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TWICE
UPON A
MIDNIGHT

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A Regency Cinderella Story

by

Anna Harrington



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CHAPTER ONE

Mayfair, London

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ou look beautiful, Elenora.”

“*Y* Seated at her dressing table, Ella Darby darted her eyes to her mother’s reflection in the corner of the mirror and did her best not to frown. She wished she could be as certain of her appearance as Mama. But then, Mama *was* the Duchess of Durham, and confidence seemed to be a requirement for the position.

Mama came up behind her and gave her shoulders a quick squeeze. “Your debut will be the event of the season!”

Whether the emotion she saw shining on her mother’s face was pride, approval, or just plain relief, Ella couldn’t have said. But she knew her mother was happy, and at least one of the Darby ladies should be happy tonight. So she forced a smile. “Thank you.”

Then Ella pulled in a deep breath, the same one of resolve she’d counted on to maintain her silence during the past several weeks of planning for tonight’s grand ball. But this time, the devil inside her made her blurt out—

“Do I really have to go through with this? I don’t need to be introduced.”

Her mother’s expression melted into one of long-suffering patience. “We’re back in London now, and we need to be part of its society, you know that.” The gentle reminder was softened further by her mother’s affectionate fussing with the puffed sleeves of Ella’s satin gown. “Tonight will let people know you’re accepting callers.”

In other words...Ella's parents thought she needed a husband.

Her shoulders sagged. She couldn't blame them. After all, she'd turned twenty-three last December, and surely, she was the world's oldest miss to ever have her formal debut. For that—and a lot else besides—she put the blame squarely upon Napoleon's Corsican shoulders.

As the holder of one of the oldest and most important dukedoms in England, her father had been asked by the Court of St James's to act as envoy to the Congress of Vienna when the wars with Bonaparte ended six years ago. He'd been happy to...only to be forced into additional service when Boney refused to stay in exile. Was it too much to ask, truly, for the former emperor to stay on Elba where he belonged, rather than reassemble his army and fight at Waterloo, thus requiring her father to settle in Paris to aid in the restoration of the French monarchy and, as a result, throwing Ella's social life into chaos? Oh, if she were ever to come across Boney, she'd pop him a good one!

Of course, she was being facetious to consider circumstances that way, given the atrocities of the wars. Yet as a result, the Duke of Durham had dutifully gone to the Continent for the duration, with his wife and seventeen-year-old daughter in tow and his son safely ensconced at Eton. Only recently had affairs on the Continent settled down to the point where her father felt he could return to England.

By then, though, Ella had missed her London debut and five full seasons.

She hadn't minded living in France. She'd enjoyed Paris and had made several close friends from all social classes and walks of life, from the daughter of a French duke to the daughter of the dressmaker who fashioned Mama's gowns, from bluestockings with whom she could discuss art and literature to bankers and merchants who respected her intelligence. She spoke real French every day, not that butchered drawing room French of English lords and ladies who spoke it only when necessary and only to put on airs. Her

years in Paris were a wonderful time she would always be grateful to have had. And would always miss.

But her parents *had* minded the lack of what they saw as a proper social circle for their daughter. Now, they were attempting to make up for it with a grand ball meant to turn back time by introducing her to English society, reestablishing themselves within the *ton*, and lining up potential husbands. All in one fell swoop.

Perhaps they were right that she needed to find her way into English society, that tonight's debut might help her make friends. She wasn't opposed to that.

When it came to finding a husband, however, Ella had other plans. Oh, she might go through the motions her parents wanted from her, of dancing with young gentleman and taking turns about the ballroom on their arms, but those pleasantries were a long way from actual courtship.

Her life—and her heart—would always be her own.

“Tonight will give you the opportunity to meet all the most eligible bachelors,” her mother continued as she straightened the string of pearls around Ella's neck. “Something tells me you'll enjoy it.”

Yes. *If* it didn't kill her first.

But Ella didn't dare utter that aloud. She knew how much tonight meant to her parents, and she would never hurt them.

Had she been anyone but the only daughter of the Duke of Durham, she would have been rapidly approaching spinsterhood and happily left to her own devices. But not Ella. Her father's position and wealth made her the most eligible miss in the kingdom, with the possible exception of the royal princesses. Thankfully, unlike them, Ella wouldn't have to marry a foreign prince to appease her father, although Papa would be thrilled if she did, given how many foreign dignitaries had been invited to tonight's ball. No, she simply had to find a husband of whom he approved. Yet that was no

mean feat given that Ella preferred bookish gentleman to the baronial and visionaries to viscounts.

