

USA Today Bestselling Author

CHASITY BOWLIN

Too
Wylde
To
Tame

THE
WYLDE
WALLFLOWERS

TOO WYLDE TO TAME

CHASITY BOWLIN

CONTENTS

[Also by Chasity Bowlin](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Chasity Bowlin](#)

ALSO BY CHASITY BOWLIN

HISTORICAL ROMANCE

THE VICTORIAN GOTHIC COLLECTION

[House of Shadows](#)

[Veil of Shadows](#)

[Passage of Shadows](#)

DARK REGENCY

[The Haunting of a Duke](#)

[The Redemption of a Rogue](#)

[The Enticement of an Earl](#)

[A Love So Dark](#)

[A Passion So Strong](#)

[A Heart So Wicked](#)

[An Affair So Destined](#)

STANDALONE

[The Beast of Bath](#)

[Worth the Wait](#)

[A Little Christmas Magic](#)

[A Private Wager](#)

[Spellbound: A Witchy Regency Romance \(preorder\)](#)

COLLECTIONS:

[Christmas in Cumbria \(preorder\)](#)

THE LOST LORDS SERIES:

[The Lost Lord of Castle Black](#)

[The Vanishing of Lord Vale](#)

[The Missing Marquess of Althorn](#)

[The Resurrection of Lady Ramsleigh](#)

[The Mystery of Miss Mason](#)

[The Awakening of Lord Ambrose](#)

[A Midnight Clear: A Lost Lords Holiday Novella](#)

[Hyacinth: A Regency Romance Novella](#)

[The Pirate's Bluestocking \(Pirates of Britannia\)](#)

THE HELLION CLUB SERIES:

[A Rogue to Remember](#)

[Barefoot In Hyde Park](#)

[What Happens In Piccadilly](#)

[Sleepless in Southampton](#)

[When An Earl Loves A Governess](#)

[The Duke's Magnificent Obsession](#)

[The Governess Diaries](#)

[A Dangerous Passion](#)

The Lady Confesses (COMING SOON)

[All I Want For Christmas Is You: A Regency Historical Romance Novella](#)

[Making Spirits Bright: A Regency Historical Romance Novella](#)

[The Boys of Summer](#)

[When The Night Closes In \(preorder\)](#)

THE DUNNE FAMILY SERIES

[The Last Offer](#)

[The First Proposal](#)

[The Other Wife](#)

[The Late Husband](#)

[The Plain Bride](#)

[The Perfect Groom](#)

[The Scandalous Elopement](#)

[The Inconvenient Compromise](#)

DRAGONBLADE PUBLISHING STANDALONES AND COLLECTIONS

[Once Upon a Haunted Romance: An Historical Romance Collection](#)

[Into the Night](#)

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[Night of Lyons: A Lyon's Den Connected World Anthology \(preorder\)](#)

[Eight Hungry Lyons: A Lyon's Den Connected World Boxed Set](#)

[Fall of the Lyon](#)

[Tamed By The Lyon](#)

[Lady Luck and the Lyon](#)

The Lyon, The Liar and The Scandalous Wardrobe (coming soon)

AND THE WYLDE WALLFLOWERS...

[One Wylde Night](#)

[A Kiss Gone Wylde](#)

[Too Wylde To Tame](#)

[On The Wylde Side \(available for preorder\)](#)

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[Ciaran](#)

[Clayton](#)

[Carter](#)

[Quentin](#)

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[Purrfect Santa \(Co authored with Jessie Lane\)](#)

[Two Tickets to Bearadise](#)

PROLOGUE

Miss Charity Wylde was waiting as patiently as was possible for her. In truth that was not very patiently, at all. Her cousin had been browsing the shelves and stacks of books at Hatchard's for what seemed like ages. For herself, Charity had already selected her own book, paid for it and paced the length of the store four times over. Cordelia was always one to mull things over. She was as deliberate and plodding as Charity was impetuous and prone to impulsivity.

It didn't help matters that it was an unseasonably warm day for Spring. Inside the shop, with the closed windows, the throngs of people and the dust that was inherent to a bookstore—it was cloying. Unable to tolerate it for another moment, Charity made for the door and the relief of not so fresh air beyond it. It was perfectly proper, after all, she reasoned. Cordelia had a maid inside with her. One of their aunt's many footmen was waiting outside to cart their purchases and Charity would remain in full view of the windows. She just needed to breathe.

It felt as if the muslin of her day dress was made of steel, and it was slowly squeezing the life out of her. Or that might have been the full corsets that her mother insisted she wear, as simple short stays did not provide enough correction for her too plump figure.

She'd begun to feel that way more and more frequently. Trapped. By her clothing. By the city itself. But it wasn't the dress. It wasn't even the city or the crowds. What Charity felt closing in on her was the crushing weight of expectation. The last letter she'd received from her parents had indicated as much. With Felicity married months earlier and the end of the Season looming, she was expected to have a husband or at least a betrothal. If she

failed to produce either, then her first London Season would be her only London Season and she would return to Bath, humiliated.

Raucous male laughter pulled her from her troublesome thoughts. She glanced to her left and saw a group of gentlemen emerging from an establishment that—while she did not know precisely what took place within—she knew it was an indecent sort of place. How could it be anything else? It was eleven in the morning, the men were still dressed in their evening clothes and the lot of them appeared to be thoroughly foxed. In truth, their behavior was so beyond the pale that she was tempted to go back into the dusty, heated confines of the bookshop. But she was too late in making that decision. The gentlemen, if indeed they could be termed such, had already caught sight of her. Their leader—or the one she could only presume held that ignoble position—looked at her with a speculative and possibly even cruel gleam in his eyes. She knew that look. Every childhood bully she'd ever encountered had worn it just before they tormented her cousins, her sister or herself.

“What do we have here? A plump little partridge all alone,” he mused loudly as he headed for her.

Charity did not acknowledge him. Nor did she run timidly back inside. That was what he wanted, after all—to bully her, to see her cower. So instead, she simply stared straight ahead, ignoring him entirely.

Not satisfied with that, the gentleman paused only a few feet from her, his friends coming up behind him. “A bit fleshy for my tastes, but pretty enough I suppose,” he assessed her. “Prettier if she'd smile. Give us a smile, won't you?” His friends laughed and jeered, egging him on. Not that he appeared to need it.

Charity refused to be baited by them. They weren't the first such cads she'd ever encountered in her life. They would hardly be the last either. With her posture completely rigid and her eyes locked on a spot across the street, she simply pretended they weren't there. In her peripheral vision, she could see the footman moving toward her, but she held a staying hand in his direction. He was alone, after all. Just one of him to four drunken louts. Even given how foxed they were, the odds were too great. Not to mention that, based on their state of dress, they were supposed to be gentlemen. The law would look very unkindly upon a mere servant who dared strike someone of a higher class.

“Perhaps she can't hear,” he suggested to his friends. “And mayhap she's blind also. I can't think of any other reason for a fat spinster to ignore the

kind attentions of a gentleman. Can you?”

“Maybe you should do something to get her attention,” one of his cronies suggested, then guffawed loudly.

The first gentleman stepped closer to her. He blew out a puff of air that reeked of tobacco and spirits. It was close enough that it ruffled the tendrils that curled just beneath the brim of her bonnet. At that Charity turned to him with a glare, “Leave me be.”

“She speaks!” He exclaimed in mock surprise. “Not deaf. Not blind. Just not very nice.”

“Nice? Have you done aught to deserve nice? Hardly, sir. You are nothing more than a drunken lout surrounded by others of your ilk. You may wear the trappings of a gentleman but you are not one. Now, for the last time, leave me be!”

He grabbed her arm, his grip bruising. All pretense of amusement, cruel as it may have been, was gone from his face. His eyes were cold and hard—the eyes of a predator. “You’re quite the mouthy one, aren’t you? No one speaks to me that way.”

“Kent!”

The shout, in that very familiar voice, prompted him to drop her arm and step back. Charity glanced over her shoulder to see her brother in law, Lord Phinneas Merrick, Viscount Randford, approaching. He’d just exited a shop down the street. That the man who had accosted her was known to him wasn’t a surprise. After all, Phinneas knew everyone. And it seemed the man knew him, as well, since he unhandled her immediately and stepped back.

“Viscount,” the man he’d called Kent acknowledged.

“Charity,” Phinneas said, ignoring the man’s greeting pointedly. The cut-direct. And right there on the street for everyone to see. “Are you all right?”

“I’m quite fine, thank you.”

“She had stumbled and I came to her aid,” Kent lied.

“I am not blind and I could see perfectly well what was going on,” Phinneas replied, still speaking just to her. The skepticism in his tone was impossible to miss. “Charity, I will see you inside the shop to collect your cousin before I escort you both home.”

“Thank you, Phinneas. That would be much appreciated.”

Leaving the group of so-called gentleman on the sidewalk, they retreated into Hatchard’s. No sooner had they crossed the threshold than Phinneas said, “Oliver Kent is not to be trusted, Charity.”

“Oh, that is quite obvious,” she said. “I had no wish to speak to them. I was only outside because it’s so unbearably warm in here. And then they... appeared. All of them acting like bullies in a school yard.”

Phinneas frowned. “They are a bit more dangerous than that, Kent being the worst of the lot. If he ever approaches you again, just leave. Go wherever other people are, preferably people who outrank him in society. The only things that surpass his cruelty are his dishonesty and social ambition.”

Charity placed her hand on his arm. “Have I told you how glad I am that my sister married you? Not just because you were wonderful enough to come to my rescue just now, but because there are so many wolves in sheep’s clothing in society—men like Mr. Kent who will smile prettily in a ballroom and corner you when he thinks no one is watching. It is an endless relief to me to know that she found a good man.”

“I’m glad I married her also... because I love her madly and because I have an entire new set of relations whom I equally adore,” he offered with a smile.

“Do not mention this to Cordelia. She’s a bit of a worrier,” Charity urged him.

“It’s our secret. But if Kent so much as looks at you again, you will tell me. Won’t you?”

She nodded. “Without hesitation.”

“Good. Now, lets drag your cousin kicking and screaming from the bookshop and I’ll see you two home. With perhaps an ice in between. The heat is dastardly.”

ONE

“Twenty quid... no, fifty quid!”

Lord Jameson Dartwell grinned behind the glass of champagne'd just procured. “I could hardly be bothered for such a piddling amount,” he retorted with lazy good humor. The truth was he didn't have the twenty quid, much less the fifty. He was well up the river tick.

“One hundred. Even you cannot deny that!” His companion exclaimed a bit too loudly.

“Hush, Harry!” Oliver Kent snapped. His words were sharp and hard though his voice was little more than a whisper. More quietly, he admonished, “Keep your voice down. Or do you want everyone present to know the particulars of this wager?”

“He's right, Harry,” Jameson interjected. “This bet, should I accept it, is a bit more risqué than any of our prior wagers. We'd all be ostracized. And more importantly, my older brother would cut me off without a tuppence. Then the wager would be moot, wouldn't it?”

“Righty-o! Ollie is always after me about opening my big mouth,” Harry agreed with a nod, absentminded as always. No doubt he'd have to be reminded again.

“All that's left now is to pick the girl,” Oliver said, his gaze scanning the room. And then he stopped, a hawklike focus on the double doors that opened onto the ballroom. “Her.”

At once, they all swiveled toward the door, taking in the scene. Everyone knew who she was, of course. Her scandalous sister and more scandalous cousin had prompted their aunt to take a much firmer hand with her in an effort to get one of her nieces married off in a respectable fashion. “I'll never

be able to get near her!” Jameson protested.

“If you aren’t up for the challenge...” Ollie trailed off, the implication quite clear that the wager would be automatically forfeit.

“I’m up for the challenge. But can’t it be someone else? You know I prefer my ladies to be more slender than that cow, Miss Charity Wylde,” Jameson replied with an edge to his voice.

“Yes. It must be her,” Ollie replied with a kind of wicked glee. “No one else will do, Dartwell. No one else.”

Jameson turned to glance at her once more and gave a sigh of capitulation. “It’ll require some effort and no small amount of maneuvering, but I have no doubt whatsoever that I can accomplish the task.”

“One month and one hundred pounds,” Ollie reiterated with a smug smile. “You’ll win the bet by making her fall so madly in love with you that she will play fast and loose with her good name. Then you will jilt her publicly and Miss Charity Wylde will be a pariah—a woman with a reputation so tattered she will not even be able to show her face in society. It’s perfect.”

“Perfect for what?” Jameson demanded.

“Revenge, Dartwell. Revenge.” Ollie didn’t elaborate on what or who he was seeking vengeance for or against. He just stared at the young woman with smug satisfaction.

Across the ballroom, Lord Frederick Dartwell, Viscount Welbey, was doing everything in his power to pretend his brother was not present. Whenever Jameson deigned to engage with polite society trouble always followed. That he was with Oliver Kent was another matter. Kent was a troublemaker extraordinaire. Whenever Jameson associated with the social climbing wretch, trouble always followed.

And there was no one in his family whom he could ask for help. The prior generation of Dartwell men were all gone, most of them courtesy of their vices. The women were not much better. Scandal-ridden was a vast understatement when one spoke of his family. The truth of the matter was, that, in terms of the Dartwell family, Frederick himself was the black sheep. Having dared to walk the straight and narrow, every relation he possessed stared at him as he were some sort of exotic laboratory specimen.

But ignoring Jameson was no easy task. And given that Jameson had been pestering him for weeks about increasing his allowance—something Frederick had no intention of doing until his brother could show some

semblance of responsibility—avoiding him had proven terribly difficult, as well. To that end, he kept his gaze averted from his brother and focused on any other area of the room. And it was for that reason that he was watching the door to the ballroom when she appeared.

She was tall for a woman though still quite a bit shorter than his own height. Her blonde hair had been arranged in a tumbled mass of curls that appeared to be held in place by one precariously perched diamond pin. Of course, that was an illusion, albeit a pretty one. With a delectably curvaceous figure and fine features, she was lovely. Lovelier than most, but not young. Well, not terribly young. He would guess her to be nearing five and twenty. And yet, she was not there in the company of a gentleman. That offered him some degree of hope. After all, his entire reason for being in society was to find a bride. And while the Season was nearing its end, she was the first woman to draw his gaze and keep it.

Then she turned to the woman beside her—who was still hidden from view by the ostentatious plumes erupting from Lady Montrose's turban. The blonde beauty's laugh rang out, not the delicate tinkling of bells or the politely muffled giggles of most young ladies in society. No, her laugh was full bodied, louder than it ought to have been and all the more appealing for it. There was no artifice in it, not guile, and no self consciousness. She didn't appear to be embarrassed by the attention it drew because, as far as he could ascertain she had no awareness of anyone else at all beyond her companion who had amused her.

He took two steps forward, heading in her direction to beg an introduction, but another laugh halted his steps. His brother's. It was a sound he recognized well—cruel and taunting. Whipping his head around, he searched out Jameson and what he saw made his jaw clench. Jameson and his cohorts were staring in the same direction, all of them grinning like fools and elbowing one another like naughty boys playing a prank.

Reluctantly, his gaze traveled in the direction of Jameson's and his companions'. It was her. The woman who had captured his attention. They could be looking nowhere else. If Jameson were to realize that Frederick had any interest in her, he'd court her for spite. And as his brother had no intention of marrying anyone at present and also lacked the funds to do so, he would never have honorable intentions toward her regardless of his reasons for instigating the courtship. To approach her would be to paint a target on her.

Just then, Lady Montrose stepped aside and he felt a surge of satisfaction. Based on the identity of her chaperone, Lady Marguerite, he had some notion of who she was. Marguerite's nieces, four of them, had come to London for a season with her. The only question left was which one of the four was she? Surely one of the two that yet remained unmarried. He could not be so unlucky as to finally see a woman who robbed him of the ability to breathe, much less think, only for her to already be married to another.

Before he could even formulate a plan to finagle an introduction to her without Jameson seeing them, he saw his brother step forward, making a beeline for her. He was too far away to intervene. Instead, he could only stand back and watch as Jameson yet again ruined everything for him without even trying.

CHARITY STARED at the glittering ballroom before her with excitement, its origin unknown to her. That evening felt *different*. Something would happen, something would set that night apart from every other ball or party she had attended. What that was, she could not say. But she did know that it was impossible to recall the last time she had been truly excited to attend a social event. The joy of anticipating possibilities had faded as year after year, season after season, she failed to emerge with even one viable suitor.

Her parents had despaired of ever getting them married off, but her twin sister had managed to find not just any husband but one with a title. Not that Phinneas wouldn't have been perfectly wonderful even if he hadn't a title or a tuppence to his name. It seemed to her that her sister and cousin had managed to snatch up the only two eligible and still truly honorable men in existence. She would never find anyone.

So they'll only have one spinster daughter to moulder in decrepit ruin on the shelf.

That bitter thought dimmed her enthusiasm for the evening more than a little bit. But she was determined that the night would be a success. Tonight, she vowed, I will meet a man with marriage on his mind. He might not be as handsome or as wealthy. He might be deadly dull and have the conversational skills of a rock, but he'd have a pulse. He'd have a home that would not be her parents. The very idea of going back to Bath and the miserable life she'd

had before, especially when she would be going back to it alone, was more than she could bear.

Her gaze traveled over the crowd and stopped on one particular gentleman who was eyeing her in a way that no gentleman should. *Any man but that one*, she mentally corrected. She might have been feeling the squeeze of desperation but that didn't mean an aging lech with spots, bad teeth and a balding pate was a tempting alternative to spinsterhood. In truth, that wretched man made the shelf appear a sanctuary rather than a sentence.

"Avoid him, dearest," her aunt whispered behind her fan. "He's a horrid little man."

"That much is obvious," Charity replied with a grin. "Where are the handsome men, Aunt Marguerite? The *young*, handsome men!"

Marguerite shushed her gently. "This is a crowded room, Charity. Be mindful of your words, your tone *and your volume*. The last thing we need is another scandal. As if Felicity and Benny haven't created more of that than any of us need!"

There was no heat in her aunt's words. Marguerite adored and doted on all of them as she'd had no children of her own. And however scandalous her twin sister and her cousin might have been, they'd managed to do the impossible and come out of it married to titled gentlemen who seemed to be madly in love with them. Perhaps scandal wasn't such a bad way to find a husband, after all.

"Oh, I see Felicity," she said excitedly, as she caught sight of her sister across the crowded room. Once more, from the glances of everyone around her, she knew she'd been talking too loud. But she saw so little of her sister, of late. After all, Felicity no longer had any reason to go to Almack's or to promenade in the park so that she might be displayed before all the eligible men.

Charity noted just how happy her sister looked. She positively glowed with it. Phinneas stood next to her looking dashing as ever. What a striking couple they made! Even as she felt a wave of happiness for her sister, inside there was the bitter tinge of envy. She didn't want Phinneas, but she wanted even a fraction of what they had. They looked at one another as if they were the only two people in the world. "I'm going to go say hello."

"Be cautious who you speak to along the way," Marguerite admonished. "There are several unsavory gentlemen in attendance tonight."

Marguerite stressed the word *unsavory* in such a way that Charity was

more curious than cautioned. Cheekily, she shot back, “Are they handsome?”

Marguerite scowled. “You will be the death of me, child. Go to your sister. Perhaps Phinneas can help to keep you in line!”

Charity was still smiling at her aunt’s exasperation as she weaved her way through the crowd to her sister. She had almost reached her when disaster struck. A man had been walking forward while looking over his shoulder and simply barreled into her.

Champagne sloshed over her arm, dampening her glove and splattering onto the hem of her dress.

“Forgive me, miss! My most humble apologies,” the gentleman began.

Charity finally glanced at his face. He was handsome enough, though he appeared a bit boyish—too young to ever be a serious suitor and she hadn’t the time to entertain anything else. He had dark hair and twinkling blue eyes, though something in them seemed a bit off to her. *False*. “There is nothing to forgive, sir. Accidents happen, after all.”

He smiled, revealing a dimple in his cheek. “You are too kind. But you must allow me to make amends... somehow. But first, we must have a proper introduction.”

“Oh, I don’t think—”

“Ah, Lady Marguerite!” He called out. “I beg you to give me an introduction to this ravishing young lady who has accompanied you tonight.”

Charity frowned. “How did you know I was with Marguerite?”

“Oh, I saw you when you entered the ballroom,” he answered with a smile.

She didn’t trust that smile, Charity realized instantly. It was too bright. Too charming. “You saw me entering the ballroom but then lost sight of me entirely to the point that you almost knocked me to the ground?”

His smile never faltered, but his eyes lost some of the twinkle. They appeared hard and glittering instead. “Alas, I’m a goosebrain, I’m afraid. Perpetually distracted. My eyes never seem to be aimed in the same direction in which my feet are traveling. Do forgive me! I couldn’t bear it, otherwise.”

“Lord Jameson Dartwell,” Marguerite said, her voice lacking its usual warmth. “What sort of trouble are you getting into now?”

“No trouble at all, Lady Marguerite,” he vowed solemnly. “But I was being a bit clumsy and have nearly knocked your companion down. I must beg an introduction so that I can make my apologies properly.”

“It isn’t necessary,” Charity insisted.

Marguerite smiled. “There! You heard it from the lady herself, sir. No apologies are needed and thus no introductions are required. Now, we must bid you good evening.”

“Please, I must make amends!”

Marguerite sighed her displeasure. “Very well, Charity, this is Lord Jameson Dartwell... Lord Jameson, my niece, Miss Charity Wylde.”

“It is my pleasure to meet you,—formally—Miss Wylde. Perhaps I could call on you tomorrow that we might better our acquaintance with one another?”

“I’ve no doubt we will be too fatigued after tonight’s festivities to entertain callers tomorrow, Lord Jameson,” Marguerite’s dismissal of the man was quite firm and it only served to lend credence to Charity’s feeling that he was not a trustworthy gentleman at all. “Good evening, sir.”

With that Charity turned, linked her arm with her aunt’s and together they walked away. Neither of them noticed the way his mouth firmed, that his handsome features twisted into a petulant scowl as he watched them fade into the crowd.

TWO

“Avoid him, dear. At all costs,” Marguerite cautioned.

“Oh, I require no such warnings about him, Aunt Marguerite,” Charity assured her. “I’ve no interest in spoiled boys... and that is my impression of him. A spoiled little boy who always gets his way.”

Marguerite smiled. “You could not be more right, dearest. Now, go find Felicity and stay out of trouble. I’d hate for Phinneas to have to fight a duel on your behalf.”

Charity said nothing as she thought of how recently that very thing might have occurred. How far would Oliver Kent have taken his accostment of her had Phinneas not arrived on the scene? And of course, there was Felicity. She would never want to give her cause for worry or create strife in their marriage. The very thought of what her sister might do to her if her husband was, even inadvertently, placed in danger was positively terrifying. Nodding to her aunt, they parted ways in the center of the ballroom and she made for the perimeter where Felicity was standing with her husband, Lord Phinneas Merrick. They looked so right with one another, him so tall and powerful, and her sister who positively glowed with happiness.

She wasn’t jealous. Even as Charity mentally reminded herself of that, it rang false. She was jealous. Not begrudgingly, of course. That her sister had found love, despite the circumstances of her betrothal and marriage to Phinneas, mired in scandal as they were, had been such a relief. She wanted only good things for Felicity. Was it so terribly wrong to want those things for herself, as well?

“Charity!” Felicity called out with a wave when she caught sight of her.

Charity’s smile widened. They would never be what they were supposed

to be, she thought. They'd always be loud and brash, a bit too vocal, and much too honest for society. That had been true in Bath and it was even more true in London, it seemed.

"Good evening, sister. Good evening, brother," she acknowledged, giving Felicity a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I've missed you."

"You must come visit," Felicity insisted. "You and Cordelia should stay with us! For an entire week. It will be just like when we were little. Maybe we could prevail upon Payne to part with Benny for the week, as well!"

Charity took note of the less than enthusiastic expression on her brother-in-law's face. They were newly married, after all. What man would want his wife's sister to descend on them only a few months into their marriage? "Aunt Marguerite would never let me out of her sight! Between your foibles and now Benny's, it's a wonder she let me cross the ballroom without wearing a lead like a trained spaniel."

Felicity frowned but Phinneas had to camouflage a laugh with a cough. "I must ask your forgiveness for that," he said softly. "It won't last forever."

"Don't ask for forgiveness. That seems to be a theme for the evening," she replied. Finding the man who had bumped into her, Felicity asked, "What is your opinion of Lord Jameson Dartwell?"

"Trouble," Phinneas replied. "Trouble of the worst sort. Irresponsible, irascible and unscrupulous. He's part of a very fast set. Please say you have no hopes in that direction."

"Oh, no! Not at all. He bumped into me and I can't help but think it was some sort of scheme to finagle an introduction. Though why he would bother, I cannot imagine!"

Phinneas blinked at her in surprise. "Can't you? Really?"

Charity blushed. "I have no illusions about my appearance, my dear brother-in-law. If I did, I'd have only to look at my twin and be assured that we have all the necessary charms to attract a man. But if he's a fortune hunter, and I can only assume that he is, mine is much too modest to draw his attention."

Felicity held up her hand. "Enough talk of this Lord Dartwell— he's of no interest to you and if his interests have been piqued by you then the man is destined for disappointment. So let us move on to happier topics... such as Mr. William Stockton. He's very handsome and quite wealthy... and looking for a wife."