To appease her mother, though, she simply had to marry for love... Well, the love of a wealthy duke or marquis in possession of a spotless reputation, old family lineage, and a grand fortune, that is.

“And you’ll be able to make friends with all the young misses, too. Won’t that be lovely?”

Ella bit back a laugh, even as a deep part of her heart wanted nothing more than for her mother to be right. She desperately missed her friends in France, and so far, all her attempts to acquire new ones in London had come to nothing. The more polite young misses she’d met on afternoon calls with her mother had simply been cold to her and failed to pay her any calls in return. The worst ones gossiped about her behind her back and jealously called her “the princess” when they thought she couldn’t hear them. As for stimulating conversation with anyone about Voltaire and Wordsworth—a complete and dismal failure.

Yet those young ladies were all eager to attend her party tonight because the most eligible gentlemen in London would be here, gathered in one place without having to tolerate the hassles of Almack’s vouchers, weak punch, and even weaker personalities.

Those misses didn’t want her friendship. They wanted her castoffs.

Castoff gentlemen—*ha!* Ella would be happy to give away the lot of them, if she could.

But she also knew she wasn’t growing any younger, and even at three-and-twenty, she’d missed five very important years of husband-hunting. Aye, *there’s* the rub, because she did want a husband and a family to whom she could dedicate her life and her love, the way her parents had.

Yet time was marching on, and if she wasn’t careful, she’d run out of time before she found the man she wanted to marry.

As if on cue, the mantel clock struck the hour.

Ella pulled in a steeling breath. It was time to make her entrance.

Her mother gave her shoulders one last squeeze for luck. Looking at their shared reflection in the mirror, Ella noted once again how much she resembled her mother, right down to the same big, blue eyes and dark chestnut hair.

“Whatever you do tonight,” Mama whispered as the door opened and Papa entered the bedroom to collect them for Ella’s introduction, “try to have fun.”

With a quick kiss to her cheek, her mother stepped back to greet her husband.

Henry Darby, seventh Duke of Durham, smiled brightly as he strode across the room to greet his wife with a happy nod. Then he placed a kiss on the top of Ella’s head, the way he had done for as long as she could remember.

Ella’s chest tightened with guilt. She loved her parents and knew they loved her. She just wished their love hadn’t manifested itself as the party event of the season, right down to rented swans in the front courtyard and fireworks over The Green Park behind the house at midnight. Tonight was her debut. How could she ever live up to swans and fireworks, for heaven’s sake?

“Well now.” Papa glanced in the mirror at the picture the three of them made, complete with his brightly striped waistcoat and elaborately knotted cravat. Then he rubbed his hands together, pleased at how the evening’s festivities were shaping up. “Don’t we look ready to take on London, or at least our party guests?”

Which *was* all of London, Ella judged, based on the noise emanating from the reception rooms and the front drive.

They were hosting the grandest party London had seen since the celebrations of Wellington’s victory at Waterloo, with over one thousand names on the guest list, a small army of footmen to offer refreshments, a regiment of grooms to attend to carriages and horses, dozens of cooks and assistants to

create all the food, an entire orchestra...and a partridge in a pear tree, Ella was certain, hidden somewhere among the potted palms. So many guests, in fact, that they filled the St James's townhouse, spilled out of its gardens, and overflowed into the surrounding park.

And Ella was supposed to meet every single one of them. *Somehow*. Just the thought of it was daunting.

Yet she couldn't help but smile at her father. His happiness was infectious.

"Gregory should be here," her mother murmured, noting the absence of Ella's younger brother who was studying at Oxford and couldn't come to London for the party.

Who didn't *want* to come to London for the party, that is. *Smart boy*. Perhaps Gregory had learned something at Oxford after all. As the heir who would have to return home next year once he was graduated to learn the business of running the dukedom, he was eager to have as much fun with his friends as possible while he still could. That did not include playing host at his sister's introduction, especially when thoughts of marriage hung in the air. *Smart boy, indeed*.

"Best not to bother him in the middle of the term," Papa reminded them. "He needs to concentrate on his studies."