Charity shuddered. She couldn't dismiss him out of hand, sadly. But he

was certainly her last resort. “He is handsome. And if I had to suffer his courtship, I might well die of boredom. Unless all other avenues have been exhausted, I’d prefer not to set my cap in that direction.”

Felicity grimaced. “I know he’s dull, but he’s indubitably eligible.”

“Yes, and Phinneas’ eligibility is precisely why you married him,” Charity quipped. This only resulted in her brother-in-law concealing his laughter behind another cough.

Felicity cast an angry look in his direction. “If Charity doesn’t find a husband by the end of the Season, she’ll have to go back to our parents... and to the slow, agonizing death of being a lonely wallflower in Bath.”

Oh, dear heavens. At Charity’s description of her impending future, Felicity felt positively ill. It was utterly bleak. Her parents’ disappointment loomed large in her mind. Her father would mutter and shake his head, her mother would look at her with that forlorn, hangdog expression that seemed to imply she was willing to bear the burden of having such a thoroughly unmarriagable daughter.

“It won’t be so bad. Surely,” Phinneas said. “Perhaps we could offer an alternative to London or even Bath. The Season is near its end, after all. We could retreat to the countryside and host a house party. Your parents would not object to your remaining with us at least through such an event.”

“You looked rather pained at having the lot of us descend upon you here.”

“Randford House is significantly larger than the house in town,” he said. “And offers greater opportunities for privacy.”

Felicity elbowed him sharply in the ribs. “What he means to say is that Randford House would be the perfect place for you to meet eligible gentlemen who could pay court to you while you are in residence.”

That was not at all what he’d meant. While the particulars of the marriage bed were somewhat of a mystery to her, Charity was well aware that her sister and brother-in-law were viewed by on and all as a passionate love match. Whatever that meant. But anything, even if it meant imposing on their privacy a bit, would be preferable to returning to her parents. “I can’t see that Mother and Father would have any reason to disagree.”

Felicity clapped with delight and exclaimed, “That is the perfect answer!”

“It could work,” Charity agreed, feeling a spark of hope. “And I do seem to be somewhat lost in the crowd here. Can you invite the least appealing young ladies amongst the *Ton*? Please?”

“You may consider it done,” Phinneas replied as a solemn promise.

JAMESON DARTWELL WATCHED wallflower that was his target with barely concealed disdain. How dare she reject him! A girl in her shoes ought to be grateful for his attentions, he thought. For anyone’s attentions, really. Oh, she was pretty enough, he supposed. Though she hardly stood out in the crowd. And her figure was a bit fuller than he liked.

He muttered a word under his breath that made a woman near him gasp. It hardly mattered. Half of the *Ton* already considered him beyond redemption. Scandalizing a society matron with his foul language would hardly be the offense that wrecked him entirely.

“Turned you down, did she?”

Jameson glanced over his shoulder to see Ollie standing just behind him wearing an expression that conveyed he was already enjoying his victory. With narrowed eyes and a hint of steel in his voice, Jameson replied, “It isn’t over yet. I have time to pursue the match and win her over.”

“So you do,” Ollie agreed. “But she may not be in town for the duration of it. Someone informed me that they happened to overhear her conversation with her sister and Merrick. They mean to host a house party to find her a husband.. When the season is at its end, your pigeon will have flown off to Essex.”

He was sunk. Phinneas Merrick would never invite him to that party. He would also never be considered by that prig to be a suitable match for her. “Counting your coins already,” Jameson observed with more than a hint of accusation in his voice.

“Reconsidering the terms of our wager, actually... If you win her and walk away from her, I’ll give you the one hundred pounds. And if you manage to make her a complete scandal in the process, I’ll throw in an additional one hundred pounds. Let’s call it a bonus.”

Jameson cocked his head, considering the offer. “What precisely do you mean by *win her*? Are we speaking of a seduction or an offer of something more?”

Ollie smiled. “I want you to court her openly. I want you to bow and scrape before her like a besotted fool. You will act as a man reformed by

love. And once she's ready to accept an offer from you, you will turn and walk away from her... leaving all of society to wonder what is so wrong with her that a man so in love would reject her out of hand."

It was a stretch even for him. Jameson had played fast and loose with all the rules for a very long time, but intentional cruelty wasn't something he indulged in without just cause. "Why do you hate her so much?"

"Oh, I don't. It's just a game, Dartwell... an experiment if you will."

Jameson frowned. It was a lie. Obviously. Oliver Kent never did anything solely for amusement. There had to be some advantage in it. "Who is the subject... Miss Wylde or myself?"

Ollie grinned, but it was a cruel and wicked expression. "Both, of course."

THREE

Frederick found him in the billiard room. “Randford,” he said in greeting.

“Welbey,” the man returned with a nod. They were of similar height, though Phinneas Merrick possessed a sturdier build than himself. He looked more like a brawler than a nobleman. As for himself, Frederick had a much leaner frame. In his youth, he’d been likened to a stick figure. Thankfully that had altered over time and he now tended more towards athletic than simply scrawny.

“Fancy a match?” If he could get the man to play billiards with him, ply him with a bit of brandy, perhaps he could manage to find out what he needed to know.

If Randford was surprised by the offer, he didn’t indicate it. Instead, his gaze remained steadfast and locked on him in an assessing manner. “I wasn’t aware that you played.”

Frederick went to the small rack and selected a cue. “I rarely do in public. I’m accomplished enough at it, but find that most other gentlemen want to play for money rather than love of the game. I’m not much for gambling, as you know.”

Randford nodded. “Indeed. Although the same cannot be said of your brother. He’s run afoul of several of the hells of late... In case you weren’t aware.”

Frederick bit back the curse he wanted to hurl at his brother’s head. “I’m aware. I’ve elected not to pay his debts this time. I feel letting Jameson bear the consequences of his actions will be far more educational than simply another lecture from me.”

Randford sighed wearily. “It’s a hell of a thing isn’t it? Being the head of

a family.”

“That it is. Six points or shall we strive for 21?”

Randford picked up the red ball and placed it in the center of the table. “Why don’t we discuss whatever it is that prompted you to seek me out... When we get to six, I’ll decide if the conversation should progress further.”

Frederick admired the man’s directness. It was common knowledge that Randford was a good sort—an honorable sort. He hoped that others considered him such as well. But it was difficult. Even as the elder brother, he was somewhat overshadowed by Jameson’s wild ways. “I’ll be frank, as it seems you are a man who values such things. I wish to be introduced to your wife’s sister. I saw her tonight when she entered the ballroom and I was quite awestruck by her.”

“Charity?”

Charity. He turned it over and over in his mind. “Is that her name? I confess to not knowing it beforehand.”

Randford shook his head in confusion. “Forgive me for saying this but I’m not certain Charity— well, between the scandal of my marriage to Felicity and then their cousin’s hasty marriage to Davenport, it is imperative that Charity not be touched by anymore scandal. And your family, despite your every effort to the contrary, remains scandalous.”

“So that is a refusal,” Frederick surmised.

“Not outright, no. It is a caution. Charity’s nature is somewhat rambunctious. She laughs loudly, she voices her opinions quite firmly and she has no qualms about telling the truth. Perhaps even when she should not. If your intentions are honorable and your resolve is set, I will see to it. But if you are wavering in the least, then I would suggest proceeding with discretion.”

“My resolve is quite firm... I cannot explain it other than to say that from the first moment I saw her, and heard her laugh, I simply knew. I do not think I could entertain the notion of marrying anyone else. Does that sound positively mad?”

Randford shook his head and began to line up his next shot. “On the contrary. It sounds alarmingly familiar... Still, discretion might be better. I’d intended to wait for the end of the Season but it is almost gone now. We will retire to the countryside a bit earlier and host a house party. I’ll see to it that you are on the guest list.”

“And there will be other prospective suitors there as well I take it?”

Randford looked up. “Yes. It wouldn’t be very sporting if she were given no choice at all, would it?”

In short, while the Viscount might not forbid the match, Frederick would have his work cut out for him. It wasn’t in his nature to be charming and dance attendance on anyone. He was too direct, too forthright... and too serious, by all accounts. But if he wished to win her hand, he would need to utilize every bit of charm he possessed. “No, it would not. Thank you for... well, not dashing my hopes altogether. At least now there is a slim chance.”

Randford missed his shot by only a hair’s breadth. With a sigh he rose to his full height. “Be yourself, Welbey. Entirely and without reservation. Do not try to beat others at their own game—you’re not the sort to write odes to her beauty or compare her eyes to sparkling stars in the sky. But you are the sort who will have a conversation with her as though there is a brain in her head. That will serve you better than anything else.”

Frederick wasn’t so certain. Having no pretensions of greatness when it came to writing sonnets or offering flowery compliments, he’d never been very successful with the ladies. He’d long ago reached the conclusion that the only ones who tolerated him were the ones angling for a titled husband. The idea of being married to a woman who saw him as interchangeable from any other gentleman of standing had never appealed to him. “I will keep that in mind.”

Randford smirked. “Take your shot, Welbey. That is advice that applies to this game and to life.”

With those sage words of wisdom ringing in his ears and plaguing his mind, Frederick did just that.

CHARITY WAS CONSIDERING PLEADING a megrim and going home. The evening, thus far, had been a dismal failure. The only gentleman who had expressed any interest in speaking to her, much less dancing with her, was that terribly unsuitable Lord Jameson Dartwell. He’d made quite a nuisance of himself, really. Bringing her lemonade she had not asked for, insisting that he must have a dance with her. Though it was considered impolite to refuse an invitation to dance, she had managed to decline in what she hoped was a civil fashion at the very least.

Had she any sense at all, she'd simply call for the carriage and depart immediately. She could go home, climb into her narrow bed in the room she currently shared with Cordelia who was home with a stuffy nose and listen to her cousin regale her with whatever gothic tale she was currently reading. It would surely be a more productive use of her time.

Turning to her aunt to make her excuses, Charity was brought up short by the appearance of her brother-in-law. Beside him was a gentleman she did not recognize, but he was quite handsome with dark hair swept over his brow and an aristocratic bearing. It was height which was the most startling thing. Very few gentlemen stood taller than her brother-in-law, but this man had several inches on him. Despite his rather impressive height, he wasn't rail thin, though he did tend toward a leaner physique.

"Charity, if I may, I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine... Lord Frederick Dartwell, Viscount Welbey. Welbey, let me present my wife's sister, Miss Charity Wylde."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, my lord," Charity said with what she hoped was a welcoming smile.

"The pleasure is all mine, Miss Wylde, I assure you. If the truth be known, I harassed Randford to arrange an introduction in the hopes that I might persuade you to dance... unless I have missed my opportunity and your dance card is entirely full."

The only thing her dance card was full of was dust and disappointment. Perhaps a stray cobweb collected from disuse. "I believe there is room for you, my lord."

"The next set?"

Charity paused, as if trying to recall whether or not she was already engaged for the next dance. After what she hoped was a reasonable pause, she replied, "I do believe I am free for the next dance."

As if on cue the dance floor cleared and the orchestra struck a note to indicate the next number was about to begin. From the first strain, it was obviously a waltz. A flutter of nervous energy erupted inside her as he held out his hand to her. Charity placed her gloved hand in his and allowed him to lead her to the floor. She knew how to waltz. She waltzed very well in fact. That the only people she had ever waltzed with were her dancing instructor and family members should make no difference at all. But those dances had left her unprepared for what it would feel like to be held in the strong arms of a handsome man.

As they turned about the floor, finding the rhythm of the waltz, her nerves settled somewhat. She became far less concerned about trodding on his toes than saying something that would be deemed terribly inappropriate. It was a well known fact that she often spoke without thinking and much of what she said tended to be, if not scandalous, then at least not what a young lady of her standing should say.

“Tell me, Miss Wylde, are you finding London to your liking? Is it preferable to Bath?”

That was a question she could answer easily enough. “Any place I feel is preferable to Bath, my lord. I am finding London to be quite to my liking. Are you much for the city?” There. It was perfectly polite and appropriate and she hadn’t made an utter fool of herself. *Yet.*

His answering smile was positively devastating. His face lost the severity that she’d noted in it initially. The most charming dimples appeared in his cheeks and his eyes twinkled warmly with his amusement. “I am not much for any city. I prefer the country, I’m afraid.”

She laughed. “Then why in heaven’s name are you here? One should never spend their time in a place they do not wish to be.”

His expression was quite serious when he replied, “Why does any man do such things? Was it not Miss Austen who declared it a universal truth that any unmarried man in possession of a good fortune must also be in want of a wife?”

Charity wasn’t quite certain how she was supposed to digest that bit of information. Was she a prospect for him? Or was he simply being polite and dancing with her to appease her brother-in-law who had likely roped the man into it? “I see. There are any number of eligible young ladies in attendance tonight.”

“Are there? I hadn’t noticed.” His gaze locked with hers with that statement, and there was no denying that it was indeed quite loaded.

He was very definitely flirting with her. While she had only a passing acquaintance with what that was like and it had been years since she had experienced it, the man was not subtle about his meaning or his intentions. “Why did Phinneas introduce us?”

“Because I asked him to,” he replied, spinning her about the floor. “Because from the moment I saw you enter this room, I wanted to know more about you.”

“And does your brother have anything to do with that? Lord Jameson

Dartwell?”

His lips thinned and firmed. “My brother and I have very little to do with one another, Miss Wylde. He lives a very fast life and I am, much to his dismay, not inclined to gamble and carouse my way through *the Ton*, burning bridges as I go. It has been a point of contention between us for many years. But I can assure you that nothing about my desire to meet you, to dance with you—and I hope—to call upon you at your earliest convenience, is in any way related to my sibling.”

“Tomorrow.” The word came out breathlessly, her voice sounding completely unfamiliar to her own ears.

He blinked in surprise. “Pardon?”

“Tomorrow, my lord. That would be my earliest convenience,” she said. There was something about Lord Frederick Dartwell, Viscount Welbey. A connection between them that she had never experienced before. Initially, she had thought that spark of attraction would be only one sided. But knowing that it was not had given her a spark of hope that they might explore that connection more fully, that he might well be, as her sister referred to Phinneas, *the one*.

“Then tomorrow it is, Miss Wylde. I will be counting the hours,” he said.

“As will I,” she admitted.

And just like that, his beaming smile and those irresistible dimples made another appearance.

ACROSS THE BALLROOM, watching from a distance, Lord Jameson Dartwell observed his brother waltzing with his own quarry. Of course, he thought. Even portly spinsters would deem him unworthy in the face of his titled brother. Resentment bubbled inside him, like a cauldron ready to spill over. Why was it always Frederick?

It wasn't just that he'd been born first. It wasn't even that he had the title and all of the family's money. Frederick had also been the favorite. How many times had their father looked at Frederick with awe and opined that he would be the salvation of the family? Somehow, his elder brother had been spared whatever fever lit the blood of every other man in the family for adventure, for risk, for the thrill of illicit pleasures. He might as well have

been a monk with how virtuously he lived.

Jameson couldn't stop the sneer from twisting his lips as he watched them, twirling about the floor, smiling at one another as if they were the only two people in the world. The rage he felt belied just how little he cared for Miss Wylde. It could have been any woman who had snubbed him and favored his brother. That she was so singularly ineligible only added insult to the injury.

Oliver Kent placed a consoling hand on his shoulder. "You can concede the wager now. It's quite obvious that she has made her preferences very clear. No bad seeds like us for the virtuous Miss Wylde. Only a paragon like your brother will meet her exacting standards. No wonder she's become a spinster."

There was something in Ollie's tone that alerted him. The man had some grudge against her. Suddenly, the wager made more sense. "She rejected you too."

"Her missishness has made things complicated for me. We were only teasing her, having a bit of fun. But, of course, Randford showed up and now—well, I'm surprised I was even granted admittance tonight. The man has the power to ruin me. Ruining someone so closely connected to him will even the odds a bit."

It wasn't nearly so cut and dried as that, Jameson thought. Ollie's pride was as wounded as his own. He didn't want Charity Wylde anymore than Jameson himself did. But she was supposed to want them, wasn't she? She was supposed to be grateful for their attentions. "It doesn't matter. I'd do it without the wager now. Without the payment of any kind. Just to watch my sainted brother fall into woebegone mourning when the woman he clearly fancies turns out to fancy someone else. She'll be ruined, Ollie. One way or another."

Ollie smiled. "You're a man after my own heart, Dartwell... or you would be if I had one."

"That fellow you use to do your dirty work... Stanton, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Jameson smiled. "If I know my brother, he will mean to call on her tomorrow. He's not one to drag his feet. If Stanton can ride, I've got an errand for him. Something that will see Frederick well occupied."

"I'll put it on your account," Ollie replied. "He'll come by the Albany tonight."

FOUR

The infernal knocking was not in his head. The dream of constantly hammering against a rock that gave no indication of budging or cracking was in fact his mind's attempt to incorporate that banging on his door into his slumber. Cursing softly, Frederick rolled over in bed before sitting up. Despite his love of country life, he wasn't truly a morning person. He was even less so when keeping town hours that meant staying up until nearly dawn.

A glance at the sun streaming in through the eastern facing window told him that it was not yet noon. Whoever was disturbing him would have to be possessed of a very sound reason to do so or they'd get the tongue lashing of a lifetime.

Getting to his feet, he tugged on his breeches and slipped his discarded shirt over his head before padding to the door in his barefoot. The person on the other side of that door was his man of affairs, Joseph Fincastle. The short, squat little man had a perpetually florid face and the temperament of a nervous Pomeranian. But he was steadfastly loyal and capable beyond measure. He also wouldn't be there without a damned good reason.

"Yes, Fincastle? What is it?"

"There's been a fire at Hamden Court, my lord," the little man said, all but ringing his hands.

Frederick's blood ran cold at the thought. "How bad?"

"Minimal, sir, to everything but the summer kitchen. Two of the maids were injured. One severely."

"Have the servants see to my horse. I'll leave within the hour."

Fincastle nodded. "Certainly, my lord."

“Oh, and Fincastle?”

“Yes, my lord?”

Frederick considered his options. “Please have a dozen red roses—no! Have three dozen rose; one red, one pink and one white— delivered to Miss Charity Wylde on Brooke Street. And the note should offer only my apologies for having to depart on short notice and an assurance that I will make every effort to return soon.”

If the secretary thought it an unusual request, he wisely kept his own counsel on the subject. Instead, he simply offered a curt nod and then went off to see to the tasks he’d been assigned.

Another soft curse, this one entirely of disappointment. He would not see her that day. Or likely the next. And in that length of time, he feared what she might think.

Moving to the wash stand, he washed the best he could given the need for haste, and then shaved the morning’s beard. With his grooming complete, he dressed in fresh clothes intended for riding and left his chambers. His housekeeper was waiting at the foot of the stairs with some bread, cheese and a bottle of her famed lemonade.

“I know you’ll want to hurry along, so I put together some provisions that should see you to Hamden Court, my lord,” she offered.

“Thank you, Mrs. Collins. I cannot imagine what I would do without you,” he said, accepting the bundle from her.

“Do let the poor dears know they’ll be in all our prayers, sir.”

Frederick nodded. “I will. If Jameson should come around—”

“I know, my lord. He’ll not be left unattended in the house.”

Considering that the last time Jameson had darkened his door a good portion of the family’s silver had vanished, that was a very good thing. “Bless you, Mrs. Collins. Thank you for all that you do—running this house and me.”

She blushed like a school girl despite the fact that she’d been tending him since he was in leading strings. “Off with you now. Tis a long day’s ride and heaven knows what is awaiting you at the end of it.”

With a grimace, Frederick nodded and then quickly exited the house. A groom was there, holding the reins to his mount. Passing the bundle of food to the boy, Frederick hoisted himself into the saddle and then secured his thoughtfully prepared provisions into a small leather pouch. Within minutes, he was off, making for Essex and whatever catastrophe awaited him there.

WHEN HE SAW the delivery of roses, the vast quantity of them was a testament to the degree of his brother's infatuation. Jameson smiled with calculating satisfaction. Standing upright from where he had leaned nonchalantly against the wrought iron railing of the kitchen entrance, he stepped forward. The delivery boy drew up short.

"Beg pardon, sir."

"No, I must beg your pardon, young man," Jameson said. "Is that the delivery from Viscount Welbey?" he asked.

The boy's shock at having someone know the identity of the sender without even seeing the card was visible on his face. "It is, sir."

"I'm his brother. He asked me to intercept it and deliver them to the lady in person with his most heartfelt apologies."

The boy's head dropped and he shook it. "I couldn't do that, sir. My employer would box my ears and send me off without pay."

Jameson retrieved one of his few precious coins from his pocket and passed it to the boy. "There, you've been paid. The lady will get her roses and your employer need never know."

The boy reached out, accepting the coin in his grubby hand and reluctantly relinquished the bouquet. "You promise she'll get them?"

Jameson smiled with wicked glee. "Oh, I can assure you that she will get them. Immediately. You may even watch from across the street to ensure it."

The boy nodded and made for the street, crossing carefully to avoid the traffic and street sweepers. Once he was far enough away that anything Jameson said would be well out of ear shot, Jameson climbed the steps and rang the bell. Within seconds, a distinguished man of middling years answered the door.

"Lord Jameson Dartwell to see Miss Charity Wylde," he said, handing the man his hat.

"I will see if Miss Wylde is available, my lord. Please wait here," the butler answered with a touch of disdain.

Jameson wasn't bothered by the man's disapproval. He'd been shrugging off such judgement for well over a decade. It no longer bothered him.

After a moment, the butler returned, "Miss Wylde is awaiting you in the drawing room, my lord."

Following the butler up the stairs to the drawing room, he felt a frisson of

excitement. It had nothing to do with Charity Wylde. Pretty enough, but of no real interest to him. But she was of great interest to his brother and that made her useful. Even without the wager, he would have pursued her for that reason alone.

“Good morning, Miss Wylde,” he said as he entered the well appointed room. Lady Marguerite had no children and was very wealthy. Maybe there was more merit to pursuing the girl than just getting his brother’s goat. “I saw these and I simply could not help myself. They were so beautiful and I could not imagine any lady so deserving of being surrounded with beautiful things as you are.” As he handed over the flowers, he carefully pocketed the attached card.

“This is too much, my lord! Good heavens. I’ve never seen so many roses at one time. Whatever possessed you?” She was staring at the flowers not with awe, but suspicion.

He had to do something to win her over. Long ago he’d learned that the best way to lie was to begin with a truth. “I know, Miss Wylde, that my reputation precedes me. Most young ladies would refuse me admittance to their homes and rightly so. While half of what is whispered about me is true, I can assure that at least half is not. I am no villain. I only want a a chance to prove that to you. Please... take the flowers. They put you under no obligation to me.”

She was softening. He could see it. After a moment, she buried her nose in one fragrant bloom and a smile teased her lips. She wasn’t all that bad, he thought. Was she wealthy? Lady Marguerite certainly was. But he knew nothing of her parents and whether or not her father would have a hefty sum to bestow on his daughter. Perhaps wedding her was worth more than merely winning a wager or disappointing his brother.

Lifting her head, she offered a slight smile. “Thank you, my lord. They truly are lovely.”

“You are most welcome, Miss Wylde.”

She waved a hand to the settee opposite her, letting him know exactly where she expected him to sit and that it was not near her. “I was not expecting you today.”

He nodded. “I know. I should have asked permission but I couldn’t bear the thought that you might refuse me... and I—Miss Wylde, may I speak frankly?”

“I certainly hope that you will,” she said, her tone quite skeptical.

“I find you quite charming, Miss Wylde. Indeed, I was taken with you at first sight. And, if you would permit me, I would request your aunt’s permission to pay court to you.” He made it a point to sound as meek as possible. He didn’t care if she agreed out of pity, only that she agreed.

“You may ask her, my lord, but I doubt that she will agree. As you’ve said, your reputation is hardly persuasive,” Miss Wylde replied primly.

“And would you be disappointed if she refused me?”

Miss Wylde didn’t immediately answer. When she did, it was not what he would have hoped to hear. “I cannot answer that. I know little enough of you to have an opinion either way.”

“Then I will do everything in my power to sway you, Miss Wylde. I have been a scapegrace in the past, I admit. But I am a changed man. Sadly, the world does not see that. They only see my past sins—both factual and fictitious... I hope that you will at least offer me the benefit of doubt.”

“We shall see, my lord.”

Jameson rose, bowed to her and, at the last moment, seized her hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss. “Until we meet again, Miss Wylde.” He needed to charm the aunt first. Then he would work on the niece. And he’d make sure that there were enough calamities at Hamden Court to keep his brother busy and far from town in the meantime.

FIVE

Two Weeks Later

CHARITY WINCED as the carriage hit another rut in the road. They were not very far from Randford Hall, but it seemed the last few miles on that rutted, bumpy lane might well be the death of her.

“Good heavens! This is awful,” Cordelia muttered. “Why couldn’t we stay in town for a bit longer?”

Because if she’d had to fend off one more unwanted advance from Lord Jameson Dartwell she might very well be driven to violence. But Charity didn’t say that. Cordelia had not attracted a single suitor, much to her cousin’s chagrin. To bemoan the fact that she had one she did not want would have been quite cruel, she felt. So she remained silent on the subject and puzzled out what it was about Lord Jameson that bothered her so.