Ella forced back a laugh. She didn't know if her father truly believed that, or if Papa preferred to live in denial about the antics his son was up to in Oxfordshire. Either way, he loved both his children equally, unlike most of the aristocracy who cared only for sons and heirs. Tonight's ball proved that. After all, would he be thrusting such a torturous evening onto his daughter if he didn't love her? Despite everything, the ball was a labor of love by her parents, although Ella found it difficult to fathom how a towering papier-mâché pagoda in the rear gardens could be a sign of affection.

Her father squeezed her mother's arm to reassure her, then turned more smartly toward Ella than she would have expected from a man of his age and girth. His brows rose toward his balding head. "Are you ready for your debut, my dear?"

As ready as I'll ever be. Instead, she echoed, "Ready."

Ella stood and picked up her ice-blue satin half-mask that matched her gown. With a quick look in the mirror, she tied it into place, careful not to muss her pearl-laced curls pinned to the top of her head.

Tonight's ball was a masquerade—*partially*. Half-masks were encouraged simply because the duchess thought it would be romantic for everyone to unmask at midnight when the fireworks went off, but with none of the hassle of fancy dress and full-face masks that hid identities too thoroughly. After all, her mother wanted romance for Ella, but only with the right gentlemen, and how could she keep away the undesirables if she couldn't easily recognize them?

Ella could have told her to spare herself the trouble. The exactly right gentleman for Ella would never have been invited to tonight's party in the first place. He would have been closeted away in a library or museum, enjoying his books and artifacts far more than drinks and dancing.

Pushing down a defeated sigh, she put her hand on her father's arm and let him lead her from her room, with her mother following proudly behind.

CHAPTER TWO

Spenser Rhodes glanced out the carriage window at the large Italianate villa and smiled to himself.

The house was ablaze with light. From the dark night outside, he could see chandeliers shining through tall, wide windows and open sets of French doors, along with dozens of lamps lighting up the garden terraces. Narrow paths stretched away behind the house until they were swallowed up by the dark park beyond the garden wall.

Around him on the wide drive to the front façade, dozens of grooms held lanterns to guide arriving guests as they exited the snaking line of carriages through St James's that showed no signs of ending. The guests made their way past giant aviaries filled with swans to the front portico and large doors, held open by two uniform footmen whose only job for the evening seemed to be as human doorstops. More footmen waited within to take coats, hats, and fur wraps, while beyond them stood the butler, who busily checked invitations and then waved guests into the party to be announced by the master of ceremonies. Inside the reception rooms, a crush of bodies had already formed of satin-draped women and men wearing Bond Street's finest, while strains of music from an orchestra ensconced in the ballroom drifted from the house and into the night.

Spenser stared at the spectacle. He'd witnessed grand parties before, but this... *Good lord.*

"You're mad."

He slid a look across the compartment at Martin Harrow. Of all the partners in crime he could have imagined for tonight, the old man would not have been one of them. But Spenser had made the mistake of stopping by Martin's room in Cheapside on his way to the party to check in on his friend. When Martin discovered why Spenser was wearing the most expensive evening finery he'd ever donned, the old man

insisted on riding with him to the ball, to talk him out of his plans.

“Mad as a hatter,” Martin elaborated.

Or perhaps berate him out of them.

“Come on, Martin.” Spenser eased back against the squabs of the rented carriage and smiled. “Haven’t you ever wanted to party with the *ton*?”

“I *have* partied with them.” The older man snorted dismissively. “It’s not nearly as much fun as it looks.”

“Really?” He nodded out the window. Two beautiful women dripping jewels and furs waved their fans flirtatiously as they passed his carriage. He grinned back at them. “Because it looks like damnable fun to me.”

“Will it still be fun when they throw you into Newgate for impersonating a peer?”

“The Marquess of Walmesley is not a peer.” *Not yet.* Someday, his half brother Simon would inherit their father’s dukedom while Spenser, as the stepson, would inherit nothing, but until then, Simon’s title was only a courtesy. That technicality would protect Spenser from prison, if not from the ire of his stepfather. “Besides, they have to catch me first, and I have no intention of being caught.”

“People never do,” Martin grumbled.

“It’s simple.” Spenser leaned forward, elbows on knees. “It’s a masquerade. Everyone’s behind a mask, and I have my esteemed brother’s invitation.”

He held up the card with Simon’s name written elegantly across the linen paper. No one would think twice about the invitation, not with Spenser wearing a mask, and certainly not when he and Simon looked so much alike, both favoring their late mother instead of their fathers.

But that was where all similarities ended. Their characters were nothing alike.