On the surface, she should have been flattered by his attentions. In the beginning, she supposed that she had been, though she had never entertained him seriously. Regardless, he was young and handsome, with a well connected family. But there was gossip about his gambling, about his debts, and about his scandalous behavior with other women. Of course, any man could change and he swore that he had. It was always said that reformed rakes made the best husbands. Still, she could not make herself think of him as a true candidate for the role of husband.

Charity found herself shuddering at the very thought of being married to him. Aunt Marguerite had, much to her dismay, agreed to let him call with an

open invitation so long as he behaved properly. And he had, thus far. But every time she was in his presence, Charity could not help but feel there was something inherently dishonest in his interest. So she'd fled London with her sister in tow, making for Randford Hall and the house party that her sister was hosting. She had been promised that the house would be filled to the brim with eligible bachelors. Of course, that also meant other unmarried young ladies would also need to be invited. Country house parties were nothing more than a confined setting for matchmaking.

At the thought of bachelors, she remembered her single dance with Lord Frederick Dartwell. Viscount Welbey. She hadn't pegged him as dishonest, but then he'd failed to show despite his promises to the contrary.

In the two weeks since that night, he had not called on them, he had not written. He had simply vanished without a word, leaving her to wonder if it had all been some sort of terrible jest. Was she the butt of a joke? Had he met some other young lady that night whom he fancied more? Did it honestly matter? He was clearly not a man of his word and that should be more than enough reason to put him from her mind forever.

"Hello? Charity? Charity?"

Realizing that her cousin had been waiting far too long for her reply, Charity shook her head. "Because I am running out of time, Delia. Mother and Father will not let me stay with Aunt Marguerite indefinitely. And with Felicity now married... well, I've always been the problematic one, haven't I? No doubt my lack of serious suitors will somehow be seen as entirely my fault and my parents will insist on bringing me back to Bath where I can collect dust as I sit on the periphery of the dance floor at every ball I attend. *As everyone else passes me by.*"

Cordelia's expression was not just sympathetic. She could truly commiserate with Charity on that misery. In that regard, they were very much birds of a feather. The only difference being that her parents, unlike Charity's own, were overly critical of her and did not presume that her failure to find a husband was a deliberate attempt to make their lives more difficult. And they no doubt believed that the longer she was in London, the more likely it was that she would do something foolish and have all their names dragged through the mud. Though it wasn't as if girls didn't get their reputations ruined in Bath. It happened all the time.

"My last letter from mother indicated that your father is... well, irritated by the duration of your absence," Cordelia replied. "But I can write to mother

and have her talk to him. Or talk to your mother and insure that you aren't summoned home. Do not rush to a decision as important as taking a husband. And, for heaven's sake, do not accept the first man who offers *just because* he offers."

Charity made no promises. It seemed a moot point, at any rate, as she strongly suspected that there would be no offers forthcoming. Even if there had been a gentleman interested, then Lord Jameson Dartwell's very public devotion to her would surely have dissuaded them. Drat the man. And try as she might, she could not convince herself that his interest was truly in earnest.

"How much longer till we reach Randford Hall?" Cordelia asked after the silence had stretched on uncomfortably.

"Not very long, I think. Our last stop was in Saffron Walden nearly an hour ago. We have that to go or perhaps less," Charity offered up her assessment.

"I think I shall try to rest and hope that we do not look an utter mess when we arrive."

Charity smiled. They would look a mess. There was no avoiding it. The road had been muddy and despite best efforts, getting in and out of the coach had left the hems of their skirts caked in the substance. "Sleep well, Delia. I'll wake you when we are close so that you may prepare."

FREDERICK ENTERED the game room at Randford House and immediately stopped short. Jameson was leaning nonchalantly against the mantel above the cold fireplace. The windows had been opened in deference to the warmth of the day and most of the men present had discarded their coats, including his younger brother.

"We didn't invite him."

Randford had approached so silently that Frederick hadn't even heard him. Or perhaps he'd been so focused on his brother's presence that a herd of cattle might have snuck up on him.

"And yet here he is," Frederick noted grimly.

"He came with Lord Beechum and there was no polite way to turn him from our door," Randford continued. "Also, it would have looked very bad

had we denied admittance to a man who has been publicly courting Charity, quite intensely for that matter, for several weeks now. There are already whispers of an understanding.”

“And Lady Marguerite has allowed this? Surely she could not really think him a viable suitor for her niece,” Frederick said, shaking his head in confusion.

“Oh, she does not. But Marguerite fancies herself quite the strategist. She’s permitted his courtship because she insists that having one man angling for Charity’s affections will automatically make her more appealing to others.” Randford sounded less than convinced of her plan.

“Or it could make other men feel her affections are engaged elsewhere and give up any notion of pursuit,” Frederick suggested.

“Have you given up then?”

“No. If anything, I am more determined than ever. Whatever my brother is up to, I can assure you it is nothing so straightforward or honorable as simple courtship. There is some sort of scheme afoot, though I’ve no notion what it may be.”

Frederick had been beset with one disaster after another since he’d left London the morning after the ball, when fire had destroyed part of his home. Those consecutive problems had kept him from returning to the city prior to receiving the invitation to the party at Randford Hall. Now he regretted his decision. Some of those events could surely have been handled by Fincastle. If he’d returned to town, he might have intervened already and made certain that Miss Wylde was safe from his brother’s machinations.

“If you intend to do something about it, I’d advise you to do so quickly. Charity and Cordelia are expected to arrive within the hour.” With that parting word of advice, Randford sauntered off, pausing to greet each of the gentleman gathered in turn.

With dread, Frederick approached Jameson. “Brother.”

“Keeper,” Jameson replied. “Or are you my jailer? Have you come to drag me back to Hamden Court and put me in one of the dungeon cells?”

Frederick felt his temper rising, but he managed, just, to keep it in check. “That will depend on whether or not you have done anything to warrant such an action. Have you, Jameson?”

A smirk twisted his normally petulant mouth as Jameson replied, “I suppose that depends on who you ask. A more pressing question is what exactly brings you here? Frivolity of any sort is an anathema to you.”

“We have very different notions of what constitutes frivolity. Losing copious amounts at the gaming tables, despoiling innocent young women who have the misfortune of possessing a trusting nature, and generally causing wreck and ruin for anyone crossing my path has never offered me the sort of enjoyment you seem to glean from it... What are your intentions toward Miss Charity Wylde?”

Jameson raised an eyebrow. “I cannot see that it should be any concern of yours, Frederick. But I shall tell you, regardless. I mean to ask for her hand.”

“Why?” He ground out the question between clenched teeth. He knew it wasn’t truly marriage that Jameson wanted. What then? What sort of confidence game was his younger brother playing at?

“Why does any man ask a woman for her hand?” Jameson’s leering expression was beyond insulting. “You saw her at the ball, didn’t you? You even danced with her, I think.”

“I did,” Frederick admitted, unwilling to say more. He didn’t trust his brother at all. Time and again, he’d been proven right in not doing so.

Jameson continued, musing to himself almost as if Frederick weren’t even part of the conversation. “She’s a real beauty. A bit plumper than I normally like them. Then again, none of that matters in the dark, does it?”

“Do not speak of a lady in such a manner,” Frederick snapped. “Even the worst sort of rakehell still has manners, Jameson.”

Jameson laughed then, throwing his head back and all but cackling with glee. Then he demanded, “Manners? Like when you vanished to the countryside, abandoning the poor girl without even a word?”

Frederick felt the blood drain from his face. “What are you talking about?”

His brother shrugged. “If you want to give a flowers, brother, you really ought to deliver them in person. Who knows when such a delivery might be intercepted?”

The fury that washed through him at Jameson’s taunting admission was unprecedented. He’d never so intensely wanted to strike another person in all of his life. But they were not in a place where he could retaliate in such a way. Not if he meant to prove himself a more worthy match for Charity Wylde than his younger brother was. His temper would have to wait while he figured out a way to repair the damage Jameson had done.

SIX

Their arrival at Randford Hall was met warmly. Felicity greeted them, running outside to embrace them both. It was a whirlwind of activity as bags were unloaded and they were ushered inside.

“I’m so happy you’re here. Oh! Where is Aunt Marguerite?”

“Coming in another carriage. One moving far more slowly than ours. She insisted she is much too old to hurry anywhere,” Delia answered.

“Which we all know is nonsense. She just wanted to sleep and knew Delia would never hush,” Charity teased.

Linking arms with both of them, Felicity led them to the widely opened double doors. “Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m just happy you are here. And I know someone else who will be very happy you are here... Lord Jameson Dartwell.”

Charity stopped so suddenly that all three of them stumbled. “He’s here?”

“Yes. He arrived with Lord Beechum... Are you not happy he is here?” Felicity asked in a horrified tone.

“His perseverance in courting me, despite a decided lack of interest on my part is a bit... well, off putting. I can’t help but think there is some insincerity in his actions that puzzles me greatly,” Charity admitted. “But Aunt Marguerite has insisted that his courtship will be beneficial, even if I have no real interest.”

Felicity nodded, “Of course. It’s an attempt to exploit the overly competitive nature of men. She believes his interest in you could prompt other gentlemen to see you in a different light.”

“Or just see me, at all,” Charity said. “I was so relieved to come here for the week because I thought that I would at least be free of his constant

attentions!”

Felicity’s face fell. “Oh, Charity. I’m so sorry. Had I known you didn’t welcome his attentions I would never have permitted him to stay. Regardless of what Aunt Marguerite says, you should not have to endure the attentions of a man you have no interest in. Please forgive me?”

“There’s naught to forgive. Unless you seat me beside him at dinner. Then I’ll never speak to you again.”

Felicity’s sheepish smile was telling enough.

“You didn’t!” Charity exclaimed.

“It isn’t too late to change it,” Felicity replied. “I will make certain that you have a suitable dinner companion. Now, let me show you to your room. You can refresh yourselves and then join us on the lawn for an outdoor tea. I think some of gentlemen mean to put on a game of croquet.”

Charity didn’t wince, but it was a near thing. It all sounded dreadful. It was terribly hot outside, croquet was always dull and boring, mostly because she was terrible at it, and she had no wish to strain the swarm of summer insects out of her tea before every drink. But, because she knew how hard her sister had worked and how nervous she had been to host her first event, Charity only smiled warmly. “That sounds lovely.” Beside her, Cordelia coughed.

“It must be all the traveling,” Delia lied.

Together, they followed Felicity up the stairs. While they were still sharing a room, the connecting chamber had been readied for Marguerite upon her arrival. It was a lovely room. Two fairly large beds, both draped in identical crimson silk took prominent place. Beneath them was a rich carpet of golds and reds. And gold damask covered the walls.

“This is positively palatial!” Delia exclaimed.

Charity eyed her sister speculatively. “I knew that you had married well. I did not know you had married this well. How many estates does Phinneas have?”

Felicity blushed. “I honestly don’t know all of them. Four that I can think of, and the house in town. Is it terrible?”

“It’s delicious!” Delia said as she laid back on the soft mattress, moving her arms and legs as if she were making snow angels.

They were still laughing at her antics when Felicity departed.

Hurrying through her toilette, Charity washed quickly then, restored some semblance of order to her hair. Or at least some sad imitation of order. There

weren't enough pins in all of England to ever truly tame it. She donned a fresh day dress in a pale sea foam green trimmed with delicate ivory lace. About her neck, she wore a simple gold locket that had been a gift from her grandmother. Felicity had the ring that their grandmother had always worn. Those items, she supposed, were their talismans in some ways.

While she had been getting cleaned up, Delia had done the same. She was dressed in blue, her preferred color. "I suppose this as good as it will get until Marguerite arrives tomorrow with our maids in tow. I confess, I've become terribly spoiled living with her and having a maid to do my hair and tend my clothes," Delia admitted.

Charity grimaced. "We are wretched, entitled creatures and our parents, if we have to return home to them, will be terribly disappointed in just how rotten we've become."

Delia sighed, "I wouldn't change it for the world. It truly has been lovely."

"Let's go down and join the others. How many gnats would you like in your tea? One or two?" Charity teased.

"Oh, no. No gnats for me. Bees are preferable. It's the honey, you know? It makes the tea sweeter."

Charity was still giggling about her cousin's jest when they reached the lawn and the other assembled guests. In an instant, her mirth fled. On one side was Lord Jameson Dartwell. On the other was Lord Frederick Dartwell. And she had no desire to speak to either one of them.

FREDERICK HELD his breath when her gaze settled on him. He didn't delude himself that he had hurt her feelings as those were likely not engaged, at least not for her part. The idea that she might have equally succumbed to infatuation at first sight, while pleasing, was highly unlikely. But if Jameson had done as he'd said and intercepted both his gift and his missive, her pride would be terribly wounded. And while it was only supposition on his part, he imagined that Miss Charity Wylde had pride in abundance. He did not necessarily see that as a character flaw.

Before he could take a single step in her direction, Jameson was calling out to her, his voice filled with false cheer. It was all for show, undoubtedly

just to grate on his already frayed temper even more. No doubt his brother was intentionally goading him in the hopes that he would behave so boorishly that Miss Wylde would want nothing more to do with him. Then all the apologies and explanations in the world would make no difference at all.

But he was heartened by her reaction to Jameson's greeting. He saw her shoulders stiffen, and while she smiled, as was expected, the expression appeared somewhat pained. Perhaps she was not as fooled by his false charm as Jameson believed. It would not surprise him. She had struck him as being very bright and not so naive as many young women he had met. Thought, she had endured five seasons sitting on the edge of ballrooms, watching men charm other ladies for their own amusement and pleasure. It was bound to have left her at least a bit jaded.

Rather than shout her name like a fishmonger calling out his wares, Frederick crossed the expanse of lawn to where she stood with her cousin. "Miss Wylde, I must make my apologies to you."

She arched one eyebrow at him, her stare cool enough to leave him with a chill. "That isn't necessary, my lord."

"I very much fear that it is... an apology and an explanation are both owed."

"You owe me nothing," she insisted. "Consider the matter... forgotten."

Not the matter. Him. She wanted him to understand that he was forgotten. But that was not something he could let stand. "Miss Wylde, my brother will tear himself away from his friends in a moment and then foist himself upon you... perhaps you do not want my apology or explanation, but if you take a turn about the lawn with me while I give you both, you will at least be spared his company."

That bit of reason seemed to break through her icy disdain. "Very well, Viscount Welbey. I shall accept your invitation."

Frederick offered her his arm, but she merely looked at it. Then, with her head held high, she stepped past him, leaving him to follow in her wake.

He wasn't foolish enough to give up the one opportunity he had to set things right for something as silly as a power struggle. Dutifully, he fell in step behind her and let her begin the merry chase on which she would likely lead him. It only furthered his determination that she should learn the truth, both about him and his brother. Even if she chose to reject him, he couldn't see her with Jameson. The life of indignity and misery that he would bring her was a punishment no woman deserved, but certainly not her.

SEVEN

Charity's heart was hammering in her chest. She'd had no idea that he was here. When Felicity had told her that Lord Jameson Dartwell had been invited as a guest, she had failed to mention that his elder brother, Viscount Welbey, was in attendance, as well. She hadn't wanted to face him. The moment she had seen him, the moment her gaze had settled on that strong, lean frame with his aristocratic bearing and patrician features, she'd thought only of retreat. It had taken every ounce of will she had not to turn and flee into the house so no one would see just how humiliated she felt to be in his presence when he'd so clearly played her for the fool.

Had it been some sort of game? Some sort of sibling rivalry where they competed for the attentions of the same lady? She certainly didn't want to believe that but it seemed to be leaning in that direction. And her poor sister, hosting her first ever event, was smack in the middle of it. That more than anything else had swayed Charity to hold her tongue. Making a scene and causing a scandal at her sister's house party was the last thing she wanted to do.

"I am truly sorry for the slight you suffered when I did not arrive for our appointment," he said softly.

He sounded so sincere, she thought bitterly. "You mean when you left me sitting in my drawing room waiting for you to arrive as you had promised? And when after more than an hour you had not shown nor sent word, your brother suddenly appeared? Tell me, do the pair of you do this often?"

"Do what often?"

"Fight over a woman like dogs over a bone?" She couldn't keep the snappish disdain from her words, regardless of her intent to do so.

“That isn’t what I’m doing,” he answered, halting his steps. “Look at me, Miss Wylde. Look at me and see that what I am telling you is the truth and that it is for your benefit only, regardless of whether or not you elect to forgive me.”

Reluctantly, Charity turned to face him. The other guests were several yards away. Close enough, she thought to hear them talking to one another, but not so close that anything they said to one another might be overheard. “Go on then. Tell me what it is that keep you away for a fortnight.”

“Well, first it was a fire,” he admitted. “Then it was stolen livestock from several of my tenants. A dammed river that was threatening crops. One of my horses, a favorite of mine, was lamed and had to be put down. The list goes on. One calamity after another, and all of them intended to keep me from returning to town and furthering our acquaintance.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Do you honestly expect me to believe that your brother has sabotaged you at every turn just to spend time with me?”

“No. I believe that is part of the reason he’s doing it. But I also know that Jameson does nothing unless there is a profit to be made in it. I suspect that there is some wager with his wretched friends—the nature of which eludes me.”

Charity wanted to deny it. She desperately wanted it not to be true. Not that she wanted to have Lord Jameson’s attentions. She did not. Not at all. But she didn’t want them to be prompted only to win a bet, either. To think that a man would only want to be in her company because he might win a wager with his friends was beyond insulting. “Even if what you say is true, that does not excuse the fact that your behavior toward me was not that of a gentleman. To leave a woman waiting for you—.”

“Three dozen roses... one red, one pink and one white. From Gatton’s Shop. I won’t bother to tell you what I’d had written on the card as my brother undoubtedly discarded it before he gave them to you.”

Charity blinked in shock. He couldn’t have known that. Oh, it would have been easy enough to guess that if his brother had called on her he would have brought a gift of some sort. Flowers or chocolates were the traditional sort of offering. But for him to know the specifics—the composition of the bouquet, the colors, the florist from which it had originated—that was difficult to explain away.

“What did the card say?” she asked.

FREDERICK FELT the pleasant surge of victory in his blood. She believed him, or at the very least, she wanted to. “I confess to it not being especially romantic. I relayed the message through my man of affairs. Perhaps if I had penned it myself, I might have spoken more freely. I asked him to offer my apologies for my unexpected departure and an assurance that I would return as soon as possible. Alas, one event after the next kept me consumed with estate matters for the duration since last we spoke.”

“I see,” she said.

“Miss Wylde, I know we have only had one occasion to meet, but I cannot and will not deny that I am very attracted to you. I pray that you will forgive this unintended slight and that you will offer me an opportunity to make it up to you,” he implored.

She shook her head. “Do you know what happens to a toy that children fight over? It gets broken, my lord. Invariably. I’ve no wish to be that toy ripped to shreds between you and your brother.”

It was an argument he could not refute. Whatever his intentions toward her and whatever his feelings, if she were to enter into an understanding with him, Jameson would see it only as a challenge. And hurting her to hurt him was not out of the question. “Indeed, Miss Wylde,” he said. “Even in my disappointment, I cannot say that you are wrong without being the deceitful sort you must have thought me when I did not arrive for our scheduled meeting. But should you change your mind, or decide that it might be worth risking, know that you have only to say the word.”

She nodded. “Thank you, my lord. If you will excuse me, I need to return to my cousin. She knows very few people here besides my sister and myself and is—well, shy.”

He nodded and stepped aside, leaving the gravel path so that she could pass him easily. Watching her walk away, Frederick felt more bitterness toward his brother than he ever had in his life. He had loved Jameson at one time, he thought. When he’d been born, he had thought it was the most perfect thing in the world to have a brother, to have what he assumed would be a lifelong friend and companion. But over the years, Jameson’s jealousy and resentment of his position as the eldest and the heir had chipped away at those affections, leaving only anger and distrust behind.

“Damn him,” Frederick murmured. “Damn him for his spite.”

With that, he walked away—heading in the opposite direction which Miss Wylde had taken. He would spend the next week avoiding her. Her position had been made clear and her reasons behind it were too sound for him to refute. Which meant he could only learn to bear his disappointment with some degree of dignity and the knowledge that he was stepping aside for her safety. Because, as she'd said, Jameson would very much see her as a child would see a toy. A thing to be used. A thing to be broken if he did not get his way. That was the last thing he wanted to see happen to her. For her to be hurt because of him, even indirectly, was an unbearable thought.

EIGHT

After what seemed like ages of battling midges and heaven knew what other kind of creatures, Charity pled fatigue from their journey and escaped the gathered guests. Felicity had offered to send up a tray to her room, but she had declined. She wouldn't make things harder for her sister by making Felicity worry about her. She'd have a bit of a lie down, escape the hovering presence of Lord Jameson and the disturbing presence of Lord Frederick.

No sooner had she crossed the threshold of their room and made her way to her bed when it opened once more. Delia came in, all but vibrating with excitement. It didn't take a great deal of intellectual acuity to know that the interrogation was about to begin.

“What did he have to say for himself?” Delia demanded instantly.

“Must we talk about this now?”

“Yes!” Her cousin exclaimed. “Because if I am seated near him at dinner, I need to know whether or not to give him the cut.”

Charity shook her head vehemently. “Absolutely not. It wasn't at all what I thought, but that doesn't mean things are repaired between us or that they ever will be. In truth, it is all much more complicated than I had thought it would be. If anyone should receive the cut, it is Lord Jameson. But I do not want to cause a scandal that might leave a black mark on Felicity as this is her first event as a hostess. We must, both of us, be ever mindful of that.”

Delia sat down on the edge of the bed. “I know you are right, but I cannot like it. They have treated you very poorly, indeed. Both of them.”

“Lord Frederick has not... not intentionally, at any rate.” Reluctantly, Charity relayed the incident with the roses and what Lord Jameson had done.

“What a scoundrel he is! And he seemed so very nice and attentive. Why,

Charity? What possible reason could he have?”

It was a humiliating thing to admit, even to Delia. “More than likely a wager. Which, quite honestly, is in line with all the gossip, rumor and innuendo about Lord Jameson that has come my way. He’s known to be quite callous... I think that is only part of it though. There is some resentment between them that, if I had to guess, falls mostly on the shoulders of Lord Jameson. He’s quite the scapegrace and for all that I have heard about Viscount Welbey, he is anything but. That is why it was so shocking that he would arrange a meeting between us and then fail to appear.”

“I will be cordial to him then. I will be cordial to Lord Jameson if I cannot avoid him. But... Charity, if Lord Frederick really is not to blame for what occurred, then couldn’t things be repaired between the two of you?”

“What things? We shared a single dance,” Charity said dismissively. Even to her own ears it rang false. It had been a dance, yes. But it had also been a connection. There had been something, some pull between them, that defied reason and the fact that they had only just met.

Delia’s dubious expression was telling enough. She was far from convinced, as well. “You said yourself that you needed to find a husband this season. That if you do not, your parents will force you to go back to Bath. And I think, given half a chance, that Lord Frederick would ask. He’s very taken with you! And you are very taken with him. Aren’t you?”

Charity didn’t want to say yes. She didn’t want to admit it, especially given that she had essentially told him they could have nothing further to do with one another. “That doesn’t matter. I will not be the bone two dogs fight over. It would only end in disaster.”

“You’re looking for problems where there are none! You’ve no interest in Lord Jameson and you will tell him so. You will tell him you know about his deceit with the roses and that you will not have such immoral people in your life. Then you shall speak to the Viscount and tell him you have reconsidered.”

“I can’t!”

“You can. You’re simply scared to. He’s the only man who has ever paid attention to you whose attentions you actually wanted,” Delia insisted.

The ring of truth in her cousin’s words halted Charity’s protests. She could not deny it. Not a single word of it. “I’ve made a terrible mess of it.”

“Messes can be tidied up. One just has to know where to start.”

Charity reached out and took her cousin’s hand. “You have always been

the voice of reason. Always. Felicity was the voice of caution in our foursome. Benny the voice curiosity.”

“And you? What is your voice?”

“Normally the loudest,” Charity admitted with a rueful grin. “You are right. And I will do what you’ve said. I just need to figure out how to go about it.”

“Promise you will not let this opportunity pass you by,” Delia urged.

“I won’t. I promise.”

JAMESON WAS FURIOUS. He’d played his hand too soon. Boasting of his scheme with the flowers had been a mistake. It had given Frederick enough information to ruin his chances with Miss Wylde. The prospect of stealing her from beneath his brother’s nose had only added to her appeal. He had been weighing his options. To win her and discard would mean victory in the wager with his friends. But winning her and keeping her would mean making his brother miserable for a lifetime. The more he heard about the Wylde family, the more he realized that Charity Wylde would, at the very least, have a generous marriage settlement. In short, there was greater benefit to marrying her than discarding her. He would have to sacrifice a bit of his pride either way, Ollie would be displeased.

If he meant to win her, regardless of the final outcome, he’d need to do something to impede Fredericks’ pursuit of her. Perhaps an injury. The gathered gentlemen were supposed to ride the following day. An improperly cinched saddle would likely not kill him. Of course if it did, he wouldn’t need Charity Wylde’s fortune. He’d have the entirety of the Dartwell holdings at his disposal then. But if dear old Freddie were at least injured, he’d spend the house party convalescing and propriety would never allow Miss Wylde to visit him in his sick room. There was truly no way for him to lose in that scenario.