Spenser’s blood family held no connection to the aristocracy. Instead, he’d been forced to make his way in the

world via his own merits because his stepfather, Charles Radcliff, Duke of Pensworth, barely acknowledged Spenser even existed; he certainly would never have helped raise him into the upper class with Simon, his son and heir. But Spenser succeeded more than anyone would have thought possible. He owned the second most successful print shop in London and was well on his way to acquiring his own fortune, yet he also could hope for nothing more from the *ton* than to hover at its fringes, tolerated but never fully accepted.

He held no delusions. A printer would never have been invited to a ball like this. The only way he was able to attend was by forging an invitation. It wasn't difficult, given that his own shop had printed the party invitations. All he had to do was take one and have his housekeeper write his brother's name in her elegant handwriting across the front. Unless he and Simon stood right beside each other, no one would notice anything amiss.

"I'll slip in as Walmesley and enjoy myself at the party. That's all. I'll help myself to a couple glasses of Madeira, a few plates of refreshments—perhaps a waltz with an accommodating lady." Martin scowled at the wink Spenser sent him. "Then I slip out with the departing guests when the night's over. No one harmed, no one embarrassed. No one the wiser but me. Just a fun evening."

One spent among the people whose world he should have been part of had life been fair.

But it wasn't, and the lords and ladies and all their ilk filing into the Duke of Durham's villa would never accept someone from the working-class in their midst, no matter how successful he was. What mattered to them was social rank determined by birth, not merit gained through hard work.

Tonight, he simply wanted to have what should have been his, if only for a few hours.

"Why are you so determined to do this?"

Spenser leveled a hard yet utterly honest look on Martin. "Because I'm tired of being treated as lesser even when I've worked harder and been more successful than ninety percent

of the men inside that house. Because I'm tired of being the kid who has his nose pressed against the glass of a candy shop window with no hope of ever being let inside, no matter how much money he has in his pocket."

Because he was tired of being treated like an outcast who wasn't as good as his brother simply because the old duke had sired Simon but Spenser had come as a package with his mother.

Elizabeth Rhodes was Pensworth's second wife and the war widow of Major James Rhodes, who had died in the Battle of Lincelles saving his men from the French in the War of the First Coalition. No matter that Spenser's mother was the only woman the duke ever claimed to have loved, no matter how distraught he had been when she died less than five years into their marriage and four years after Simon's birth, Spenser was her child from her first marriage and so meant nothing to Pensworth. So at the tender age of ten, Spenser had been shipped away to Yorkshire to live with relatives he didn't know, while his younger half brother Simon had remained with Pensworth in their home and been trained to inherit a dukedom.

That exile had proven to be a godsend in the end, because the second cousin whom Spenser had been sent to live with was a talented printer. The man ensured that Spenser received a good education and taught him everything about the printing and publishing industries. He'd given him a solid skill that Spenser parlayed into his own business and the formal education necessary to make it successful.

But he had taught Spenser nothing about how to straddle two different worlds without truly belonging to either. Spenser was reminded of that everywhere he went in London. So if he couldn't belong to this world, he'd sneak his way into it.

From the look on Martin's face, though, his friend didn't agree .

Spenser shook his head in exasperation. "Haven't you ever wanted to be part of a different world, if only for one night? A world you would otherwise never belong to?"

“No.” He brushed at a fleck of invisible lint on his old, threadbare coat. “I like my world just as it is...casual and common.”

Spenser rolled his eyes as the carriage crept slowly forward toward the footpath where uniformed footmen took turns opening carriage doors and helping ladies to the ground. “I should have left you in Cheapside.”

“And who would be here, then, to rescue you when you get into trouble?”

Spenser tied his mask behind his head, yet he was certain Martin could see the lift of his brow despite it. “The way I saved you, you mean?”

A little over two years ago, Spenser had been making deliveries for his print shop early one evening when he'd come across Martin on the street near Paternoster. Two footpads had beset the old man in an attempt to rob him, then decided to beat him for their troubles. Spenser chased them away, then took Martin home to the room the old man rented above a warehouse in one of the poorest parts of London and nursed him back to health.

By the time Martin was able to walk again without pain, Spenser felt obligated to continue to care for him. He'd been doing exactly that ever since. Bringing him food from the local chophouse, new boots and gloves to ward off winter's chills, even copies of newspapers and pamphlets his print shop produced—Spenser came up with whatever ready excuse he needed to drop by and check on the old man.

“Yes, yes—you saved me.” Martin dismissed that with a wave of his hand that turned into an accusatory point of his finger in the general direction of St Paul's. “Those ruffians stole three perfectly good pennies from me, I'll have you know. Never did get those back.”

“Here.” Spenser pulled a sovereign from his pocket and handed it over. “Now you're ahead.” Ignoring Martin's scowl, he nodded toward the front of the carriage. “Use it to pay the coachman to take you home and get yourself a meal on the way. I'll see you in the morning.”

Before Martin could stop him, he threw open the carriage door and bounded down to the ground, then hurried toward the villa's front door.

A footman just inside the entry hall took his coat and hat, and the butler barely glanced at the name on the invitation as he took it from Spenser's hand. The footman gave a low bow that would honor a prince—or a marquess—and welcomed him inside. At the doorway leading to the salon, the master of ceremonies took the invitation, announced his name to the crush of guests who couldn't have cared less who he was—or who he was pretending to be—and tossed the card into a silver bowl on a side table with all the others from the hundreds of guests who had arrived before him.

Spenser fought back a smile and walked into the party unchallenged.

He stopped just inside the salon and tried to seem unaffected even as he stared, flabbergasted, at the display of wealth and rank noted by the villa's extravagant show of marble, plasterwork, and gilding. He'd been inside some of the grandest townhouses in Mayfair and Piccadilly, but he'd never seen one like this, and certainly not one shining like a diamond for such an unbelievable party, packed to the gills with people. Of course, he knew how many invitations had been issued, but knowing a thousand invitations had been printed and actually seeing the results were two completely different things.

Whatever worries he'd had about being noticed as an uninvited guest flew right out the window. No one would question one more masked man in this crush, especially one who looked as if he belonged here. As if he truly were the Marquess of Walmesley.

He helped himself to a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing footman, straightened his shoulders, and sauntered forward into the ball.

CHAPTER THREE

If Ella had to smile and hold out her hand so one more gentleman could bow over it, she was going to scream.

She had been standing at the head of the reception line for the past hour, a smile pasted on her face so wide her cheeks had begun to ache. *How do you do? ... So nice to meet you... How are you? ... So glad you could attend our party... Yes, we're absolutely thrilled to be back in London...* So many people behind masks, so many names, that she would never be able to remember them all.

Thankfully, the end of the line had finally arrived. She let out a sigh of relief.

"Papa." She placed a hand pleadingly on his arm. "I need a moment to check my hair and dress."

What she really needed was a moment of space, peace, and quiet before she was expected to accept dances for the rest of the evening. At least she loved to dance, especially waltzing, and she could bear even the most boring conversation with hopeful suitors if it meant the chance to dance. That might just make the rest of the party bearable.

"Of course." He signaled to her mother standing several feet away, surrounded by a group of chattering ladies.

"Please don't bother Mama," Ella insisted. "I'll be fine on my own."

This *was* her home after all. True, it was only a rented house and one now filled with over a thousand strangers crammed into every nook and cranny and even spilling outside. But she could find her way to the retiring room and back by herself, for heaven's sake. Although the idea of not returning grew deliciously more tempting with every passing moment.

With a kiss to her father's cheek, she darted off into the crush before he could stop her.

She would do her duty tonight and make her parents proud. But sometime between now and when the first potential suitors began to make overtures to her father for permission to call on her, she hoped to have a long talk with her parents about what they needed to look for in a potential son-in-law.

“And it’s not a grand dukedom,” she muttered to herself. It was intellect, a sharp wit, a love of literature and the theatre—truly, was it too much to hope that at least one of her suitors could quote Shakespeare or recite poetry? “*I don’t think so.*”

Yet she pulled up short at the sight of the Earl of Inslee, who smiled overeagerly at her. He was a dandy of the first order, right down to the elaborate cravat and high collar that forced his chin up and made him appear as if he were always looking down his nose at people.

Perhaps it *was* too much to ask.

Ignoring Inslee, she hurried out of the ballroom toward the long gallery with its series of side rooms her mother had transformed into retiring rooms.

But she didn’t need a retiring room. What Ella needed was simply a few minutes’ escape. So she ducked into an alcove behind a thick potted palm halfway down the hall. She let out a long sigh, and her shoulders deflated with relief to be alone. *Finally*. Between the palm and her mask, it would be a long time before anyone dared to wonder if the lady hiding in plain sight was the guest of honor.