He might have had an attack of conscience in years past. But Jameson had discovered that the more frequently one did awful things, the less one was bothered by them. And he’d done a vast number of truly terrible things in the past few years. Each heinous act committed for the sake of easing the unbearable resentment that burned inside him for having been born the

second son.

Frederick didn't deserve all the good fortune that had been bestowed on him. At the very least, he didn't deserve it any more than he himself did by virtue of an accident of birth.

The more Jameson ruminated on the matter the more convinced he became that, while it wasn't necessarily the right course of action, it was the most beneficial. At least to him. And at the end of the day, that was what mattered. It would, one way or another, give him some or all of the things he wanted. What befell his brother or Miss Charity Wylde as a result of it was of no concern to him.

Whistling a little tune to himself, an obscene ditty he'd picked up in one of the worst brothels London had to offer, he took himself off in search of something stronger than the insipid lemonade, tea or even wine that was on offer for the afternoon. For once, he would practice moderation. If he meant to sabotage Frederick's equipage, he couldn't indulge his love of spirits too deeply. After all, he had work to do.

NINE

The drawing room was full of guests, all of them assembled there to enjoy a bit of wine and conversation prior to dinner. Frederick scanned the crowded room. It was without conscious thought, searching for some glimpse of her. He was also searching for Jameson. The old adage about keeping one's friends close and one's enemies closer should not apply to a sibling, but there it was. Jameson's resentment of him had grown to a point that everything his brother said and did was suspect.

No sooner had he thought of him than he spied him lurking near a set of French doors that led out on to the terrace. He did not approach him. Another skirmish was the last thing either of them needed. Antagonizing him further when he was clearly already so unreasonably angry would only make the remaining time at Randford House even more difficult.

In truth, he'd considered packing up and returning to his own estate. After all, Miss Wylde had made her position very clear. Her rejection of him was sound and for all the right reasons, but that didn't make it any less bitter to swallow. The idea of leaving her alone when Jameson's motives remained unknown to everyone but him was giving him second thoughts.

"Good evening, Welbey," Randford said, approaching him with two drinks in his large hands. He passed one to him. "No brandy, I'm afraid. Not till after dinner when the ladies have closeted themselves in one room and we've all been banished to another. Port is a tolerable substitute."

"So it is," he agreed, accepting the glass. "I need to ask something of you. I had been considering an early departure, but I have changed my mind about that.. My brother is up to something—I think his courtship of Miss Wylde may be legitimate but his motives in doing so are... nefarious. You will be in

a far better position to look after her than I will.”

Randford shook his head. “You’re giving up? Just like that?”

“Miss Wylde was correct in refusing me. Her reasons are logical and very sound. She does not want to be a point of contention between myself and Jameson. Being in the middle puts her at risk and that is the last thing I would ever want.”

“The women of the Wylde family are not easy. They are complex creatures with minds of their own and all of them have more stubbornness than any one human ought ever possess. But they are well worth the effort required to woo them. Do not give up. Not just yet. Remain, persevere and you can look after her yourself.”

He might have dug in his heels. But the drawing room door opened then and the Misses Wylde entered. He understood, objectively, that Cordelia Wylde was pretty enough. But she might as well have been invisible. He had eyes only for Charity. The deep emerald green silk that she wore made her skin glow. Her blonde hair was in some style that he’d never know the name of. But it was half up and half down, with part of it cascading over her shoulder in a mass of curls. All he wanted in that moment was to feel those silken tresses in his hands.

“I will remain.”

“Excellent. It’d be damned awkward since I maneuvered, manipulated and bribed my own servants to seat her beside you for dinner,” Randford replied. “Nothing ventured results in nothing gained, Welbey. Good luck.”

For the remainder of the gathering, he stayed near her. Not so close that she would feel compelled to acknowledge him, but close enough that he could intervene if Jameson were to corner her. When the dinner gong finally rang, he immediately stepped toward her. “Miss Wylde, I believe we are to be neighbors for dinner. Please allow me to escort you in.”

There was the briefest of hesitations. Then she offered a small, polite, but undeniably warm smile. “Thank you, Viscount Welbey. That would be very nice.”

There was a spark of hope in him. Perhaps she had changed her mind. Perhaps he had a chance, after all.

CHARITY WOULD HAVE KISSED her sister had Felicity been near her. After the small party on the lawn, she had not spoken to her sister about the viscount. But she could only imagine that Felicity had known, somehow. Her sister was trying to play matchmaker and remove as few obstacles from her path as possible. Putting them beside one another at dinner was a way to ensure that they would be able to converse relatively privately. At such events, with everyone talking at once and the clinking of glasses, china and cutlery, the din was such that one could only ever hear the person to one's immediate right or left. And since Cordelia would be on her left, what she and the Viscount spoke of would remain a well kept secret.

Placing her hand on his proffered arm, she allowed him to lead her into the dining room. For a moment, she was so overwhelmed with pride for what her sister had created that her own dramas simply faded to the background.

The already exquisite dining room of Randford House had been made over into something akin to a magical fairy land. The tables glittered with candles. Carefully constructed trees, bedecked with sugared fruit and artfully decorated cakes, provided unique centerpieces that would be the talk of everyone present. The tables themselves, three altogether, had been positioned around the room to form a u-shape. They were covered with moss and an actual trickling stream had been crafted so that water flowed from one end of the table to the next. It was brilliant. It was ostentatious and incredibly extravagant, but it was a triumph.

“Your sister has outdone herself,” the viscount observed.

Charity smiled. “She certainly has. Never let it be said that when Felicity puts her mind to something, she cannot achieve it not only competently but with panache.”

They found their seats. The Viscount was seated on one corner of the U and she was next to him. In some ways, that was better. It would make conversation so much easier because they were seated closer together that way than others were. But it was also nerve-racking because looking at him, meeting his intense gaze, always left her breathless and a bit shaky. She'd likely the spill soup all over herself and make a complete muddle of everything.

The footman held her chair for her and she sat down, letting him push the chair in toward the table. Up close, Felicity's vision for the evening was even more stunning. The detail and thought that had gone into creating such a display was truly impressive. And thinking of that was so much easier than

thinking about the man beside her.

“I made a mistake this afternoon, Miss Wylde,” the viscount said.

The abrupt change of subject from talking about Felicity’s decor to the very uncomfortable conversation they’d had earlier in the day was unsettling to say the least. But she tried to remain calm and collected as she asked, “What mistake is that, my lord?”

“I conceded defeat and allowed you to end something before it has even begun. I’ve had a change of heart. And my brother, Miss Wylde, can go to the devil. But I’ll not let him have any sort of control in what happens with the pair of us.”

Her heart was pounding wildly with excitement, with anticipation of all that was to come. But above all, what she truly felt in that moment, was relief. She hadn’t ruined things with him forever. There was still hope. “How fortunate it is, my lord, that I had reconsidered my stance already. You’ve spared me the embarrassment of bringing it up. Thank you.”

“What prompted your change of heart?”

Charity looked down at her hands folded primly in her lap. “My dear cousin simply pointed out to me that caution, while a valuable trait, should not always supersede courage.”

He smiled. It was that same beautiful smile with that delectable dimple and those sparkling eyes that she had seen the first time they had met, when they had danced, and she’d been so thoroughly taken with him. In that moment, it was no less devastating and it left her quite flustered. He really was beyond handsome, but it was the warmth she sensed in him, the kindness, that drew her in. Perhaps it was the absence of those traits that had made Lord Jameson’s attentions so much of a nuisance. Only politeness and unwillingness to break etiquette and embarrass her aunt had kept her from telling him to leave her be.

“Make no mistake, Miss Wylde, that it is you alone whom I mean to court. But should an extravagant gift be anonymously delivered to your cousin, you may rest assured that it was given only in gratitude.”

Charity couldn’t hold back her giggle. “I should tell you that isn’t necessary, but frankly, I think Cordelia would enjoy it greatly.”

Their eyes met and her laughter died away. Their gazes locked in a way that felt unbearably intimate, far too intimate to occur in a room full of people. And that might have made a difference had she not lost all awareness of anyone else in the dining room but him.

When he spoke, his voice was pitched very low. Low enough that she needed to lean in a bit to hear every word. “Then you may consider it done, my dear Miss Wylde. I believe we have outings scheduled into the local village tomorrow. Perhaps you could advise me on what she might like.”

“I would like that very much, my lord.”

“Frederick, if you please. And if you would permit me, I should very much like to have the liberty of your given name.”

Charity couldn’t stop the blush that pinkened her cheeks. “Then it is yours... Frederick.”

They were so lost in one another that neither of them even took note of Lord Jameson glaring daggers at them from across the table. He sullenly gulped his wine, signaling the footmen to refill his glass despite the fact that it was considered terribly bad form to become inebriated in the presence of ladies. But then, Lord Jameson Dartwell had made it a point to always defy convention just for the sake of it. Now he had reason. He had a belly full of port and boiling resentment. But it was no longer just directed at his brother. Because he could see from the way Charity Wylde looked at Frederick, in a manner which she had never looked at him, that there would be no chance to win her over. Her affections were already engaged and likely had been from the first.

He might not have her, he thought, reconciling himself to that fact. But it didn’t mean that he couldn’t exact his own form of revenge.

TEN

The following morning was bright but the weather was uncharacteristically mild. In short, it was perfect for their outing to the village. Two large carts had been hitched to teams of horses, the back of them filled with hay covered in soft blankets to prevent it from sticking to anyone's clothing.

Frederick wasn't concerned about making certain he had an opportunity to sit next to Charity. It had already been arranged in advance. He was waiting for her in the foyer so they could walk out together. It was tantamount to acknowledging that there was some sort of understanding between them. That was certainly how gossips would interpret it and he had no problem with that at all. The more people who understood his intentions, the better it would be.

When Charity descended the stairs with Miss Cordelia at her side, he simply watched her with rapt attention. She didn't wear the pale pastels and white that so many unmarried young women in society did. Instead, she wore what she liked—what she felt suited her. And as he took note of the deep violet muslin that perfectly complemented her alabaster skin, he was inordinately pleased that she did not feel the need to adhere to convention for convention's sake. Charity had a mind of her own and a will strong enough to ensure that she could give voice to it.

“Good morning, Charity. Miss Wylde,” he acknowledged.

“Good morning to you, Frederick,” Charity replied with a coy smile. Beside her, Cordelia grinned.

“Viscount, it was so kind of you to agree to escort Charity and I about the village today.”

“It is not kindness, Miss Wylde. It will be both a pleasure and an honor.

Allow me to take you to the waiting cart. It will be a far easier journey if we are not in the rear facing section of it.”

Miss Wylde shuddered. “Thank you, my lord, for thinking of it. I do sometimes experience travel sickness... But not Charity. She is far more suited to adventure than I am.”

“Hush, Cordelia,” Charity chided softly. “Do not tell Lord Dartwell all of my embarrassing peccadilloes.”

“Well, now I must know,” he insisted with a smile.

Miss Cordelia grinned. “And I shall delight in the telling. Come, cousin, and defend your actions if you can!”

That pleasant conversation with the two ladies set the tone for the ride into town. Cordelia shared delightful anecdotes about all four of them: herself, her sister and her two cousins. And all the while, Charity blushed and protested what she deemed the more embarrassing stories.

For him, they were all a delight. He especially liked the ones about her shimmying down the tree at her parents house to visit a fortune teller.

“What did this soothsayer predict for you, Charity?” Frederick asked teasingly. “That you would meet a tall, dark, and handsome stranger?”

Charity’s lips twisted in a rueful grimace. “Of course, she told me that. Just as she told the twelve other girls that paid her ridiculous fee. We, the lot of us, got the same tale, word for word. Which I only found out because Benny had snuck out with me and heard the same thing.”

Cordelia frowned. “I hadn’t thought about it, but that prediction came true for Benny! She did meet a tall, dark and handsome stranger and they did have a whirlwind betrothal. And by all accounts, they are quite pitifully in love with one another. Perhaps she wasn’t a charlatan, after all?”

He felt Charity’s gaze on him and he smiled in return, a conspiratorial expression he was sure. “Perhaps she wasn’t. Time will tell, will it not, Charity?”

“WE SHALL SEE, FREDERICK,” she said imperiously. “We shall certainly see.”

JAMESON HAD LEFT Randford House late the night before and made his way into town. There was a tavern there and, from what he had been told, a very friendly tavern maid. Sadly, she'd already been occupied for the evening when he arrived. So instead, he just drank himself into a stupor before passing out on the taproom floor. He might have worried about being robbed if he'd had any actual coin on him. The small amount he'd possessed had already been spent on whiskey by that point.

Staggering to the door, he winced at the bright sunlight as he stepped outside. He reeked of liquor and the general dirtiness of the establishment. Disheveled, with stains on his shirt, and all of his clothes impossibly rumpled, he looked every inch the reprobate that the gossips painted him. Normally, that would not bother him in the least. He'd certainly never made any great effort to hide his wicked ways. But that morning, of all the times to wander out looking as if he'd spent the night doing exactly what he had been doing—drinking and carousing—was decidedly inconvenient. Because just as he stepped foot outside, two carts full of laughing and smiling guests from Randford House were driving by.

It only took seconds for their laughter to die away. It was replaced by shocked gasps followed by furtive whispers. And all of them turned to look at him. Every last person who had decided to participate in their mundane little outing, had seen him at his absolute worst—including Miss Charity Wylde and his damnable brother.

For the first time since he'd made that stupid wager with Ollie Kent, he didn't bother to conceal his contempt. As they rolled by, he glared daggers at the lot of them. And he felt strangely freed by that. If they wanted to think him a wastrel and rakehell, so be it. If others amongst them would paint him even darker—as a true villain—well let them think it as well. And he would do everything in his power to meet all of their expectations.

Turning, he presented his back to all of them, and strode toward his waiting horse. He'd return to Randford House, pack his belongings and make for London. But first, he'd make a brief stop at the stables to have a minor repair made to his tack. And while the tackhand was occupied with that small chore, he'd take the necessary steps to ensure that his brother did not achieve the happy ending he appeared to be on the cusp of. By the time they all went for their afternoon ride and Frederick suffered his tragic accident, he'd be halfway to London with no one ever making the connection.

A wicked smile twisted his lips. Paying the hundred pounds to Ollie

wouldn't be such a painful experience if the lot of Frederick's fortune were to fall into his hands first.

Jameson began to whistle, that same dirty little tune from earlier. It was a catchy one to be sure.

ELEVEN

That afternoon, Charity and Cordelia were once more in their room. Ostensibly it was to have a rest after their morning outing, but the truth was that her cousin simply wouldn't to pester her for information.

“What did he say? Did he ask you to marry him yet? When you slipped away at the church, did he kiss you?”

The rapidly fired questions from Cordelia were enough to make her head spin. Charity held up her hand. “Good heavens. Pick one question, ask it, get your answer and then move to the next! I honestly can't even remember all of them by the time you get to the end.”

Cordelia grinned. “I'll start with the important one. Did he kiss you?”

Charity frowned. No. He hadn't. There had been a moment when she thought he would, when they'd been studying a particularly well executed effigy of a knight who had died in battle. She'd turned to point something out to him and found him staring at her. Or more particularly, staring directly at her mouth. Then he'd leaned closer and, heaven help her, she'd leaned into him, as well—waiting with bated breath for the first touch of his lips.

And then Lady Agnes Milford's shrill voice had penetrated the haze around them, only seconds before she'd turned the corner and come upon the very same crypt they were examining. And she'd gifted them both with a very knowing smirk. Guiltily, Charity had backed away from him then. But he seemed to suffer no embarrassment at all... only disappointment that they'd been interrupted.

“No, he did not kiss me,” Charity said.

Cordelia lips twisted into a pout. “Well that is terribly disappointing. I wanted you to tell me what it felt like since it seems I'll never find out

myself! I can assume with no kissing there was no proposing?”

“We’ve really only just begun to get know one another!” Charity protested. And while she would not say so to her cousin, she could admit to herself that if he were to ask, she’d say yes without hesitation. Foolish and impulsive as it seemed, that simply felt right to her.

Cordelia’s skeptical expression was telling. “You know enough. Don’t even try to lie. We’ve known one another practically since birth!”

It was true. She loved her sister. Felicity was her twin, after all, and they were undeniably close. But Cordelia had been more than just a cousin. She’d been a friend and confidante. “Marguerite should be here anytime,” Charity said, changing the subject.

“Oh, yes. I’m sure she will and I’ll gleefully inform her of Lord Jameson Dartwell’s scandalous behavior. Good heavens, Charity! I cannot believe she permitted that man to call on you. Your father would have apoplexy.”

Charity didn’t even want to think about what he would say, or just how furious he would be. Not with Marguerite but with her. She didn’t like to talk about it, not even with Cordelia. But he’d always been much harder on her than on Charity. Her mother was not one to show favorites. She was critical of everyone. But her father had always made his preference painfully clear. “Must we tell her? Because she will tell father, and I can’t bear another lecture, Cordelia. Really.”

Her cousin rose from the bed where she’d seated herself and wrapped Charity in a warm and comforting embrace. “I won’t say anything to Marguerite, and should she find out from another source, I will plead with her not to let your father know. At least not until you’ve become the Viscountess Welbey.”

Charity didn’t immediately naysay her. How could she when that was precisely what she hoped the outcome would be?

FREDERICK WALKED with the other gentleman to the stables. They had done some shooting first, in a field not far from there, and now the plan was to ride through Randford’s estate to the river and then back. It offered a chance for the men to be able to indulge in ribald humor and conversation that was unsuitable for ladies’ ears. And also, he thought, because some of

those gentlemen just wanted to escape their wives for a bit. Lord Milford came to mind. Lady Agnes had a voice that could curdle milk.

Of course, that wasn't his only reason for participating in the event. After the indignity of Jameson's appearance that morning, if he were to stay behind, it would be assumed that he was doing so out of shame. He'd long since given up feeling ashamed of his brother's behavior. If he hadn't, he would never have had opportunity to feel anything else.

Mounting his horse, he felt it shift a bit beneath his weight. Thinking it had more to do with an error on his part, likely due to his degree of distraction, he settled himself more firmly in the saddle.

Randford nodded to him. "That's a fine horse."

Frederick patted Hannibal's neck. The gray gelding snorted in pleasure and tossed his head a bit. "He's a vain one."

Randford laughed. "He has reason to be. Is he a jumper?"

"He's been known to be," Frederick said with some excitement. Perhaps it wouldn't be a staid ride, after all. There might actually be a challenge to it.

"Good. There's a section on the other side of the woods... hills, fences and a few hazards. Nothing really dangerous, of course. Just enough to make it a bit of a challenge. Are you game?"

"I'm more than game, Randford."

Randford nodded. "By the way, I should tell you that Lady Marguerite will be here this afternoon. Likely by four. I'm assuming you'll be wanting to have a conversation with her."

"Indeed," Frederick nodded. "Indeed, I will."

When the last of the riders had mounted up, they took off. Some were better than others, but all were adequate horsemen. Frederick didn't feel the need to push his mount in the beginning. He was content to stay with the pack and save the animal's energy until they reached the course Randford had mentioned.

The first jump was a low stone fence. Just a bit more than knee high, it should have been easy. It should have been something he could do in his sleep. But the moment his horse flexed beneath him, preparing to take that leap, he knew something was wrong. It was too late to change course, too late to redirect. They went over and he heard the snap of leather as the saddle slipped beneath him. But this time it wasn't simply a slip. The entire thing came away, taking him with it. He hit the ground with a heavy thud. At the very last second, he managed to twist slightly to avoid a large stone. It grazed

his forehead as he fell, but did no serious damage beyond drawing a bit of blood. But the fall did knock the wind out of him, leaving him a bit dazed.

He lay there for a moment, taking stock. When he was fairly certain he was not seriously injured, he sat up. The other riders had circled back, Randford coming up first. Seeing that he was relatively unharmed, his host went to see to his horse first. As much as he cherished the animal, there was something else that he needed to see to first.

Hoisting himself up off the ground, he winced at what would surely be a few nasty bruises. Despite his discomfort, he went immediately to where his saddle lay on the ground. Squatting down, he picked up the loose end of the cinch and examined it. There were too distinct patterns to the separation of the girth. On one side, it was a normal tear, jagged and rough. On the other, it was clean smooth. As though a knife had been taken to it.

The leather hadn't simply worn through. And even if it had, the tackmaster would have replaced it. Everything had been checked over and readied for them. Between the time they'd gone to do their shooting and returned for their ride, the girth had been cut. Sliced almost through—sabotaged to break under his weight.

“This was no accident,” he said.

Randford had reached him then, leading both of their horses. “Deliberate?”

Frederick held up the cut leather. “Just so. And I do not think either of us have to struggle to identify the culprit. He's gone now.”

Randford nodded. “He is. He left just as we returned from the village... but I know that he stopped by the stables before departing, just moments before we all convened for our ride.”

“What reason did he give? One of your servants would have brought his horse round to him, which is much more in line with his typical way of doing things. Jameson never works harder than absolutely necessary,” Frederick mused. It wasn't that he doubted his brother's responsibility for what had just occurred. He knew that Jameson was more than capable of it, but he didn't want to believe it. He wanted desperately for it to not be true.

Randford was quiet as he answered, “He said he needed a simple repair to his one of his stirrups—that the stitching of the leather had come loose. While it was being repaired, he would have had ample opportunity to tamper with your tack. The horses were already saddled and waiting for us. No one would have thought to check it again as it had been checked beforehand. It's

a diabolical scheme, really.”

It was more than just diabolical. He'd thought his brother wicked, perhaps. Selfish, certainly. He had never thought his brother truly evil, but now he was forced to question that.

Randford continued, “And had it not broken here, if we'd made it to the course on the other side of the woods, it might have had a very different outcome.”

It was a chilling thought. But it didn't take any extraordinary intellect to see the motive behind it. He had not yet married. He had no heir other than his younger brother who would get everything upon his death. Charity wasn't the cause, but his intentions toward her could well be the catalyst. The looming end of Jameson's position as the heir apparent had likely spurred him on. “You're certain he is gone?”

“Well, as certain as one can be. Why?” Randford asked.

Frederick met the other man's gaze steadily. “Because I think he could well be a danger to Charity. This attempt on my life failed. Another one would be highly suspect. But if a tragic accident were to befall the woman I intend to marry—then that gives him time. Time to plot and scheme how best to get rid of me and claim the family holdings. It's greed. Nothing more than greed. But it is boundless and makes him more dangerous than I had ever realized.”

Randford turned to the others, “The lot of you go on. Enjoy your ride. The groom knows the path well enough to get you there and back. I'll see Welbey back to the house.”

When they had gone, Frederick used the stone wall to step up and mount the horse. Riding bareback was not something he enjoyed, but he was capable of it. It was a damn sight better than walking the mile back to the house. He needed to warn Charity. He needed her to know just how dangerous his brother could apparently be.

TWELVE

Cordelia had accompanied her downstairs to greet Marguerite upon her arrival. As always, their aunt was somewhat dramatic. She dramatically bemoaned the rigors of travel but insisted, loudly for all to hear, that any discomfort or inconvenience was well worth it to attend what was sure to be recorded as a party for the ages.

She had just finished that speech when two riders approached. Instantly Charity knew them. It was Phinneas and beside him was Frederick. Riding without the benefit of a saddle. The closer he came the more she realized that something was wrong. When they were near enough for her to see him clearly, she gasped. His clothes were dirty, likely from having fallen or having been thrown from his horse. And there was blood, now dried, smeared on his forehead.

“What on earth has happened?” She murmured the question aloud, heedless of others around her. Immediately, Cordelia and Marguerite turned their attention to the approaching riders.

“Is the Viscount injured?” Marguerite asked. “While I certainly would not wish harm to befall him, I will not trouble myself over him either. He treated you very badly, Charity. That your kindness allows you to have concern for him after that is a testament to your character.” The last of it was stated far more firmly than necessary, almost as if there was an order in it.

“There are things you do not know, Aunt Marguerite,” Cordelia said. “And they involve not only Viscount Welbey, but his scoundrel of a brother. Come inside and I will explain. Charity will come along after she’s assured herself that the Viscount is well.” While the words and tone were not sharp, there was a firmness in Cordelia’s suggestions that could not be denied. After

a brief hesitation, Marguerite did as her youngest niece had said and they disappeared through the heavy oaken doors of Randford House.

Charity didn't wait for him to reach her. Instead she took one step forward, then another. Each subsequent step became faster than the last until she was almost running towards him. He dismounted quickly as she reached him.

"I'm quite alright. It isn't nearly so bad as it looks."

"What happened?" Charity asked.

"A saboteur," Phinneas replied. "Lord Jameson, to be exact."

"He frayed the girth so that it would fail while I was riding," Frederick explained. "But I'm unhurt. Truly. A few bruises and a bit of a scrape, but otherwise hale and hearty."

Charity shook her head in dismay as they began to walk back to the house. Phinneas had dismounted, as well, and while he kept them in sight, he provided enough distance to allow for private conversation. "Why would he do this, Frederick? Surely it must be more than petty jealousy."

"There is nothing petty about his jealousy. It's festered inside him for a very long time, I think. But you made a very clear choice, and it was a choice seen by everyone here... coupled with his own bad behavior which resulted in this morning's disgrace, it was too much. He has, for whatever misguided reason, always placed his troubles at my feet. As if our birth order rather than our character determined what sort of lives we would have."

"He resents you for having the title," she surmised.

Frederick shook his head. "He resents me for having the fortune. I think it is more that than the title which spawned his jealousy. And I would share the fortune with him as much as I am permitted to with all the various entails. But his gambling and his hedonistic lifestyle would bankrupt us within only a few years... By all accounts, Jameson has left for London. But if he's willing to commit murder, he'd hardly balk at telling a lie. There's a possibility he could still be lurking nearby."

"You are still in danger then."

"As are you," he said pointedly.

Charity was instantly in denial. "Why on earth would I be in danger from him?"

"Because... I haven't asked you to be my wife—not yet. But he knows, surely as everyone else here does, that is my intent. And taking a wife puts me one step closer to having an heir. And when I have an heir, his very last

chance to claim all the family's holdings is obliterated.”

Charity's steps faltered. “I know I should be thinking about your brother and the threat he poses. But quite honestly, I'm much more overwhelmed at the prospect of a proposal.”

His lips quirked slightly. “Then I will delay asking until you tell me you do no longer feel overwhelmed by the notion.”

“And how would I do that? Just walk up to you, and say, ‘Frederick, I am ready for my proposal’?” The very notion was ridiculous.

He laughed, the sound low and muted. It was an attempt to keep their conversation discreet. “You just need remind me that I had a question to ask you. I will know precisely what that means and so will you.”

“I will keep that in mind. Now, we need to get you to the house so that your scrapes and bruises may be tended. That is a nasty cut on your forehead. And I am woefully cognizant of the fact that it might have been much, much worse.”

“As you wish,” he said. “Always. And in all things.”

Charity found herself blushing, not from what he said, but from the way he looked at her. She had never experienced attraction. Not really. She had certainly never experienced being on the receiving end of it. In Bath, all the gentlemen had been absolutely appalled by her apparent inability to refrain from speaking her mind or hiding her feelings behind a mask of cool politeness. They all looked at her and saw only the flaws. “You don't think I talk too much? Or too loudly? Or that I speak my mind too freely?”

“There is nothing about you I would alter. Rather than minding any of those traits you listed, I admire them. There is an honesty about you—about your reactions to everything around you, that I find refreshing.”

“Oh.” It was the only response she could manage. She was so terribly flustered by him in that moment, it took everything in her not to run away. But she persevered through her own uncertainty, through the strange fluttering sensation inside her when she felt his gaze on her. How she wished Lady Agnes had not interrupted them that morning.

WALKING BACK to the house with her, Frederick wanted nothing more than to pull her off the path and find a secluded spot where they would not be

interrupted. Where he could kiss her as he'd so longed to do that morning.

"Meet me in the garden," he said. It was an impetuous thing.

"Now?"

"In an hour. At the Roman folly. Say you will, Charity. I wanted so badly to kiss you earlier today and I believe, unless I misread the situation based on my own wishful thinking, that you very much wanted to be kissed. Am I wrong?"

The hot blush that flamed her cheeks was telling enough. "No, you are not wrong. I will try to get away. Aunt Marguerite is here and she might make things difficult. But not impossible."

"Then go... go inside now before I do something that scandalizes all of us. And I will see you in the garden."

She nodded and then walked ahead, her steps speeding up until she reached the doors and disappeared inside. He had much to do before he met her, including getting himself cleaned up. A bath and a change of clothes, and he'd be good as new.

"I don't know what you're planning," Randford said, closing the distance he'd allowed while Charity was present. "But if it hastens you both to the altar, all the better. Charity's parents have grown impatient. If she is not married by the end of Summer, she will be summoned home and likely never see London again."

"At the very least, I think we will be betrothed by the end of the week. If I had my way, we'd be married by then," Frederick admitted. "I've never met another woman in all my life that I felt so instantly and intimately connected to. Was it that way when you met your bride?"

Randford laughed. "Yes and no. But Felicity and I met under *unusual* circumstances. But those circumstances smoothed the way for a short engagement and a hasty wedding. I regret none of it."

Perhaps, Frederick thought, he was more like Jameson than he wished to believe. Because he immediately began considering all the ways he could create just such an unusual circumstance that might force her hand into a very short betrothal. Or perhaps no betrothal at all. He finally understood the allure of an elopement.

THIRTEEN

“Are you certain you are well?” Marguerite asked. “Your cheeks are very flushed, Charity!”

“I’m fine, Aunt Marguerite. Really. It’s just very warm. In fact, I think I’m going to take a book and go read in the garden. It’s very stuffy inside, even with the windows open,” Charity insisted. It was the fourth time her aunt had remarked on her flushed appearance. She couldn’t very well admit that she was nervous about her planned assignation with Lord Frederick Dartwell, Viscount Welbey could she? Marguerite would lock her in her room.

“Very well. You must wear your hat. Heaven forbid your father sees a single freckle on your face after you’ve been in my care,” her aunt said with an exaggerated roll of her eyes.

For her part, Cordelia had remained silent throughout it all. But her eyes sparkled with mischief when she asked, “What is it that you are reading, Charity? I’ve been looking for a good book.”

“It’s one of Mrs. Radcliffe’s,” Charity lied smoothly. “I have only just started it so I cannot attest to its quality just yet.”

“Fair enough. I will expect a full accounting,” Delia insisted.

“You could always join her,” Marguerite said.

Panic clawed at her as Charity mentally scrambled for some way to deny her aunt’s suggestion without arousing suspicion. Luckily, Delia, despite her good natured needling, had no wish to interfere in her budding romance with the viscount.

“Oh, no! I have no wish to go outside in the garden right now. I think I’ll have a little lie down. This heat simply leaves me feeling quite wilted,” Delia

said.

Marguerite nodded. “It’s just as well that you are going to the garden, Charity. You’d never be able to concentrate on your book with the way Cordelia snores and talks in her sleep.”

Dutifully, Charity retrieved her bonnet from their room. “I shall see you for tea.”

Quickly, before anyone else could ask further difficult or embarrassing questions that she couldn’t answer, Charity made her escape. She headed straight for the morning room, which she knew would be deserted at that time of day, and where a set of doors led out onto the terrace overlooking the garden. She had a general notion of where the folly was simply because she’d seen blueprints of the design before it had been executed. Felicity had labored over every minute decision when it came to redesigning the formal gardens.

The stone path was flanked by well manicured hedges that were no higher than her waist. And within the center of each walled section of the garden were lush roses and other flowering plants. It was truly a work of art. But Charity couldn’t appreciate its beauty at that moment. Instead, she wanted only to reach the folly that was concealed behind well manicured boxwoods.

When she turned the corner, immediately she stopped. Frederick was waiting for her, just as he’d said he would be. With her heart pounding in her chest, Charity approached him.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t come,” he said softly.

“To be perfectly honest, so was I,” she admitted. “My aunt and my cousin were asking impossible questions.”

“Such as?”

“Oh, just nonsense really,” she said, not wanting to admit that her nerves had very nearly spoiled everything and kept her from meeting him.

“Let’s walk,” he said. “I think there is a place that you will like. It’s a very pretty spot.”

She couldn’t say anything. He’d reached out taking her hand in his, holding it gently, his thumb stroking the tender skin at the inside of her wrist in a way that elicited a shiver of excitement, of pure sensation, from her. She remained quiet as he led her along the path and towards a small summer house that overlooked the pond.

“There is a spot very similar to this at Hamden Court—my own estate. It is not so very far from here. Perhaps half a day’s ride. A full day in a carriage,” he said.

Inside the summer house, there were banquettes with thick cushions and a table burdened with a large picnic hamper. “What is all this?”

“We’ve shared a dance. A handful of conversations. We’ve shared one brief outing into town in the company of a dozen or so others,” he explained. “This will be the first time we have had a truly private moment together. I thought we should take advantage of that.”

“You are quite right. We have not had very much time together,” she reflected. “And what we have had has been... not conducive to really getting to know one another.”

He opened the hamper and retrieved a bottle of wine along with two glasses. “So now we rectify matters. Tell me about your family... your life in Bath.”

“Mother and father are... well, father is difficult and our mother is disapproving. Always. They were also quite out of patience with us. We’d had four seasons in Bath and neither of us managed to attract a respectable suitor. That is why they allowed us to come to London with Aunt Marguerite. We managed to convince them we might have more luck in London,” she explained.

“Well, clearly your arguments for it were well founded. Your sister has married well. One of your cousins, as I understand, has also married quite well. And you have attracted a respectable and quite committed suitor,” he observed.

She blinked. “I hadn’t thought of it in those terms... of our arguments being proven by the outcomes for Felicity and Benny... and potentially for myself.”

He poured the wine and passed a glass to her. As she accepted it, their fingers brushed. It was only a whisper of a touch, but it made her shiver nonetheless. Every time he touched her, she had a visceral response to it. And watching his face, she noted that she was not alone. There was an intensity in his gaze, a hunger, that was undeniable. With every touch, with every moment they were together, it only grew stronger.

He stepped closer, the distance between them shrinking until it was negligible. They were closer than they had ever been, even when dancing. Even when he’d been on the verge of kissing her there at the old chapel. With her hands trembling with nerves and anticipation, she placed her glass on the table. “I know you’re going to kiss me.”

He smiled. “Yes, I am.”

“Well, if you don’t mind terribly, could we just get on with it? I’ve no idea what to do or what to expect and that’s positively nerve racking.”

HER WORDS HAD all tumbled out quickly—a clear indicator of her anxiousness. At any other time, he might have considered it endearing. But in that moment, he could focus on only thing. He’d been granted permission to the thing he wanted most, to taste the sweetness of her rosebud lips.

Wasting no time, he deposited his own glass of wine on the table and then reached for her. Grasping her wrist, he pulled her forward, slowly, until there wasn’t even the space of a breath between them. With far more patience than he believed himself capable of, he lowered his head, brushing his lips softly against hers. Once, twice... and then she let out a soft sigh, a sound of pleasure that fired his blood.

He settled his mouth more firmly on hers, the kiss becoming slightly more demanding even as he closed his arms about her. Pulling her to him, their bodies pressed tightly together, he savored every second of it. All the while, he battled back his own urges to take more, to demand more from her than he knew she was prepared to give in that moment.

She leaned into him, pressing closer, increasing the contact. He couldn’t have been given a more clear signal to deepen the kiss. With the lightest pressure, her lips parted beneath his and he traced those delicate curves with his tongue. She gasped in surprise, but didn’t pull back. But when she kissed him in return, when she mimicked those actions, he was lost. Sweet, innocent, passionate, with an innate kindness and an exuberance for life, he found her positively irresistible.

With two steps, he’d maneuvered them to one of the banquettes. Sinking down on it, he pulled her down with him until she was sprawled across his lap. It was quickly escalating beyond the simple kiss he had offered and that she had asked for. While, he knew he should halt their amorous activities, he couldn’t. Not just yet. Asking him to stop kissing her would be like asking him not to breathe.

A special license. They would marry by special license because he couldn’t wait three weeks for the banns to be read.

Forcing himself to break the kiss, he spoke despite his labored breathing.

“You will marry me. Because after one kiss, I cannot let you go.”

She smiled, her kiss swollen lips curving upward. “You haven’t asked me.”

“Will you marry me, Charity, and do me the great honor of becoming my viscountess?”

“I think this has been inevitable from our first dance...Yes. I will marry you.”

He seized her mouth once more. This was no slow introduction to kissing. Instead, it was hot, hungry and possessive. The softness of her flesh yielding against his own, the sounds of pleasure that escaped her—they all fueled the fire that raged inside him. A fire that burned only for her.

Without thought, his hands which had been resting at the curve of her waist, moved—roaming over her generous curves and mapping the contours of her body. Every gasp of surprise that transformed into a moan of pleasure was like a symphony to him. And when he shifted his hand over her rib cage, his thumb brushing the soft curve of the underside of her breast, her back arched. That subtle movement only heightened the contact. Emboldened by her response, he let his hand slide upward, cupping that soft mound completely, feeling the hardened point of her nipple against his palm.

Dragging his lips from hers, he kissed his way along her jawline, down her neck. When he reached the hollow at the base of her throat, he licked lightly at her skin and felt her shiver against him. Her fingers threaded through his hair, holding him to her. It was a welcome touch, but unnecessary as there was no place he’d rather be.

A sound reached him, penetrating the haze of desire. Quickly, he set her away from him and rose, putting an appropriate amount of distance between them. Before she could even formulate a question to ask what had happened, Lady Agnes Milford and Mrs. Whittinger appeared, walking the path arm in arm and giggling like school girls. They saw him, nodded in greeting and went on about their way. They had not seen Charity courtesy of a particularly tall rose bush that flanked the summer house. But that concealment wouldn’t serve her well when they completed the loop in the path and were heading back to the house.

Once the ladies were out of sight, he turned to her. “We need to get you back to the house before they see you... I should like to speak with your aunt about our marriage before a scandal makes that unnecessary.”

Without another word, he hastily repacked the hamper and and they left

the summer house. They were almost back to the small Roman folly, when she halted him by placing a hand on his arm. "Are you upset about what happened?"

"I'm upset that I allowed things to progress to that point when we risked such a chance of exposure. I had intended only to kiss you, but my intentions and my desires were at cross purposes."

She shook her head. "I should be sorry for what we've done today. At the very least, I should feel a modicum of embarrassment or shame. But I do not. I regret nothing other than the very abrupt ending of our all too brief interlude. And if just kissing is that divine, I can only hope that we will have a very short engagement."

He was left in the garden, staring after her in a dumbfounded manner as she hurried back to the house.

FOURTEEN

Frederick waited until they were gathered in the drawing room before dinner. The moment Charity entered the room, his eyes were drawn to her. She looked stunning, her gown a deep indigo silk that perfectly complemented her hair and her complexion. Beside her, Cordelia and Lady Marguerite were all but invisible to him. Still, he managed to pull his attention from her and acknowledged the other ladies with a smile before crossing the room to join them.

“Good evening, Miss Charity, Miss Wylde... Lady Marguerite,” he offered.

“Good evening, my lord,” Marguerite replied, though her tone was somewhat cool. She was not entirely convinced of his blamelessness in what she saw as his disregard for Charity. He could certainly appreciate her concern. He could only hope that the conversation he meant to have with her would allow him to persuade her of his feelings for Charity.

“Lady Marguerite, if possible, might I have a private word with you after dinner?”

Marguerite’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “That will depend upon my niece, my lord. Do I need to have a private word with him, Charity?”

Charity smiled. “I would very much appreciate it if you did. I am aware of what the viscount wishes to discuss with you and have given him my answer already.”

Marguerite’s lips firmed. “I see. Why don’t the three of us step onto the terrace? We can discuss the matter now and get things settled before dinner. I will speak with Felicity and be certain that she delays the meal for a moment or two.”

When Marguerite had stepped away to speak to her other niece, Frederick turned back to Charity. “Your aunt detests me.”

“She does not. If she detested you then she would have refused to discuss the matter with you,” Cordelia said. “But she is concerned. Charity’s feelings were terribly hurt when you didn’t show up as planned. Of course, now that we understand why, that makes all the difference in the world!”

“Well, I am happy to have your forgiveness, at least... and Charity’s.”

Cordelia laughed. “You have my forgiveness, my lord, but on a trial basis only. Should you give my dear cousin cause to regret meeting you ever again, it will go very badly for you. That I can promise.”

With that Cordelia walked away, leaving him staring after her bemused. “I would not have imagined she would sound so savage. I do believe she would actually do me bodily harm.”

Charity nodded in agreement. “Oh, she would. Cordelia is quite protective of all of us... and we are equally protective of her.”

“As you should be,” he remarked. He’d never had that sort of relationship with Jameson. Even when they’d been very young, Jameson’s resentment of him and his position as the eldest son had always been a bone of contention between them. “I must confess to being quite envious. I have never been close with Jameson. And given what has occurred, I fear we never will be.”

There was no chance for Charity to respond to his confession because Marguerite returned. “Felicity has recommended that we speak in her study which is just at the end of the corridor. We shall go first, and then you may follow momentarily,” she instructed. “There is no need to call attention to ourselves just yet. Nothing is decided as of yet, after all.”

Yes, he would clearly have considerable efforts ahead of him to assuage Marguerite’s mistrust and soothe her hostility toward him. As they left the room, Charity looked over her shoulder at him, a soft smile playing about her lips. He acknowledged then that his feelings for her, unlikely as it should have been, went far beyond simple desire or infatuation. They went much deeper than that. Unwilling to call it love, at least immediately, he did acknowledge that he was certainly on the cusp of falling completely in love with her.

After a suitable amount of time had passed, he exited the drawing room, making for the small study that Marguerite had indicated. As he neared it he heard voices—Marguerite and Charity were deep in conversation.

“Are you certain that you can trust him?”

“I am,” Charity replied to her aunt. “I know that the circumstances at first looked very bad, but his explanation has been borne out by the behavior displayed by Lord Jameson since we arrived here. Why do you distrust him so?”

“The Dartwells have a long history of questionable character,” Marguerite answered stiffly. “And while, until he failed to show for his arranged visit with you he had never displayed any similarities to his relations, it cannot be ignored. Both Felicity and Benedicta have married under... we will call them unusual circumstances. I had hoped to ensure that you and Cordelia might have more traditional courtships and betrothals. You’ve known him for such a short time, Charity.”

“I’ve known him for long enough,” Charity insisted. “I know it’s unorthodox. I do. But, there are times in this life when you must simply take a leap of faith. This is the right choice. I know it. I cannot tell you how I know it, but I do.”

Heartened by her words, and more certain than ever about the course of action he’d chosen, Frederick knocked on the door. With only a brief hesitation, he opened and stepped inside. “Lady Marguerite, I’m certain you know what it is that I wished to speak with you about. I have asked Charity to be my wife and she has consented. But I would not move forward without her family’s approval.”

“My brother has entrusted me with approving their matches,” Lady Marguerite stated. “And while I have concerns, it is clear that Charity’s mind is set on this. I hope, for both your sakes, that she will not have cause to regret this.”

“I will never give her reason to,” he vowed. Reaching into the pocket of his coat, he produced a small leather box. “I brought this with me in hopes that I would be granted an opportunity to present it to you. It belonged to my grandmother.”

CHARITY ACCEPTED THE BOX, opening the delicate closure with slightly trembling hands. Nestled against a bed of silk inside was a golden band topped with a single large diamond. On either side of it was a cluster of three very small pearls. It was lovely. Lifting it from the box, she slipped it

onto her finger. It fit perfectly which was something of a surprise. It fit as if it had been made for her.

“It’s perfect. I’ve never seen a more perfect ring,” she said, her voice quavering slightly.

“I will leave you two alone,” Marguerite said. “But only for a moment.”

The second that Marguerite left the room, she launched herself at him. His arms closed tightly around her and she savored that contact, that feeling of *rightness* when he held her. She’d never really fit anywhere, except with her sister and her cousins. But she fit with him. Perfectly.

“If you want a traditional wedding—”

“I don’t,” she interrupted. “I just want to be married to you as quickly as possible. I don’t care if we have a big wedding.”

“I can go to Rochester and obtain a common license. I’ll be gone half a day,” he said.

“Can’t we just go to Gretna Green?”

“It will be a hasty wedding, but not a furtive one. There is no reason for you to marry without your sister and your cousins present. I would not have you regret later that they were not there to share the day with you.”

They might not have known one another for very long, but it was clear to her that he knew her well. He understood her in a way very few others had. “I know you’re right. I’m just so afraid that something will get in our way again.”

“There is no power on earth that could keep me from you,” he whispered.

He kissed her then, a tender brush of his lips over hers. Charity shuddered at the contact, clinging to him. That kiss was sweet and tender, but the fire that had burned between them earlier was still there, banked and waiting to roar to life again.

The sound of Marguerite clearing her throat from the doorway had them breaking apart. But there was no guilty flush. Neither of them were the least bit sorry.

“Two days,” he said.

She could not even think about what getting through the next two days would be like. She could barely manage to think of how she might get through dinner without simply flinging herself into his arms.

“Two days,” she agreed. It would feel like a lifetime.

FIFTEEN

Entering the notorious gaming hell near St. James Place, Oliver Kent caught sight of the dejected form of Lord Jameson Dartwell. Nothing in all of England traveled as fast as gossip. He'd received a letter just that afternoon from someone in attendance at Randford's little house party. They'd been only too happy to relay the tale of Jameson's disgrace.

Approaching the small sitting area where the other man lounged negligently with a doxy he could not afford perched on his lap, Ollie offered him a friendly smile. "Back from the country so soon?"

Jameson looked up and his expression was sullen. Not unusual. Jameson was always sullen. "Miss Wylde has made her choice. Her preferences are quite clear and I have been summarily dismissed as any sort of viable suitor."

Ollie took a seat on the adjacent chaise lounge. "Pity. What a shame it is that your brother has ever been a thorn in your side." With a subtle sleight of hand, Ollie slipped a coin to the soiled dove and sent her on her way. Clearly, no one's fool, she palmed the coin and left them to talk.

"He has been... he continues to be," Jameson murmured morosely. He sat up long enough to retrieve the bottle of brandy from the table before him and began to swill directly from the vessel, not even bothering with a glass. "Why him? Why did it have to be him who was born first? It's nothing more than an accident of fate that he is Viscount Welbey while I am a prospectless younger son with nothing but a life of penury ahead of me."

Kent smiled. "It is terribly unfair, indeed. All because he is the eldest and currently holds the title, but fate has a funny way of correcting itself. With a bit of help, of course."

Jameson frowned. "What do you mean?"

“Well, if he were to suffer some sort of terrible accident and die without issue—then you would become Viscount Welbey. Of course, if he marries, you’d have to wait until it was a certainty that his viscountess would not bear him a posthumous heir.”

Jameson scoffed. “I’d hardly be so lucky. I’ve already made one halfhearted attempt which failed epically.”

Tending the seed he’d planted, Kent nodded. “You’ve never been the lucky sort, Jameson. Perhaps its time you begin making your own luck rather than waiting on fate to work in your favor... If your brother marries Miss Wylde, and by all accounts he means to do so most expeditiously, then you could be without the fortune and title forever! But if he were to meet some unfortunate demise prior to their wedding then it would all be yours. No doubt her affections would follow the title—Not that you want her, of course. But the irony of having her want you when you can have anyone else... wouldn’t that be rich?”

The younger man looked up, but it wasn’t disdain or even denial that could be read on his face. It was possibility. The seed had taken root and the plot was sprouting like the new growth of spring. “I could deny her publicly. I could humiliate her as she has humiliated me.”

“Us,” Kent said. “I’ve suffered my own embarrassment at the hands of Miss Charity Wylde. I’d certainly be inclined to forgo our little wager if you managed to find some way to make her an object of ridicule. But first, your brother... He’s the primary obstacle for you, Jameson. Eliminating him solves every problem that you have.”

“But he’s still at Randford House and I’m here in London. After the incident in the village and now, having sabotaged his mount, I would never be permitted to return.”

“I did not meant that you should go back openly. Discretion, Jameson, is sometimes the most dastardly of weapons.”

Jameson, intrigued, put the bottle down. “What exactly are you suggesting?”

“It’s only a four hour ride, isn’t it? You could be back there by the morning. You’ve been a very visible presence here tonight. So many people have witnessed your attendance here, that your alibi is all but set in stone... And with a bit of coin in the right hand, I’m certain someone would be willing to swear that you were here for the entirety of the night. You can slip into Randford House unobserved and permanently eradicate your problems.

This is the best way forward, Jameson... and I'll help you however I can."

"Why?"

Ollie smiled, ready to assuage the younger man's sudden suspicion. "Because I am your friend, Jameson. Perhaps the only friend you have. But you couldn't ask for a better one if you mean to give fate a helping hand and ensure your future." Ollie leaned forward and plucked the bottle of brandy from Jameson's hand. "You'll want to have a steady hand for what comes next."

CHARITY SLIPPED DOWN the hall as silently as possible. She'd left Cordelia sleeping soundly, her rhythmic snores echoing in their shared room. Frederick didn't know what she was about. She certainly hadn't arranged a late night assignation with him, and yet that was precisely what she had left her room with the intention of having.

When she reached Frederick's door, she didn't knock at all, but opened it as silently as possible. The room was dark, but he wasn't abed. No, he was sitting on a small settee at the foot of the bed, in the process of removing his boots. He'd already discarded his coat and cravat. His waistcoat hung open and the neck of his shirt had opened to reveal a v of golden skin and crisp, dark hair.

"Charity, what are you doing in here?" He asked the question in a low whisper. Then his expression changed, growing tense. "Have you had a change of heart?"

She blinked in shock. "Oh, heaven's no. I've never been more certain of anything in my life than my desire to be your wife... But that's days away. And as soon as our betrothal is announced, every person in this house will be watching us like hawks. If we are to have a private moment together, it is now or never... or now until we are legally wed."

His eyes narrowed, not with anger but with speculation.. "Why would we need privacy before we are legally wed?"

"Must I say it?"

"Oh yes," he nodded. "You absolutely must."

"Well," she took a deep steadying breath, "I thought it would be in my best interest to let you know, without any doubt, that I am perfectly amenable

to being seduced.”

He dropped his second boot on the floor to join the first before he rose and padded toward her in his stockinged feet. Despite his state of undress, or perhaps because of it, she realized that Frederick was a dangerous man. Affable and kind, well mannered, certainly. But there, alone in his room, with him moving towards her with the slow, languid grace of a predator, she felt a frisson of fear—but it was tempered with something else. Desire. Anticipation. Curiosity. The maelstrom of feelings swirling inside her was overwhelming. But she didn’t move. Not a muscle. Instead, she locked her quaking knees and waited for him to reach her.

He halted only inches from her, close enough that she could feel the heat of his body radiating towards her. “What do you think that means, Charity? Seduction... kisses, a stolen embrace? I’d like to know that we are both aware of what is to come next.”

Drawing on all of her courage, Charity took a deep breath then let it out slowly. “I have no practical experience in lovemaking, obviously. But I am not entirely ignorant of what is involved. And I came here tonight with that purpose in mind.”

“You are certain this is what you want? We are to be married in just two days,” he cautioned. “I do not want you to regret this.”

She leaned in, her lips barely a whisper from his. “Why is it that I am trying to seduce you and you are trying to talk me out of it?”

He couldn’t halt the smile that curved his lips. “Never let it be said that I stood in the way of you having what you want... There is nothing I wouldn’t give you.”

Charity sighed with pleasure when he cupped her face gently in his hands. And when his lips brushed hers with such gentleness, she shivered at both the physical sensations it created and the emotion that welled within her.

For the longest time, her focus had been only on getting married. On finding someone who might make an offer for her so that she could avoid returning to her parents’ home. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe in love, in soul mates, but that she had not expected to have the good fortune to meet hers. But from the first moment they had danced together, she’d looked into his eyes and seen a world of possibility, of hope for more than just contentment with her lot in life. It was for that reason that her disappointment when he did not call as they had arranged was so devastating.

That disappointment had passed, however, and now she only wanted to

look toward the future. *Their future.* With Frederick, she could have everything. Passion. Happiness. Love. All of those things were wrapped up into the soft press of his lips to hers and the gentle stroke of his fingertips over her cheek.

SIXTEEN

Frederick brushed his lips over hers. The light, teasing touches were strategy on his part—because he didn't want to frighten her and potentially have her change her mind. Also, because he very much needed to temper his own raging desire. But like every time he kissed her, tenderness was short lived. His best intentions were forgotten in the heat of rising passions.

The soft sounds she made, sounds of surrender and pleasure, only further incited his desire. With her hands clutching at his coat and the softness of her body pressed against him, temptation was like a living thing—pulsing between them. She returned his kiss just as fervently. And when he pulled his lips from hers to drag them over the delicate column of her throat, she arched her neck to give him greater access. Allowing his teeth to scrape over one certain spot that made her shudder each time, he gloried in that unfettered response.

“Make love to me,” she whispered.

“We will be married in two days time,” he replied. “We have not passed the point of no return.”

“We will be married, so why should we wait?”

God, but she could tempt a saint. And he was hardly the paragon others accused him of being. “Why now? It cannot be just impatience.”

She looked down. “What if once we are married, you change your mind? What if you decide I am not perfect, after all? Then it's too late and you're stuck with me. I couldn't bear that Frederick, to know that you were trapped by my side when you'd rather be anywhere else.”

“And you think making love to you will suddenly make the scales fall from my eyes? That's not how it works, Charity. Typically, being intimate

with a person makes them more appealing rather than less.”

Still, she refused to meet his gaze. “Typically, yes. But we aren’t typical, are we? Or I’m not. I’ll never be slim and petite. I’ll always be too tall, too round, too loud—too everything.”

Understanding dawned then. “Has someone said something about your appearance?”

“Not tonight... and no one here. But historically, yes. Father and mother have both pointed out on numerous occasions that I’d have better like finding a husband if I’d put down the tea cakes. ‘No man wants a wife who outweighs him’,” she parroted the words that had been spoken to her with a pained expression, a blush stealing into her cheeks.

Frederick was furious. “No one has the right to say such things to you. You are beautiful, Charity. From the moment I first saw you, I was struck by that. And then I came to know you. Your wit, charm, kindness and your exuberance for life—your spirit—have only made your beauty shine brighter. There is nothing that could ever change how I feel for you. Not tonight, and certainly not after I can truly call you my wife.”

“Then you aren’t hesitating because... because you don’t want me?”

He met her gaze and saw the uncertainty in her eyes, the fear of being rejected. And there was only one way he knew of to reassure her that his desire for her was very much present and accounted for. “I’ve wanted you from the first moment I saw you.”

“Show me,” she urged him.

Frederick shrugged out of his waistcoat, letting it fall to the floor. Then he tugged his shirt free from his breeches and pulled it over his head, tossing it aside. Divested of most of his clothing, spun Charity around and began unlacing her gown. The whole while, he pressed kisses to her neck and shoulders, grazing tender spots with his teeth and then soothing them with his tongue.

When the gown slipped from her shoulders, falling to her waist, he pushed it past her hips and let it puddle to the floor around her feet. Her petticoat followed. When she was clad in only her stays and chemise, he turned her to face him once more.

This time, when he kissed her, it wasn’t tender at all. It was hungry and insistent. Demanding. And heaven help him, she kissed him back just as fervently. Her arms wrapped about his neck, her breasts crushed against his chest. And all he could think about was sinking into her, of feeling the soft

heat of her body surrounding him.

Without breaking the kiss, he guided them both back to his bed. When the backs of her knees hit the side rail, she stopped only long enough to climb in. Then she reached for him. No power on earth could have kept him from her in that moment. Climbing onto the bed with her, he pulled her to him, savoring the lush curves of her body as she pressed herself against him.

He hadn't a hope of resisting her from the moment she stepped through his door.

CHARITY FELT both fear and anticipation. Fear that she would make a muddle of everything, that whatever happened between them would be disappointing to him in some way and that he would no longer want her. Those fears were irrational. She knew that logically, but she had to do something to silence the jeering voice inside her head. For all the stolen kisses that they had shared, for all the caresses and embraces that they'd managed to indulge in, the anticipation she felt when in his arms was greater than the fear. And with that, she gave herself up to rush of sensations he aroused within her.

As he pulled her closer, held her tighter, she reveled in it.. Every touch fanned the fire burning inside her. And the more he gave, the more she wanted. His lips moved over her skin, a series of soft kisses punctuated with the languid sweep of his tongue and the slight sting of his teeth as he scraped them gently over her tender flesh. All the while, his hands roamed her body. Each touch was different, some feather light and others firm, kneading. And soon it felt like her body was no longer her own. As if the sensations he'd elicited inside her had taken her over entirely. She could no longer think. Instead, she could only feel.

When his nimble fingers loosened the ties of her stays she didn't protest. Instead, she shamelessly arched against him, silently pleading for his touch. He did not deny her. The first touch of his hands on her breasts, his fingertips teasing the hardened peaks, left her gasping. Those gasps swiftly became moans of pleasure as he kissed his way from her neck down, lower and lower.

He closed his lips over one pebbled bud, sucking it deeply into his mouth,

and her gasps turned into desperate moans. Every tug of his lips arced through her, to the very center of her. Charity's body heated, burning from within, as an unfamiliar tension began to wind within her. Then his hands were at the hem of her skirts, pulling them up, his knuckles raking against the soft skin of her inner thighs. But she was too lost to the feelings he'd stirred within her to be embarrassed. Acting purely on instinct driven by her own need, she parted for him, inviting him to touch her where no one ever had.

With every touch, it was a new discovery—of what she felt for him, of what her own body was capable of. She had never known that such pleasure could be had. And as his fingers stroked her most intimate places, that tension inside her coiled ever tighter. She felt as though he were a master musician and she was the instrument he played with such skill.

Her muscles drew taut, quivering as she hovered on the brink of something she could not fathom. Then, without warning, that tension broke. The world simply came apart. He kissed her again, swallowing her pleased cries as she shuddered helplessly against him.

Slowly, Charity returned to earth. She was no longer hovering somewhere above it, lost in the cloudy haze of satisfaction. While she lacked his experience, she was not so naive as to mistake the fact that he had given her the greatest of pleasures while taking none for himself. And yet, he continues to caress her with gentle, soothing strokes as he peppered her jawline and her neck with kisses.

"I thought we were to give one another pleasure," she observed.

"Watching you was my pleasure," he whispered. "Hearing the sounds you made, feeling your body quiver from it—Oh, Charity, you've no notion what a pleasure that is for me. But we are far from finished."

Pointedly, she looked down at the front of his trousers. The unmistakable evidence of his arousal was impossible to ignore. "Oh, well... then."

He rolled away from her, just long enough to remove his trousers before climbing back into the bed. She barely had more than a glance at him, but that was enough to have her eyes widening. What she had seen bore little to no resemblance to her only practical knowledge of male anatomy—classical statuary.

As if he'd sensed her hesitation, he offered, "I've lived in a state of constant arousal since the first time I saw you. Another day or so will not kill me... We can wait."

Charity shook her head. "No. I don't want to wait, I'm just... I'm being a

ninny. I'm here because I wanted to be, but I'm afraid that my courage and bravado are fading quickly."

He kissed her again, long and deep, until it robbed her of breath and thought. Easing back, he looked at her with such tenderness that it overwhelmed her and obliterated her fear entirely. "You can tell me to stop at any time and I will. No matter the cost. Do you understand?"

Unable to speak, she simply nodded and then, as a silent invitation, reached for the hem of her chemise. It took a bit of shimmying to work it over her bottom and hips as she lay there in his bed. But eventually, she managed. Once she'd tossed the garment aside and looked back to him, what she saw left her reeling. His gaze roamed over her as if in awe, as if he were simply stunned by the sight of her. The naked hunger so evident on his face was impossible even for someone of her limited experience to mistake.

"There is nothing about you that I would change... you are perfection. You are everything that I could ever want," he said, the words a solemn vow. After that, words became unnecessary. He showed her the truth with every touch, every kiss. His hands moved to her thighs, stroking and kneading. It was instinct as much as anything else that had her parting them for him. Then he was resting between them, his body fitting to hers in such a way that she could only feel they were made for one another.

The intimate touch of his fingers sliding over her damp flesh prevented further thought. Instead, she gave herself up to those exquisite sensations. It wasn't until he'd brought her to the very brink of pleasure, when her body was taut and trembling beneath him, that he drew his hand away. Then she felt his rigid flesh pressing into her. It wasn't comfortable. Not at all. It certainly wasn't pleasurable. But she wanted it regardless. She wanted to be connected to him fully, to feel him become a part of her and for her to become part of him.

There was a flash of pain, bright and sharp. And then he went completely still, not moving at all but for the softly whispered words at her ear. They were nonsensical to her as she hadn't the ability to even process them at that moment. But they were soothing. And eventually she began to relax, the tension flowing from her body. That changed everything. The more she relaxed, the better everything felt. Without the tension created by unconscious resistance, her body opened for him, welcoming him.

"Are you all right?" He asked.

Charity smiled up at him. "I think I'm much better than all right. I'm

beginning to see what all the fuss is about.”

He smiled down at her, wicked and warm and wonderful. “Then let me see if I cannot edify you further.”

When he moved within her, pressing deeper and then retreating ever so slowly, Charity’s eyes fluttered closed and her head fell back as the sensations overwhelmed her. Each stroke, each thrust and withdrawal, took her closer to the edge. She hovered there for a moment, on the brink of release.

Then Frederick hooked one hand behind her knee, drawing it higher onto his hip, altering the alignment of their bodies only slightly. But that slight adjustment sent her hurtling over the precipice. The world flashed bright white behind her eyelids as the waves of pleasure rocked through her.

Charity wasn’t aware that she’d cried out his name. She wasn’t even aware that her nails had dug into the flesh of his back, leaving crescent shaped impressions in stark relief on his skin. But she was aware of the way of his body drew taut against hers, of the broken whisper of her name on his lips as he surged within her and then the heated rush of his release sent her spiraling once more.

SEVENTEEN

Frederick had never known such contentment. Lying in his bed, Charity in his arms, her blonde curls spread out around them. It was a moment that he wanted to last forever, but he knew it could not. The dawn was approaching and with it, servants would begin their day.

“Do not say it,” she murmured sleepily.

“I have to. We need to get you back to your room before we are discovered.”

She propped herself up on one elbow and looked at him. “Would it be terrible to say that I don’t care? We’re going to be married in only a day or two. I cannot imagine that we are the only couple in the world to indulge in a preemptive consummation.”

Frederick sighed. “We are not. But I’d just as soon my valet not walk into this room and see your lovely, naked arse.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Is it? A lovely arse, that is.”

Tempted beyond belief, he slid his hand down her back to cup one lush cheek. “Perfect, I’d say. Utterly perfect. But you need to get dressed and go. Now. If you stay here any longer, I will give in to the temptation that you provide and my poor valet will be so scandalized he’ll have an apoplectic fit right there in the doorway.”

“We can’t have that,” she teased. “I’d be useless at tying your cravat. We must keep him happy.”

He kissed her once more, then rose from the bed, pulling her to her feet. “Go to your room, and know that I will be counting the minutes until we can repeat all that has passed between us tonight... and so much more.” With each word, he’d gathered up more of her clothing. When he turned back to

her, she had grown quite serious. “What’s wrong?”

Charity shook her head. “Nothing is wrong. It’s just that... Frederick, I don’t expect you to say it back to me, but I need to tell you. I love you.”

“Why wouldn’t you expect me to say it back? Why in the devil do you think I’m marrying you?” He asked, his puzzlement obvious. “I’ve been resisting the notion that I what we had was more than just the seedling of love. It was too soon. Too instantaneous. But I can admit it now, Charity, freely and without qualm. I’ve been in love with you from the moment I first saw you.”

She blinked up at him. “Oh... well. I felt the same. That it was silly to think such depth of feeling could happen so quickly—but the reality is that... I think I loved you before I knew you. And I have to wonder now if the reason I have failed so spectacularly in every other attempt to gain a suitor wasn’t simply because I was waiting for you.”

“You make me believe in fate,” he admitted. “You make me believe that some people, like us, are simply destined for one another.”

“I had hoped you would feel it too, but I didn’t know. Not really.”

He pulled her close once more, his arms wrapping around her even as he shook his head. “You’ll never have to wonder again. I mean to tell you everyday of our lives that you are beautiful... and that you are loved. Now, for the love of God, go get your clothes back on before I lose all sense of propriety and we scandalize every servant in your sister’s house.”

She was laughing as she dressed. It was a slow process because he couldn’t stop touching her. By the time they opened his door to peer into the corridor, he was fighting the temptation to say to hell with all of it and drag her back to bed with him. But somehow, he managed to stick to the plan. He walked her back to her room, pausing to kiss her once more outside the door before ushering her inside and going back to his own room.

He had to get to Rochester that day and get the license for their wedding the following day. If he left early enough, he could be back by the afternoon... and perhaps even another private interlude with his bride to be.

CHARITY SLIPPED SILENTLY into the bedchamber she shared with her cousin. The first faint light of dawn was seeping between the closed curtains

as she managed to discard her rumpled gown and stays. Wearing only her chemise she pulled back the covers and climbed into her crimson draped bed only feet from Cordelia's identical one. She hadn't even managed to pull the covers up over her before Cordelia's eyes opened and her cousin pinned her with a look that implied she knew precisely what Charity had been doing.

"And just where have you been?" Delia asked.

Charity didn't bother lying. "I was with Frederick."

Delia sat up instantly. "When you say with... do you mean in his company or do you mean you were *with* him?"

"I was *with* him," Charity confirmed. "And you cannot let Aunt Marguerite know. Or Felicity because she would tell Phinneas and he'd feel bound by honor to do something about it, which is entirely unnecessary as we are to be married anyway."

Delia sprang from her bed and bounded over to Charity's with a squeal. She plopped down next to her, the ropes of the bed squeaking in protest at their combined weight. "Was it wonderful? Was it all that you'd dreamed it would be?"

Charity thought about that for a moment. "It was wonderful. But it was nothing at all like I thought it would be. It was much... well, more. It was just more. And I can't explain it any further. Even if I possessed the words, I strongly suspect that it's a different experience for everyone."

Delia considered that for a moment then nodded. "You are likely right. And if I knew all about it, my own well confirmed spinsterhood would only feel more like a prison sentence. Perhaps it's best that I don't know what I'm missing."

Charity hugged Delia, the two of them snuggled in her bed like they had as small girls. "You will find someone. I believe that with all my heart. After all, I did, and heaven knows I was the one considered most unsuitable."

"I wish I could share your certainty," Delia sighed. "It feels very much like I'll be alone forever. Well, except for Marguerite. Perhaps I can stay on as her companion and not have to go back to deadly dull Bath and the ever disappointed and worried faces of my parents."

Charity sighed. She couldn't fault Delia for her pessimism. Only weeks earlier she had felt exactly the same. "It can all change in an instant, Delia. Do not get so mired in the disappointments of today that you miss the promise of tomorrow's happiness."

EIGHTEEN

Jameson had left London in the wee hours, slipping out the side entrance of the hell after having disappeared upstairs with one of the wenches—paid for by Kent, of course. Not that the'd gotten to enjoy her favors. As Kent had said, it was all about establishing his alibi. He'd been seen out and about, his presence noted by everyone at the gaming hell. He'd been observed leaving with his bit of baggage. And no one was the wiser that by the time they'd sought their own beds, he was half way to Chelmsford.

The initial attack on Frederick had been ill thought out. In retrospect, he could see that such an impulsive action had only made matters more difficult. For the end result he desired, he would need to be much more calculating. More cool headed and in control. Depending upon a faulty girth to end his wretched brother had been far too uncertain. His next attempt would be much more direct. So long as he was discreet and no one knew he had returned, he could see to the matter in a far more decisive fashion.

The plan, courtesy of Kent, was that he should slip into the house unseen and lay in wait for his brother. There was a bottle of laudanum in his pocket. It would be easy enough to add it to his drink or food without anyone the wiser. Enough of the drug would be fatal. And if he didn't give him enough, he would at least be incapacitated enough that Jameson would have no trouble smothering him in his sleep. Then, with Frederick out of the way, that that sow, Charity Wylde would be done for in society. She'd just be another unwanted spinster who couldn't catch a husband and not the future Viscountess Welbey.

Her rejection of him had stung. It wasn't that he wanted her. He had never wanted her. But it was the height of effrontery for her to be so

completely dismissive of him, as if he were somehow beneath her notice. No doubt when he assumed the title, and the family fortunes were his to control, she'd be singing a very different tune. As a second son, he was always second choice—to everyone he'd ever met. His own father had been no different. The second son, born of the second wife, their father had always doted on Frederick while being constantly critical of Jameson.

Nothing he'd done had ever been good enough. Even minor scrapes as a boy had been met with glaring disapproval. What young man hadn't sired at least one bastard, after all? And losing at the gaming tables was a right of passage. Every young man did so when they went to town. Yes, he'd raced recklessly through the streets in his father's phaeton that he'd borrowed without asking permission. But that hardly signified. Harmless stunts and pranks. Nothing more than the normal pitfalls of being a young man about town.

It had been Frederick even then, he thought. Frederick constantly whispering in their father's ear that his wicked ways should be curbed, that he needed to be more responsible and not cause such scandal. If Frederick had just left it alone, his father might not have even cared. He might not have such restrictive financial support after his father's passing. Nothing he had done had warranted such measures. His sins were hardly the worst committed by members of the Dartwell family. They were all notoriously debauched. Only Frederick was a paragon of virtue.

He squinted into the distance. A rider was approaching, cutting across the fields as he'd done, but coming from a different direction. He could not afford to be seen. Leading his horse into the trees, he stayed to the shadows as he moved closer to the rider. A sneaking suspicion began to niggle at his mind. Surely he could not be so lucky. Surely he had not stumbled upon his own brother, the object of all his plots, riding alone in the early hours of the morning.

But then Jameson realized that fortune had truly smiled upon him. That familiar gray horse was unmistakable. The rider was no other than his brother. What was he doing out so early? But there was only one answer. His brother was heading toward the main road that would take him either to London or Rochester. And if he was going to either of those places in the middle of the house party, there was only one reason for such a journey. Frederick was going to obtain a marriage license.

Leave it to Frederick to fall madly in love with a woman after only one

dance. And, of course, she'd accept his offer because what fat, aging, spinster would turn down an offer of marriage from a wealthy viscount? Miss Wylde was many things but he did not think her foolish enough to do that.

If Frederick had already proposed to her, there was no time to waste. Once they married, should Frederick die, then he would have to wait until a reasonable amount of time had passed without issue. While his brother was an exemplary gentleman, that didn't mean he was without urges. It was very possible that he and Miss Wylde might have already consummated their relationship. And how suspicious would it look if they both succumbed to accidents or the nefarious deeds of a wayward footpad on the cusp of their marriage? No. It was best to see Frederick in the grave before he had the chance to marry her. To do otherwise would only complicate matters further.

Poachers. It was not uncommon. They abounded everywhere in the countryside, especially in such lean times. And with his brother out in such early hours, it was a perfectly logical assumption for anyone to make that he might have been felled by a stray shot, or even intentionally if he were to be robbed in the process.

Carefully, Jameson dismounted. Moving as silently as possible, he pulled the pistol he carried while traveling from his coat. It was primed and ready as the road was beyond dangerous for a person traveling alone. Now he just counted himself fortunate to be prepared for this unexpected stroke of luck. Indeed, it was as if fate herself was smiling on him by leading his brother directly into his path when he was armed and there were no witnesses about.

Dropping to his knees, steadying his hands on a stump, he took aim. It was just patience now... patience to wait until he was close enough. Close enough for the shot to kill.

FREDERICK HAD SET OUT EARLY. After getting Charity to her room, he'd seen to his own morning toilette rather than let his valet attend him. It hardly mattered how well he was turned out when he intended to ride hard for Rochester. By the time he returned to Randford House, he'd be covered in mud and dirt regardless. After dressing, he'd left the house and by dawn had been at the stables readying his mount for a hard day's journey. He would change horses in Rochester, of course, leaving his beloved Balthazar behind.

Given that the last few days had been so stressful for the animal, he didn't mind so much giving him a long rest at the stables in town before having him brought back at a more leisurely pace than he could presently afford.

With hard riding, he could be in Tilbury in three hours and take the ferry to Gravesend. From there it was only another hour to Rochester, but he would be at mercy of the archbishop. Such a meeting could be complicated—depending upon the man's schedule. But if all went well, he'd be on the road back to Randford House and Charity before noon. It was possible that he might even managed to return in time for dinner.

Logically, he understood that his need for haste was irrational. But he couldn't quite shake the feeling that if things didn't happen quickly, something—likely his brother—would intervene. Another accident, another lying and scheming plot to keep them apart. Whatever it was that Jameson had to do, Frederick was certain that he would do it or at the very least attempt it. He didn't doubt for a moment that his brother would be utterly ruthless and without any scruples at all when it came to getting his way. Having reconciled himself to the fact that Jameson would literally see him dead in order to have unfettered access to the family fortunes, there was no anger in him. Sadness, perhaps, and a sense of relief, in some ways. His brother had done the unforgivable, leaving Frederick with only one option—to finally cut him out of his life altogether.

Blood being thicker than water was all well and good as a platitude. It took on a different meaning altogether when it was your own kin trying to spill your blood for personal gain. The family he would have going forward was the one he would build with Charity. Eventually, Lady Marguerite would accept him and see him for his own worth rather than the reputation of the remainder of his relations. Randford had already proven an impressive ally, as had Cordelia and even Felicity. Perhaps it took more than blood to make one family.

He was still musing over those ideas as he crossed the field, taking the shortcut to the main road between Chelmsford and Tilbury. It would take more than an hour off the journey and was a fairly well worn path. But as he neared the tree line at the far side, Frederick felt a frisson of awareness.

The hair on the nape of his neck rose and a prickling sense of unease snaked through him. Something was very wrong. Apparently, Balthazar felt it too. The horse shied. He didn't rear, but he refused to go forward, dancing sideways along the path.

“Easy, boy. Easy.” He leaned down in the saddle to give the horse a reassuring pat on its neck, stroking gently. It was that movement, that slight shifting of his position, which likely saved his life. The burn of the pistol ball grazing his shoulder was unmistakable as was the report from the gun echoing over the sleeping landscape.

He looked up, and through the trees, he caught sight of a familiar yellow waistcoat. There was only one man in all of London who had a garment in that particular hue. His brother, Jameson, had already taken one shot at him and was likely reloading to finish him off.

Frederick didn't hesitate. He whirled Balthazar around and nudged him sharply with his knees, setting him to a gallop. In the open, with no cover, he would be an easy target, so he stayed as close to the tree line as possible. It gave him some cover and would force Jameson out of hiding if he intended to take aim again. But speed was his best chance. Getting enough distance between himself and his brother so that he would have no chance of getting off another shot was the only option for survival. And he had a great deal to live for.

NINETEEN

“I wish you’d reconsider and have a proper wedding,” Marguerite fussed. “Your parents would have time to travel here and could be in attendance! Surely they should see their last daughter have an actual wedding?”

“Aunt Marguerite, the truth of the matter is that you are far more sentimental about all this than mother or father ever have been. They despaired of ever having us married off. They no longer care how we do it so long as it is done,” Charity said with utter detachment.

“You cannot mean that!”

Charity looked at her aunt and with a bluntness that was uncharacteristic of their normal interactions, she explained, “If mother were here, she would lament that I am at least two stone heavier than I ought to be. That the gown would be far more flattering if there was less of me to put in it. Then she would tell me what was wrong with my hair. That my posture is not what it ought to be, but my behavior has never been, so it stands to reason—well, you know how it would go. And Father would be no better. He’d just walk around muttering to himself about how relieved he is that some poor man was finally foolish enough to take me off his hands.”

Marguerite had the good grace to blush a bit as she looked down at her hands. “They can be quite critical, my dear, but they do love you both very much.”

“Oh, I’m certain they do. I just do not think they like us very well... or possibly at all. At least they do not like me. Felicity was much quieter and therefore less offensive,” Charity observed quietly. “And it’s fine. Really. I am happy to have a small group of people who truly wish us well—who wish us happiness. With you, my sister, my cousins and the spouses who now

accompany two of them—that is enough.”

Marguerite nodded. “Of course, it is. And he is lucky... that man is lucky to have you. Do not let anyone ever tell you otherwise. The two of you enter this match on equal footing—not as one person beholden to another. That is no way to start a marriage.”

“Careful. You are beginning to sound like a reformer!”

Marguerite’s lips firmed at that teasing comment. “Choose which of your gowns will be your wedding gown. We haven’t the time to have anything new made but we can certainly dress up something you already have to make it more the thing.”

Charity glanced down at the ring Frederick had presented her. It still felt strange to her, heavy on her hand in a way that made her constantly aware of it. And yet, that was’t unpleasant to her. She liked the reminder of him, of what their future together might be. “The emerald green silk I think. I was wearing it the night we met. We can take the embroidered ribbon with seed pearls from that wretched ivory ballgown that makes me look pale as death and trim the bodice and cuffs with it. Don’t you think? Perhaps we can fashion a fichu to make it modest enough for the church?”

“It’ll be perfect. And you will wear my pearl drop earrings. They will set it off perfectly.”

Charity was left sitting there while Marguerite sent her maid to gather the gowns that Charity had selected. The poor woman would be sewing well into the night, but she didn’t seem to mind. There was something about weddings, after all. They were an exciting and joyful time for everyone. It was for her, as well. But Charity could not quiet the little voice inside her mind that kept whispering something was wrong. Was it just her nerves? It had to be, surely. There was no other logical explanation for it.

When Marguerite exited the room, Cordelia entered. “For a young woman who has just chosen her wedding gown, you appear to be quite glum. And I am quite certain it isn’t doubts or second thoughts,” her cousin stated, her voice tinged with concern.

There were few people that she would admit such things to, but Delia was her greatest confidante. Even more so than her own twin sister. Of course, Felicity was terribly busy. She still had a house full of guests and a house party to hostess. She could hardly be there to listen to Charity’s irrational fears with such a momentous task before her. “Perhaps we should have had the banns read and waited. I do not like that he had to hurry off to Rochester

alone. I— it’s silly, I suppose—but I can’t help but feel like something awful will happen and that all my hopes will be dashed.”

Cordelia moved closer, taking her hands. “It’s only natural to be nervous. And to prepare yourself for the worst while hoping for the best. We’ve been doing so at the dawn of every social season for the past several years. And each time, something horrible did happen. At worst we were humiliated publicly and at best we sat—ignored and invisible—on the edge of every ballroom. We were passed over again and again in favor of girls who were prettier, thinner, smarter, less smart, more talkative, or less talkative. They were always more of less of something than any of us were—and that only affirmed our belief that good things would never come to us.”

Charity dropped her chin to her chest and let out a slightly watery chuckle. She would not cry. “Delia, your wisdom and insight are invaluable to me. Whatever will I do when I do not have you by my side every day?”

“You will ask your very wise and very insightful husband for guidance and I... I will be able to read a novel in peace for once!” Her cousin teased.

Charity was laughing, as Delia had intended. For the moment, her worries were put aside. They were still there, lingering on the periphery of her mind. But for the time being, she could ignore them and try to focus only on the happy events that lay ahead.

IT HADN’T TAKEN him very long to realize that the graze was a bit more than that. The amount of blood that had drenched the sleeve of his coat and then trickled down his arm was alarming in its sheer volume. Strangely, the pain was gone. The burn had grown more and more intense until it simply vanished.

He’d also stopped looking over his shoulder. It wasn’t the belief that Jameson wasn’t in pursuit. It was that doing so would only have slowed him down or, even worse, given his present state might have sent him toppling from the saddle. So he’d stayed low, leaning over Balthazar’s neck and galloping as fast as he could.

When he jumped the fence, it took all he had in him to keep his seat. That in and of itself told him just how weakened he was by his injury. Frederick hadn’t fallen or been thrown from a horse since he was a boy, intentional

sabotage not withstanding. He was more at home on horse back than walking.

By the time he reached the stables, he was hanging on to consciousness by a single, fragile thread. Dismounting, he held onto the saddle for a moment to steady himself. Vaguely, he was aware of someone speaking to him, of a stable boy rushing up to take his mount from him and a pair of grooms propping him up beneath his arms. Then they were walking to the house. In truth, they were half dragging him because he couldn't quite manage to make his feet move as they ought to.

That was his last conscious thought before a veil of gray surrounded him. Slowly the world went dark and he no longer had any awareness of what was happening around him. But even as he slipped into unconsciousness, he whispered a word that had the grooms looking from one to another with unease. He'd said *brother*.

TWENTY

Charity stared at the tangled mass of threads and sighed with frustration. She had wanted to do something for Frederick, a small token that would be somewhat intimate. She'd had a length of silk in her sewing basket that she'd purchased with the intent that she would make a lovely gown for Felicity's first born, whenever she made an announcement that one was imminent. But now she'd elected to repurpose that silk to make new neckcloth for Frederick, embroidered with their intertwined initials. It might have been a lovely gesture, if she wasn't so distracted that all of her stitches kept going awry. Now there were so many holes in the silk it was likely beyond repair.

The door to the morning room opened and she saw Marguerite standing there, her face quite pale and stricken. "What is it?" Charity demanded. "What's happened?"

"It's Lord Frederick, Charity."

Had he cried off? Had he changed his mind? Immediately, she dismissed the notion. He would not have. And even if he did, he certainly would not be so dishonorable as to have the information delivered to her secondhand. "Is he unwell?"

"He has been shot," Marguerite said. "He is injured, but the severity is unknown yet. A physician has been summoned... he is unconscious and appears to have lost a great deal of blood."

The ruined silk fell from her numb fingers, fluttering to the floor where it lay utterly forgotten. "Where is he?"

"They've taken him to a room off the kitchens. His condition was unknown and they didn't wish to risk the time it would take to cart him upstairs, or that in the process they might worsen his injury," Marguerite

explained. “Felicity is with him now and Phinneas, as well. They are tending him and... well, you should be there. It’s hardly proper, but until we know —”

Marguerite’s abruptly halted speech was telling enough. “Until we know if he will die? Is that what you meant to say?”

Marguerite nodded. “It is. Now is not the time to fall to pieces, Charity. That can come later. For now, you must gather your strength and face this. For his sake and for yours.”

Knowing it was necessary and being able to achieve it were entirely different things. Still, Charity managed to set her things aside and get to her feet, despite her trembling knees. Grimly, she followed Marguerite from the room and toward the kitchens. There was a flurry of activity—maids and kitchen girls bustling to and fro. But one corner of the busy place was strangely quiet. Through the open door, she could see Phinneas washing blood from his hands. Her stomach rebelled and it was all she could do to avoid vomiting right there. It wasn’t missishness that caused the response, but fear. Fear held her in its grip even as she stepped toward that open door.

The sight that greeted her when she entered the room was one that she would never forget. Frederick lay on the bed, his clothing had been cut from his body and lay in a discarded heap on the floor. Even from a distance, she could see that they were saturated with blood. It was a shocking sight. Above the sheet that had been pulled up over his chest, his skin was so pale, the normal vitality that he displayed having vanished in the wake of his injury.

“How... is it very bad?” she asked.

“I have seen worse,” Phinneas offered. “But the pistol ball is lodged in his shoulder, but not deeply and does not appear to have injured anything vital. To have ridden so far with no chance to staunch the bleeding and no doubt in a considerable amount of pain—that is likely why he is unconscious. Hopefully the physician will be able to remove the ball and stitch the wound. Then it’s simply a matter of keeping it from festering. Fever is our greatest enemy now.”

Her knees were quaking with fear as she sank down onto a chair that had miraculously been placed behind her. In a voice that sounded completely alien to her, Charity asked the dreaded question. “Who could have done this to him?”

Immediately, her brother in law looked away. But the muscle working in his jaw showed the anger he clearly felt. Why? Oh, certainly, he and

Frederick were friendly acquaintances. They liked and respected one another but were hardly bosom chums. So what prompted his response?

It was Felicity who answered the question, her tone unbearably gentle. "When Lord Dartwell was being helped into the house by the grooms... he indicated that Lord Jameson was his attacker. His brother shot him. The motive remains unclear."

"It's quite certain," Phinneas corrected. "Frederick and Charity are on the verge of marrying. It stands to reason that children will follow, which result in Jameson lose his position as heir apparent."

"This is all because of me," Charity whispered in horror.

"No," Felicity said sharply. "It's happening because Lord Jameson Dartwell is a conscienceless, scheming, criminal. Do not take this on yourself, Charity. Not when you are not at all to blame! If he were awake to do so, no doubt your betrothed would tell you the same."

Further conversation was halted by the arrival of the doctor and the local magistrate. The stable master had sent grooms to fetch both and bring them back to the estate. Suddenly the small sick room was a flurry of activity.

"The ladies should leave. I'll have to dig out the pistol ball and that will be... a grim sight," the doctor said.

"I'm not leaving," Charity stated. "I will not leave him now. Not when he is only in this condition because of our betrothal."

"Did you shoot him then?" The doctor asked sarcastically. "I think not. If you wish to stay it is on your head. If you faint, you'll just have to stay on the floor until I have finished with him."

Charity said nothing more. Nor did she faint. But she was ashen faced and trembling by the time the overly brusque doctor had probed Frederick's wound with wicked looking instruments and finally, at long last, removed the projectile. Then he was cleaning and stitching Frederick's wound. The needle sliding through flesh, tugging with each pass, was a sight that Charity would not soon recover from.

REALITY RETURNED for Frederick in stages. First he became aware of voices. Then he became aware of the awful tugging of his torn flesh as the doctor stitched his wounds. But the thing that he focused on, the thing that

allowed him to force his way back to wakefulness was the gentle touch of a soft feminine hand stroking his.

Forcing his eyes to open, he looked up to see Charity seated beside him. Her face was terribly pale and the look of horror he saw there told him precisely what was wrong.

“For heaven’s sake, look away,” he murmured. “Do not torture yourself by watching.”

And suddenly, a pin drop would have sounded like cannonfire in the small room. Everyone went still and quiet, all of them looking at him in complete surprise.

“This is a promising sign,” the physician proclaimed to those assembled. “Wakeful and speaking sensibly despite having left most of his blood outside his body.”

“You can relay the prognosis to me, sir. As you pointed out yourself, I am not senseless at this time,” Frederick snapped at the man.

“No,” the physician mused, tugging the needle and silk thread through his flesh one last time. “You are not. But you are surly enough to reassure me that you will live. And that this young woman shall see what sort of patient you are before she marries you—well, let us hope she still wishes to do so!”

With that bold statement, the doctor rose and walked over to the washstand where he began cleaning the blood from his hands. That there was so much of it made Frederick realize just how lucky he was. He could well have died between being shot and returning to Randford House. It was quite the miracle that he had not.

“I dislike being sick or injured also,” Charity said softly. “I’m a terrible patient. I whine. I cry. I demand. I also pout... terribly, per Felicity’s assessment.”

“Men do not pout,” he replied.

“Do they not?”

“Not overmuch,” he corrected. “Charity, I will be fine. I assure you of that. I have entirely too much to look forward to—our life together—to allow something as insignificant as being shot to interfere.”

“Hardly insignificant,” the doctor snapped. “You could well have died. Had you lost consciousness earlier and fallen from your horse, you would have lain in the field and bled to death before anyone even discovered you!”

Charity made a sound of distress. Frederick immediately squeezed her hand. “But I did not die, Charity, and I will not. Not for a very long time. A

day or so of rest, and I shall be right as rain. At this time, my greatest concern is that this has prevented me from getting to Rochester to obtain the license.”

“I will take care of that,” Phinneas said. “The Bishop has long been a friend of the family. I will explain the circumstances to him and we shall have the license by the morning. Though, we may have to delay your wedding more than a single day.”

Frederick’s jaw firmed. “No more than a day. By the end of this week, Charity will be my wife.”

Phinneas, apparently recognizing just how determined he was, nodded. “We will do what we must to make it so.”

While he could offer assurance that he would be well and recover from his injury, there were other things that needed to be addressed—things that all of them needed to be aware of. “In the meantime, you should not leave the house. Do not venture out. If Jameson truly means to prohibit our marriage to ensure his position as heir apparent, I am not the only one in danger from him.”

“I’ll set men to watching the grounds,” Phinneas said. “And he will not get near her... nor anyone else in this house again. The question, Welbey, is how you want him dealt with. The scandal could be quite damaging if it comes out that he’s trying to murder you and possibly your betrothed.”

Frederick looked at Charity and thought of what it would do to her if the truth came out. They could well become objects of curiosity and invited everywhere or they could possibly become pariahs. The haute ton were a capricious lot. She had suffered enough at the hands of society matrons and social climbers who were only too eager to pick apart others to increase their own cachet. “Privately, Randford. It should be dealt with privately.”

The other man nodded. “Very well. Now, I must go and deal with Magistrate Dawes. It shouldn’t be too hard to convince him that it was naught but poachers. Regardless, you may rest assured, Lord Jameson will harm no one else under this roof.”

Frederick felt a strange sense of foreboding at those words. “We should not make promises when it comes to the behavior of others. We can only pray that you are correct... I need a weapon. A pistol, I think, on the off chance he should gain entry to the house.”

“I’ll see that you have a brace of pistols, primed and ready.” With that Randford turned to exit the room, Felicity following behind him. Only moments later, the doctor left as well.

They were alone then, just the two of them in that room, with the weight of all that had occurred hanging between them. Charity scooted her chair closer and laid her head down on his uninjured shoulder. “I’ve never been so frightened.”

Neither had he, but admitting that to her would hardly be helpful. “I was foolish to take his having left for London at face value. Deception is second nature to Jameson. I underestimated him, but I will not do so again. And we will, by week’s end, be married.”

He felt her smile. “Whatever it takes.”

Whatever, indeed, he thought, as he kissed the top of her head.

TWENTY-ONE

Charity went to her room where Cordelia waited, perched on the edge of the bed, all but vibrating with the wealth of questions she had yet to ask. She'd spent the remainder of the morning and all of the evening in Frederick's sick room, watching over him. There had been no fever thus far, which was a good sign. The housekeeper had placed foul smelling but effective poultices on the wound and she'd forced him to drink a medicinal tea that had been utterly revolting. It was the doctor's prescription which had made things difficult.

He'd left her with instructions to give him laudanum for the pain. While it had helped him to sleep, it had brought on restless and disturbing dreams, as evidenced by the way he'd tossed and turned. It had taken considerable effort to prevent him from tearing his stitches. When he'd quieted, at long last, her aunt had stepped in. Marguerite had insisted that Charity should go to bed and rest and she would watch over him during the night.

Exhausted, Charity had climbed the stairs to her room. She was far too disturbed by the day's events to have any hope of sleeping. Now, based on the fact that her cousin was all but vibrating with curiosity, Cordelia wanted all the details. Charity gave a weary sigh before telling her cousin, "Go ahead and ask. I know you're dying to."

"Did Lord Dartwell's brother really try to kill him? And is it true that he might try to harm you to prevent a marriage between the pair of you? How grave are Lord Dartwell's injuries? How long will this delay your marriage?"

"Yes. Yes. So long as there is no festering of the wound, he should make a full recovery. Phinneas will obtain a common license for us, and we will marry as soon as he is able, but he is adamant we shall wed by week's end,"

she replied, addressing each question in turn.

Cordelia's tone gentled as she reached out and took Charity's hands in her own, leading her to her narrow bed and all but forcing her to sit. She was so exhausted, Charity realized, that she'd simply didn't know how to put one foot in front of the other.

"And how are you, Charity?" Delia asked gently.

Charity immediately burst into tears. She hadn't meant to do so. In truth, she hadn't even been aware that such an emotional outburst was lurking so close to the surface. But she was unable to stop it, so she simply dropped her head into her hands and wept. The whole time, Delia gently rubbed her shoulders and back, offering comforting words.

Finally, when she could pull herself together, she gave a watery laugh. "I'm sorry. I certainly did not mean to fall apart in such a manner."

"You are tired. Worried. The events of the past several days have been a wild swing from joyous to terrifying. Is it any wonder you are so upset?" Her cousin offered the observation with a gentle tone.

"I love him desperately, Delia. I know that sounds silly because we have known one another such a short time, but I think I loved him instantly! It's as though I've always been waiting just for him," Charity admitted forlornly.

Delia laughed. "Well, of course, you love him. You would never have agreed to marry him if you did not. But why is this upsetting for you? To be in love with one's husband is surely a desirable state."

"What if—what if this isn't real? What if what we think is love is only infatuation and it will wear off after we're married. Then we are forced to live with decisions made in haste."

Cordelia shook her head. "You cannot have it both ways. You cannot be instantly in love with him and then not be certain you are in love with him... or is it his feelings of which you are uncertain?"

"He says that he loves me, that he loved me from the first. I know he means to honor our agreement and we will be married. I keep waiting for the moment when I say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing and ruin it all. And he will still feel bound by honor to go through with it. Oh, Delia, I cannot imagine a worse fate than to love a man who does not love me in return! I cannot imagine anything so desperate or unhappy."

Delia shook her head even as she rose and began pulling pins from Charity's hair. When the mass of blonde curls tumbled down over her shoulders, Delia went to retrieve her brush and a length of ribbon. When she

returned, she began running the bristles through Charity's hair in a soothing manner. "I think," she said as she brushed the locks in slow, deliberate strokes, "that you need not worry about how he feels for you. I cannot imagine that the man would have gone to such lengths if he weren't truly in love with you. Look at today's events! Your love has already been put to the test, and it has passed. It is constant even in the face of danger. This isn't about the permanency of your love, Charity, or even his feelings toward you. It's about the confidence you do not have in yourself. That will grow, but you must give it time. Give yourselves time to settle into your life together. All will be well. I am certain of it."

"How can you be so certain?" Charity asked. As she uttered the question, she could hear the languidness of her voice. Delia was lulling her to sleep brushing her hair much like one soothed an infant by patting its back.

Delia shrugged as she placed the brush on the table beside the bed and then began sectioning Charity's hair to braid it for the night. "Who could not love you?"

With the task complete and her hair contained in a simple braid, Charity had no response to that statement from Delia. But she was too tired to focus on it all now. She needed to rest before she simply fell over.

"Some of the other guests have departed early, likely to run their gossip back to town," Delia said quite heatedly. "But, to give you a decent night's rest, I'll be sleeping in one of their relinquished rooms tonight."

Charity removed her dress and stays. Once she was clad only in her chemise, Delia tucked her into bed and then left the room. Within seconds, her eyes drifted closed and she fell into fitful and unpleasant dreams.

JAMESON HAD LAIN in wait within Randford House since earlier in the day. When the household had been in an uproar with his brother's arrival, bloodied and unconscious, it had been the perfect opportunity to slip in unseen. It had been a stroke of pure genius not to try and find a place to hide, but simply to return to the room he had occupied as a guest. Just as he had expected, no one had thought to look for him there. Now, he was simply waiting for the remainder of the guests to find their way to their beds or someone else's for the night. Then he would get rid of Miss Charity Wylde.

But he had no intention of killing her. There were other ways to get rid of a woman. After all, her death wasn't necessary. He only had to ensure she was so ruined that his brother could never marry her.

There was a certain brothel in London—a place that catered to men with certain desires. A gently reared lady, both young and virginal—or close enough to it—would fetch a high price if auctioned there. He saw no reason why destroying his brother shouldn't also be a profitable enterprise. Regardless of what happened with Frederick, who would no doubt move heaven and earth to have him disowned and removed from the entail entirely, he would at least know that he'd ruined his brother's every chance at happiness. His failure to end his brother's life might have destroyed his own, but he was petty and vengeful enough to not sink to the bottom alone. He'd make the lot of them suffer along with him.

As the house settled around him, the corridor growing quieter as more people sought the privacy of their bed chambers, Jameson rose from the chair where he'd been resting. *Waiting.* Crossing to the door, he opened it a mere crack and peered out. The corridor was entirely clear with no one about, the sconces had all been doused save for one burning at each end. Easing out into the darkness, he crept slowly along. He would have to subdue both Miss Cordelia Wylde and Charity before he could make off with her.

When he reached the shared room of the young women, he gripped the door handle tightly and slowly turned it. The door swung silently inward and he eased inside. The room was completely dark. The night sky beyond the open window was so cloudy that it blocked even a hint of moonlight from penetrating the window.

Easing his way through the room, he found himself staring down at a still made and very empty bed. Panic hovered around the edges of his mind? What if Charity Wylde had stayed below to nurse his maddening brother? But then he glanced to the other bed in the room and smiled. Though he couldn't make out the color beyond knowing that it was light, the long braid spread out over the pillow identified the occupant as the object of his scheme.

Padding silently toward the opposite bed, he stood there for a moment looking down at her. Then without warning, he struck out, one hand clamping over her nose and mouth, the other gripping that long braid to turn her head toward him. Her wide eyed stare and the muffled scream against his hand revealed her terror.

“You are coming with me,” he whispered harshly. “Do not fuss or make a

struggle of this. I'll kill you where you stand. Do you understand me, Charity Wylde? I'm a man with nothing left to lose."

The slight shifting of her head, nodding in understanding, was almost imperceptible, but he was attuned to every movement and every sound in that darkened room. "Get up. Get dressed... and do not make a sound."

TWENTY-TWO

Charity said nothing. In part because she was doing as instructed, in part because she was too busy formulating a plan of escape to bother with defiance for the sake of it. The terror of waking up with his hands on her and him looming above her had left her shaking. She was startled, she was reasonably afraid for her life, but she wouldn't be cowed by him. Whatever he had planned for her, she was fairly certain that the further he got her away from Randford House and those within its walls that would offer aid, the less likely it would be for her to survive.

Retrieving the discarded day dress she'd worn earlier in the day, she slipped it over her head and fastened the buttons at the front. She hadn't bothered with stays. Next, she put on her stockings and boots, all while he hovered nearby, watching every move she made. The humiliation of that was unbearable.

When she was done, he approached her once more. This time, he pulled his cravat free from his stock and then used it to bind her hands behind her. "Just in case," he said. "I am not so foolish as to think you can be trusted to behave, Miss Wylde. Now, will you remain quiet or will you require a gag in addition to your bonds?"

"No. I will not require a gag," she answered quietly. "Where are you taking me?"

"Back to London," he said.

"For what reason?"

"Revenge, Miss Wylde. For revenge," he said.

"I've done nothing to you," she protested hotly.

"That is arguable. Regardless, you are merely the instrument of revenge

and not the object. My brother has been a thorn in my side my whole life long. The paragon of virtue to whom I could never live up... He was the heir. He was the *good one*. The only role that was left to me was that of villain, Miss Wylde, and I mean to live up to it.”

Charity shivered at the threat in his voice. “You have a choice, Lord Jameson. We all have a choice.”

His grin was cold and grim. “And mine has been made.” His hand closed over her elbow in a bruising grip as he ushered her toward the door. There, he paused to peer out into the corridor.

When he pushed her through the door, the corridor beyond was dark and entirely deserted. Recalling Delia’s statement that many of the guests had departed early, she frowned. There would be far fewer opportunities for aid, fewer people to intervene on her behalf. With that in mind, she strained to hear even the slightest noise from within any of the bedchambers they passed.

She had almost given up hope when she heard the low murmur of voices. Drawing in a deep breath, Charity opened her mouth to scream. Before a single sound escaped her, she felt pain exploded along her cheek.

The blow was staggering. He’d struck her, his closed fist striking the side of her head with such force that it addled her wits and left her ears ringing. Even as she sank to her knees on the hall carpet, he was dragging her toward the hidden servants’ stairs. The bedchamber door opened just as the panel concealing the servants’ stairs closed. There would be no help. No one would even know that he’d taken her.

The barrel of the pistol he carried suddenly pressed against her temple. “I will shoot you. Do you really think me incapable of ending your miserable life?”

“I know that you are not,” she admitted. Uttering that truth aloud was terrifying. It was the first time she’d really faced the fact that he might well kill her. She might not survive long enough to marry Frederick. “But to do so would see you ruined.”

“I am already ruined,” Jameson said with a sneer. “Or didn’t you know that it was me who tried to murder my wretched brother today?”

“Your *wretched* brother,” Charity said, still palming her battered cheek, “Had elected to keep the identity of his assailant a secret. Even after what you had done, he was willing to protect your reputation, to see you have some semblance of a normal life, even if it was far from here. Your petty jealousy is the source of your misery... not him.”

There might have been a flinch from Jameson. Whether it was a slight attack of conscience or some remnant of filial emotion, she had no way of knowing. But it was the first hint of vulnerability that she had seen in him. She pressed on. "You revile him, but your brother cares for you. He has done nothing but try to help you, even attempting to save you from yourself and your own wickedness."

"Shut up! Not another word from you!" He grabbed the thick braid of her hair, yanking her head back painfully before abruptly releasing her.

Charity stumbled, nearly falling down the stairs. She managed to right herself but only just. Her knee banged sharply against the edge of one step and her shoulder connected painfully with the wall. But there was no time to catalogue her injuries. He had grasped her arm once more and was half dragging her down the stairs. Apparently his temper had superseded his desire for discretion. He was being so loud that it would be impossible for them not to be overheard by someone. And on the off chance that someone did attempt to intervene, Charity knew their best chance was her to keep him distracted.

"If you mean to shoot me, you will do so whether I've spoken my piece or not," she said. "You are the orchestrator of your own downfall, Lord Jameson. Your jealousy, resentment and pettiness have led you to a life of dissolution which has only further colored your perception of everyone around you. You see your own wickedness and selfishness in others!" They had reached the bottom of the stairs and the kitchen was just beyond.

"You are the worst sort of coward," she continued. "A man incapable of taking accountability for his own actions and blaming all his failings on others. Had you expended half as much effort on doing something worthwhile with your life as you did on thoroughly squandering it, I daresay you'd be in a very different place now."

His hand flew back, ready to strike her again. "You have no idea when to quit, do you?"

"You may strike me as you wish. It will not alter the truth." Over Lord Jameson's shoulder, she could see Frederick. He was standing in the doorway of the small room they'd placed him in for his convalescence. Far from hale and hearty, but he was at least steady on his feet. And armed. He had a pistol in his hand.

Jameson sneered. "I could kill you right now. I could put a pistol ball right in your brain and I'd suffer no greater punishment for it than is already

waiting for me. Attempted fratricide may not see me hanged, but that, coupled with my attempted abduction of you will surely seal the deal. If it does not, the people to whom I owe my debts—people who will now know that I have no hope of inheriting anything—will surely see me dead. I told you before, I've nothing to lose.”

“But you do.”

At the sound of Frederick's voice, Jameson whirled around, his pistol raised high. He never had the chance to fire. Frederick had already taken aim and the sound of the pistol firing in that low ceilinged, small room was deafening.

Jameson sank to the floor, clutching his arm, his pistol falling from his grasp and landing on the hearth with a thud. Moving quickly, Charity kicked the fallen weapon far from his reach and rushed away from him, directly into Frederick's arms. He caught her to him, both of them staggering a bit. He from the lingering weakness of his injury and her from the shock of all that had just occurred.

“You're unhurt?” He asked.

“Nothing of note,” she said.

He reached up, touching her cheek which was already beginning to bruise. “It is of note. To me. I would never wish to see you hurt because of me.”

“I wasn't. I was only hurt because of him,” she insisted. The commotion had woken the house. Raised voices and footfalls could be heard in the distance as everyone came rushing. “And you should not be up. You must go back to bed at once.”

“When Jameson is secured, then... but I won't leave you until I know you are safe,” he insisted. Turning her around, he went to work on the knotted cravat about her wrists.

At that moment, Phinneas entered the kitchen, Felicity and Cordelia right behind him.

“Phinneas can take care of all that. Can't you?” She nodded toward the bleeding Lord Jameson who still clutched his arm and moaned piteously. Considering that the wound he suffered was no greater than and very similar to the very one he had inflicted upon Frederick, she doubted anyone gathered would have any degree of sympathy for him.

Her brother in law nodded. He could not do more as he was already hoisting Jameson up. When he had the younger man on his feet, he asked,

“Welbey, what do you want done with him?”

“No trial. We have enough scandal already,” Frederick said. “But England is no longer your home. There is a plantation in the West Indies... you may go there and make your fortune, Jameson, or you may go there and run it into the ground. It will be deeded to you and it will be the last thing you ever receive from anyone in the Dartwell family. Whatever you make of it, is on your head and yours alone and you will never set foot on these shores again.”

Jameson glowered at him.

“Or you can hang,” Phinneas added. “Because I know that if it comes down to choosing between scandal or Charity’s safety, Charity will always come first.”

“Just so,” Frederick agreed. “Just so. Are you in agreement, Jameson?”

Finally, the man gave a jerky nod, his face still petulant.

“I’ll see him to a ship myself,” Phinneas offered. “And I’ll provide incentive for the captain to be certain he stays onboard.”

Cordelia and Felicity came forward, taking her hands and leading her to the scarred wooden work table. A maid was rummaging through the cupboards and eventually joined them with an assortment of remedies.

“For your marks, miss,” the maid said. “Twill help with the bruising.”

Charity became aware then of all her many aches and pains. Her cheek throbbed where he’d struck her and her scalp still tingled from his brutal grip on her hair. There were others still, their causes less immediately apparent. Suddenly she felt very, very tired.

“Can we have a moment alone, please?” Frederick asked.

The room went quiet. Cordelia and Felicity looked to her and she nodded. There was nothing she wanted more than to be alone with him. She wanted to have his arms around her, to feel safe for just a moment.

As Felicity began ushering everyone back to their chambers, Phinneas carted Jameson away. Frederick moved toward the table and sat down facing her in one of the heavy wooden chairs. Taking the jars and bottles of remedies, he examined them carefully before choosing one. Then he took her hand and began massaging some of the pungent mixture over the abraded skin there. She couldn’t even recall how that particular injury occurred.

“He hurt you,” Frederick said, his voice low and gruff. “He terrorized you... and all of it is my fault.”

“No,” she denied firmly. “I’ve come to realize that is part of Jameson’s

problem. Everyone else has assumed responsibility for his actions for so long... he's never had to. The only person at fault for any of this is your brother." It dawned on her then that she was not the only one who needed comfort. He would have been terrified when he saw Jameson holding a gun to her head. Heaven knew she would have been terrified had the situation been reversed.

He nodded. Then took more of the mixture on his fingertip and began applying it to the bruise forming on her cheek. "You are likely right. I am afraid I do not know how not to take on the blame for his misdeeds. I've been doing it for so long."

Charity pulled his hand from her face and held it in hers. Leaning forward she pressed her face into his shoulder and sighed contentedly. "This is all I require to feel better now. I simply need to be close to you."

"I will see you back to your room," he offered. "And assuming that no one is lurking in the corridor to prevent such an action, I will stay with you tonight. Just to hold you... to watch over you. I fear neither of us is up for much else."

She laughed a bit at that. "I will be quite happy to have you slip into my bed chamber under the cover of darkness. Or in the day time. Or any time at all."

TWENTY-THREE

The morning of their wedding dawned a week later than when they'd initially hoped to wed and also quite inauspiciously. Marguerite had adamantly refused to allow her to walk down the aisle with a blackened eye. Rain had rolled in through the night, leaving a sodden landscape under gray skies. But there was little that could dim Charity's anticipation of the day's events. They would be married in the village church, return to Ranford House for their wedding breakfast, and they would depart by midday. It was only a four or five hour journey to Hamden Court, so she would spend her wedding night in the home that she would share with her husband. What could be more perfect?

Her parents could still be in Bath.

Shushing her own internal negativity, Charity took a deep breath as the carriage rumbled closer to the church. It was a quaint church, more than six hundred years old. The worn stone facade showed its age in the most perfect ways, lending a bit of romance to their hasty ceremony. It was also the sight of that anonymous knight's tomb where they had *almost* shared their first kiss.

"Sit up straight! You'll crease your gown."

That hissed warning had come from her mother and instantly Charity straightened her shoulders. It was an automatic response to her mother's criticism. She'd already been subjected to her father's lectures, her mother's eternal disappointment in her and the fact that somehow, despite the fact that she was marrying a peer who was equal in rank to her sister's husband, that somehow she had failed to measure up yet again. Not that she cared. She would have married Frederick with or without his title. She adored him. And

he adored her. *And he didn't want to change her in anyway.*

“Really, Charity, you could at least try to look happy. It is your wedding day,” her mother said.

Rather than immediately complying with her mother's chastisement as she normally would, Charity stated very calmly, “It's difficult to look happy when I've been told I'm too fat for my gown, my hair is not dressed to your satisfaction, the bridegroom is not lofty enough for your standards and that having a wedding in the country was a waste of perfectly good society. Could you possibly find something positive to say, mother? Or perhaps we could just not speak at all.”

Her mother gasped, clearly offended to the depths of her soul to have her actions questioned so. “Your father will collect you from the carriage momentarily. I will wait inside... presuming you still wish for me to be present at your wedding. Given that you clearly hold me in such disdain, it is a wonder you have not rescinded the invitation.”

With that, her mother knocked on the carriage roof and instantly the door opened. The footman helped her down and Charity was left alone. It was just as well. She needed to collect her thoughts. She needed a moment to calm her jangled nerves and prepare herself for what was to come. It wasn't doubt or fear. Rather it was simply the overwhelming emotion that accompanied what she was about to embark upon.

“I will marry the man I love. We will have a wonderful life together. And I need never be forced to endure unwarranted and unnecessary criticism from others... ever again.”

“NERVOUS?”

Frederick turned to Phinneas and shook his head. “Not in the least. Anxious in the best possible way, however. I'd have married her yesterday if it had been permitted. I'd have married her the first night I met her, if I could have.”

Phinneas chuckled. “There is something about them... the Wylde Wallflowers they called themselves. They are, each of them, unique and quite special. I cannot fathom why other men did not see it, but I am thankful for their blindness.”

“As am I.” Somehow, though they had only been acquaintances prior to his interest in Charity, he and Viscount Randford had formed a strong friendship during his time at Randford House. “Thank you, Merrick. Thank you for all that you’ve done to bring this about.”

Phinneas said nothing, just nodded.

At that very second, the church doors opened. Charity stepped through the door on her father’s arm. He’d never seen her look more beautiful. Wearing the deep green silk dress she’d worn the very night they’d met, he could not take his eyes off her. With each step that carried her down the aisle toward him, the dream became that much closer to reality.

The vicar began the ceremony. Everyone responded appropriately to the questions asked of them. Her father indicated that he was giving her hand in marriage to Frederick then took his seat. Charity and he both answered the vicar’s questions about their right to be married. And then the service began in earnest, each of them bowing their head to pray.

It was during the prayer that the church door opened once more. Initially, he paid it little heed, thinking it might be an additional guest, or perhaps someone from the village come to see the vicar, unaware a wedding was taking place. But when the prayer was completed and he looked up, he caught sight of the interloper, and a feeling of dread washed through him.

Oliver Kent stood there, a smirk upon his lips. At his side, there were two people—Lady Finola Wilmot and Mrs. Gloria Haviland—two of the Ton’s most notorious gossips. And if rumor was to be believed, Mrs. Haviland was also his lover. Frederick knew instantly that things would not go according to plan.

“If anyone knows reason that this man and woman should not be joined...”

The vicar’s words faded into the haze of fury that washed through him as Oliver Kent stepped forward.

“I object,” Kent said. “The lady had promised herself to me.”

Charity gasped in shock even as Frederick shouted back at him, “That is a lie, sir. As everyone here well knows!”

The vicar was stammering incoherently, clearly having never encountered such a situation before. In general, asking for objections was only a formality. Mr. Wylde appeared to be on the verge of an apoplectic fit while Mrs. Wylde hung her head in shame. Marguerite was full of indignation, based on her rigid posture and the pugnacious set of her jaw. Kent was in for a fight that he

had not accounted for.

“Vicar, we will take this discussion to your study,” Phinneas directed instantly. “Charity, Frederick, Mr. Kent and myself. Everyone else shall remain here and in a very short time, this ceremony will resume.”

Frederick nodded. If he had to take Charity and run to Scotland with her, they would be married. Under any circumstances and at any cost necessary.

TWENTY-FOUR

Oliver Kent eyed the small gathering with contempt. He hadn't wanted to run afoul of Randford, but under the circumstances, what choice did he have? Charity Wylde was a spinster with a fortune far more impressive than he had initially guessed—a fact he certainly hadn't been aware of when he'd set Jameson Dartwell on her. But his circumstances had altered since then. Dramatically. A ship that was not an insignificant investment for him had gone down, all crew and cargo lost. A fortune in silks and printed cottons, not to mention spices and other exotic items, were now at the bottom of the Channel.

That loss had come on the heels of a particularly desperate night at the tables. Now he was struggling to hold it all together because he'd never been quite as flush as everyone had believed and he'd never bothered to correct anyone's assumptions about his degree of wealth. One of the reasons he'd set Jameson Dartwell on that course was that Dartwell owed him a small fortune. But there had been little to no point in trying to squeeze blood from a turnip. He'd needed Jameson to inherit in order to repay the many loans Oliver had given him, but that had become a muddled mess. So a new plan had arisen—one where he took Miss Charity Wylde for himself.

There were only three potential outcomes for his present scheme, to his way of thinking, and he would happily walk away with any of them. The first, Welbey would abandon her in the wake of such a scandal and find himself a bride whose reputation was not tainted. The second, he would be well paid by either Randford or Welbey to take his banbury tale and sidle quietly back to London. The third, the lady's father would step in and demand that she marry him rather than have her reputation entirely ruined.

Either way, he'd get something out of it—whether that was satisfactory revenge or financial gain remained to be seen.

“Explain yourself,” Phinneas demanded. “And do not bother with your lies about my sister in law having formed an understanding with you. I was there the day you all but accosted her outside Hatchard’s and I know that was your first meeting.”

Oliver manufactured an expression of innocence. “Did I accost her? Or did I simply arrive for our scheduled assignation only to be discovered by you? You have naught but her word, after all. And who would believe a woman?”

The vicar shook his head. “If this man claims to have an agreement with the lady, regardless of what I may feel about the validity of such a claim, it must be properly investigated before a marriage ceremony can proceed.”

“A duel,” Welbey said.

Oliver blinked in shock. “Pardon?”

“You have besmirched the honor of my intended and insulted us both. You have publicly uttered untruths that are damaging to her and to me... I challenge you, Mr. Kent, to meet me on the field of honor.”

Ollie stepped back to reassess his course. That was not one of the outcomes he had predicted.

“I will serve as your second,” Randford offered, the entire notion suddenly rolling down hill like a boulder with nothing in its path.

To Ollie, Randford continued, “As you came only accompanied by one of London’s worst gossip and the woman purported to be your mistress, we can have Davenport stand as your second if you are amenable. Do you prefer blades or pistols?”

Ollie held up his hands. It was all progressing so quickly and all of it was decidedly out of his control. “Surely this is not necessary. We are all gentlemen and can reach some agreement!”

Welbey stared at him coldly. For the first time, Ollie thought the man might actually be capable of murder. Paragon or not, he was still a Dartwell. Blood tells, as they always said.

When Welbey spoke, his voice was laced with cold disdain and no small amount of threat. “This is how gentlemen settle *disagreements*, Kent... and I can assure that we are in irreconcilable disagreement with one another. You have blackened my betrothed’s name, you have done all in your power to ruin our wedding, and I am fairly certain that you had some part to play in my

own brother's recent perfidy which very nearly ended both of our lives."

Ollie held up his hands in mock supplication as he protested, "Lord Jameson is a man grown. Surely you do not think to hold me accountable for his actions?"

"For his attempt to murder me? No. That was entirely of his own doing, as was his plot to abduct Charity. But had it not been for your goading behavior—"

"Because Charity had the temerity to reject your clumsy, drunken advances," Randford cut in.

"Just so," Welbey agreed. "And Jameson only turned his attentions to her because you pointed her out to him. I saw you that night at the ball, the pair of you scheming together as you watched her. You no doubt urged him to behave ruinously with her out of nothing but pettiness and the spite of your own wounded pride. So let us see an end to this, at last, in the most definitive way possible."

Ollie smirked with false bravado. "Dueling is illegal, my lord. You have never broken a law in your life. Surely you do not mean to start now? Even if you were to win our duel, you'd be ruined. As would your betrothed!"

"I'm already ruined," Miss Wylde said, speaking for the first time since they'd filed into the cleric's study. "I was ruined the moment you stepped into this church and spread your lies. Regardless of what the truth is and whatever outcome derives from this challenge that has been issued, the gossip will spread. Do not think to cower behind my reputation now when it was you who placed it in jeopardy to start."

"And unlike you, Mr. Kent, I can invoke the privilege of peerage," Welbey said with a smugness that was more reminiscent of his brother than anything he'd displayed to date. "I will never see the inside of the gaol, but the same cannot be said for you."

"I repeat, Kent, pistols or blades?" Randford insisted once more.

He was backed into a corner. He'd underestimated Welbey and was now paying the price for it. While he had all the trappings of being a gentleman, he didn't have the title or even a distant connection to one. His education had been sufficient to get by in society and to make the most of the small inheritance his stepfather had left him, at least for a while. But he didn't have years of training in fencing or shooting. He was no man of leisure to have devoted his time to such pursuits. There was no question that Welbey surpassed him in both areas. Cunning could only take a man so far when he

didn't have the skills to back it up.

"Perhaps I was hasty in making such a claim," he said, relenting. "I might have misinterpreted Miss Wylde's interest."

"I slapped you for your insolence, sir. That cannot be misinterpreted." She uttered the contradiction primly but with no small amount of temper evident in her voice.

"Indeed. That is precisely what I saw when I emerged from the shop just down the street," Randford seconded.

Welbey's glacial stare remained locked on him, "You have two choices, Kent. You may retract everything you've said here. Publicly. Beginning with the assembled congregation. Or you can choose your weapon."

The vicar stepped in. "Sir, if you wish to retract your objection under the circumstances that you clearly misunderstood the young lady's wishes, I will be happy to aid you as you relay that to the congregation."

It was an offer in compromise and Oliver recognized it as such. "I am willing to retract my objection and to openly confess I may have misread the situation." It was the only way he was getting out of it unscathed.

The vicar nodded. "Come with me, sir, and you may make your announcement. I shall leave the bride and groom here for a moment to compose themselves after such a... well, such an upsetting turn of events. Viscount Randford?"

"I will accompany you, Father, along with Mr. Kent. I fear you have more faith in his honesty than do I."

The vicar nodded as he and held the door. Left with no choice, Oliver exited the man's office and prepared to swallow his pride in front of the assembled guests. He was ruined. Financially. Socially. All was lost because Jameson Dartwell was a lousy shot.

"ARE we truly meant to be together?"

The question hit him like a blow. It jolted through him and left him feeling unsteady. After all they had been through, had Kent's machinations been the final straw? "Of course we are meant to be together. You cannot allow Kent and his schemes to make you doubt that."

"It isn't just him," Charity whispered. "We've been beset by obstacles at

every turn. Your brother. The fact that he very nearly murdered you! That he tried to abduct me. That it seems half the world is set against us! Now Oliver Kent is doing everything in his power to turn us both into pariahs.”

“And in the process will have succeeded only in doing so to himself,” he offered reassuringly. Closing the distance between them, he took her hands in his, clasping them to his chest. Dipping his head, he placed a kiss on her knuckles, just above the betrothal ring he had placed there more than agonizingly slow week before. “If you don’t wish to marry, then we won’t. We can run away and live scandalously together on some exotic island. We can go north to Scotland and elope. We can run away to America and set their society on its ear. I do not care what we do or where we do it, Charity, so long as we do it together.”

Tears glistened in her eyes as she looked up at him. “You really mean that, don’t you? You’d give up everything for me!”

“I would,” he vowed. “I do think our lives would be significantly more comfortable if I didn’t have to.” The quip had the desired effect and teased a watery laugh from her. “Neither of us is cut out for poverty, I think.”

“We’ll be scandalous. Even if he tells everyone the truth, it will never truly go away.”

He nodded even as he took her into his arms, holding her close. “Then we’ll be scandalous. The fewer invitations we receive the more time we can spend alone together.”

“Let’s get married. Right now. Before anyone or anything else can interfere.”

Frederick laughed. “I thought you’d never ask.”

EPILOGUE

Three months later...

THEY HAD GOTTEN married after all. Without further delay, drama or difficulty—the wedding had been concluded successfully and swiftly. Even the poor vicar had wanted to eliminate opportunity for more things to go wrong. They were pronounced man and wife to the assembled guests and then added their names to the register while all the guests were still reeling from everything that had occurred.

Immediately after the wedding breakfast, they'd made for Hamden Court and had not left it since, beyond attending church with enough frequency not to court any further scandal. It was glorious.

"You can redecorate as you like, you know... the house, the gardens. I don't care a white for any of it, so long as you are happy here."

Charity was lying on her back on a blanket near the lake, staring up at a blue cloudless sky. She smiled contentedly. They'd spent the afternoon there, enjoying what little breeze could be had in dregs of Summer. But it wasn't just the heat inside the house they'd escaped from. Every time they disappeared to their chamber in the middle of the afternoon, the maids couldn't look at either of them without blushing and stammering for days afterward. For the sake of their servants' maidenly sensibilities, they'd begun finding new and interesting locations for their amorous pursuits. "Why on earth would I wish to redecorate? Hamden Court is perfect as it is."

He snorted. "It's drafty. Damp. Dark. Not to mention I think most of the

draperies were chosen when my grandparents were newly married.”

Charity shrugged. “I like them. Perhaps they could do with a good cleaning and bit of a refurbishment, but I see no reason to change everything. It’s a bit like being a heroine in one of Cordelia’s gothic novels.”

“Am I your Udolpho then?”

It was Charity’s turn to snort. “Hardly that. You fall too firmly into the heroic category... A fact for which I am very thankful. Some women may find men with ambiguous morals and motives to be attractive, but I like knowing precisely what I’m getting with you.”

“Boredom?” He asked with a self deprecating laugh as he lay down on the blanket beside her, his arms folded behind his head.

Charity turned to face him. “No. Not boredom. A loving husband whom I can rely upon, who treats me as if I am completely precious to him and makes me feel cherished every single day. Any woman who does not envy me that is a fool.”

“I still sound like loyal spaniel.”

Moving with a grace and confidence that was somewhat new to her, Charity tossed her leg over his and came up to a sitting position. She straddled his lean hips as she looked down at him. “Do I look bored, Frederick?”

“You look like a siren sent to lure a man to the depths,” he remarked. Even as he did so, he was tugging her skirts out of the way, removing the barriers between them.

Charity knew precisely what he had in mind and she was more than amenable. Reaching down, she began to free the buttons of his trousers, the fall front parting to reveal his arousal. When he grasped her hips, urging her up onto her knees, she trembled with anticipation. And when she sank down, taking him into her, feeling the exquisite pleasure of his hard flesh moving inside her, she let out a soft moan.

“My god, you’re beautiful,” he said, his voice tinged with a bit of awe. “Every day I’m struck anew by it.”

Overwhelmed by sensation as she was, she could not even respond to that sweet sentiment. But then she didn’t have to. Like everything else between them, the heat was instant. The bright burn of passion flared hotly between them... always. And finding themselves alone, with no prying eyes or scandalized servants about, it took only seconds before they were lost in each other. Their bodies moved in an age old rhythm, taking them closer and

closer to the peak of pleasure. And then they tumbled over it together.

Charity collapsed against him, her thighs still trembling and the small shocks of pleasure still coursing inside her. “Good heavens. How could you ever think this is boring?”

“Well, we might eventually get to a point where we can be alone together for more than five minutes without falling all over one another. Boredom could set in then.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. By that point we’ll have several incorrigible and very loud children running around. We won’t have time to be bored,” she said. “How do you feel about twins?”

He laughed at that. “Well, I’m not opposed to them. We might do better to start off with just one though... get our feet wet, so to speak.”

Charity laughed. “I don’t think it works that way. Maybe we can spend some time at Randford House at Christmas. Felicity will have given birth by then. We can practice on our niece or nephew and return here by March.”

“You wish to return here by March?” He asked the question with a frown. “Don’t you wish to spend some time in London with Benny and Cordelia?”

“Well, while I would love to do that,” Charity said with a knowing smile, “It’s much more important to me that our first child be born at Hamden Court... which, if my calculations are correct, will be sometime in April.”

His eyes widened with shock. Then a slow smile spread across his face, that same bright and beautiful smile with his glorious dimples that had prompted her to fall in love with him likely at first sight. Then he pressed a tender kiss to her lips before propping himself on his elbow and staring down at her adoringly.

“I know I’m supposed to hope for an heir,” he said. “But I would not be upset at all if we had a girl. A beautiful blonde cherub who laughs too loud and winds me about her little finger... not unlike her mother.”

Charity pressed a kiss to his cheek, savoring the slight rasp of his beard against her skin. “We’ll just keep trying until we have at least one of each. Perhaps a pair. Twins, you know. Don’t you think?”

He rolled them over, pinning her to the ground and kissing her so thoroughly it stole her breath away. It shouldn’t have been possible to want him again so soon, and yet she did. That kiss had reawakened her desire and his too it seemed. “I cannot think of a better use of our time, Viscountess Welbey.”

“I love you so much, Frederick. And if possible, I think I love you more

with each day that passes.”

“I know that is possible. Because I feel just the same... Scandalized servants be damned. I’m going to make love to my wife in our bed. I don’t care what time of day it is.”

In a flurry of hastily straightened clothing and laughter, they made for the house and the comfort of their very own bed.

THE END

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