“Can you believe this party?” A soft voice floated above the distant din of the ballroom as the door to the retiring room opened. Two young ladies in pastel pink satin and a shameless amount of pearls stepped into the hall. “I counted six swans in the front courtyard. Six!”

The second miss paused to pull her long gloves into place above her elbows. “Makes a person wonder, doesn’t it?”

“Wonder what?”

“What’s wrong with Lady Elenora if the duke has to throw a party this grand to introduce her to society?”

Ella stiffened. She didn't dare turn around and let them see her.

"Well, they *were* in Paris..." the first miss equivocated.

"Exactly. What is so wrong with her that she wasn't introduced there?"

Ella held her breath at what the young woman was implying.

"It's unusual, for certain."

"It's something *scandalous*, if you ask me."

The first pink flamingo reached up to pull at her sleeve caps and tug them down over her shoulders as low as she dared. The second flamingo mimicked her and tugged at her bodice to lower it so far Ella was certain any gentleman she danced with would be able to see all the way down to her navel.

"It's so unfair!" the first one muttered bitterly. "She's the daughter of a duke, to begin with, and—"

"Not just any duke either but Durham. My father says everyone at court believes he'll be the next prime minister."

"So unfair!" She blew out a breath of jealous frustration. "We have to watch every move we make, while *the princess* can have any man she wants."

No, Ella thought miserably, she couldn't.

"No one will care what she did in Paris that was so appalling that her family felt compelled to cart her back to England."

Ella blinked, stunned. Is that really what people were saying about her? That her family had to flee France to escape some kind of terrible scandal she'd committed? Oh, how wrong they were!

"I heard they had to leave England in the first place to separate her from a man who wanted to elope with her."

Ella bit her lip. She was only seventeen when she and her family had moved to the Continent, barely out of the

schoolroom, still gangly and ungraceful, with ears and feet she'd yet to grow into. Did they really think a man wanted to elope with a miss who'd looked like that?

"No, that wasn't it at all," the first flamingo corrected.

Well, thank heavens at least one story could be quashed!

Then the first flamingo raised her fan and leaned over to whisper into her friend's ear.

The second flamingo gasped. "A *baby*?"

Ella blurted out a distraught laugh, unable to prevent it. It was either laugh or break down in tears.

Surprised, the two ladies turned and noticed Ella for the first time standing next to them, shielded by the potted palm. For a moment, they simply blinked, more angry that they had been eavesdropped upon than that they'd been caught being so nasty.

Then, their faces blanched beneath their half-masks, their eyes growing wide and mouths falling open, as they recognized her. *Of course* they did. After all, Ella and her mother had called on both of them and their mothers in the fortnight leading up to the party. Mama still labored under the belief that Ella could slide easily into London society and become good friends with ladies like these.

But Ella knew better. In the end, she might marry some son of a duke, but she would never fit into London society.

There was no better time than the present to accept that.

Straightening her back and squaring her shoulders as imperiously as possible, she stepped out from the alcove. She looked down her nose at the two misses as she gave them a once-over, then let her face twist beneath her mask as if she found them disgusting. She didn't have to pretend.

"Rest assured," she forced out with a purring amusement in her voice, desperate not to let them see how much they'd wounded her, "it was neither an elopement nor a baby that made my family move to France but the Prince Regent. Talleyrand and Wellington desperately needed my father's

help to bring peace to the Continent.” She paused as if to twist a knife into the conversation. “Have *your* fathers ever been asked to carry out diplomatic missions on behalf of the Court of St James’s?” She took another pause to dig the knife deeper. “Have they ever been personally asked by His Royal Highness for help of *any* kind?”

The two pink misses knew better than to answer. But their eyes narrowed to slits, and their lips pressed together into hard lines.

Ella could feel the embarrassment and fury radiating from them. *Good*, because Ella herself could barely stand the anguish constricting her chest as their nasty words kept circling inside her head. They had no idea how awful it was for her to leave France and her friends there, those people who understood her and loved her for herself, not for her father’s rank or wealth—those people from all levels of society who admired her because of her intellect and personality rather than her gowns, who knew she wasn’t some spoiled society daughter who wanted nothing more than to marry a peer and have lots of little lords and ladies, whom she could trust to be true friends without false pretense.

Who wouldn’t behave like these two misses had...coldly polite to her face but spreading such horrible rumors behind her back.

Ella had thought the evening had been going so well, too. Oh, she knew her return to society wouldn’t be immediate, that it would take both time and effort. But she’d hoped to make one or two friends from the crush of guests tonight, to end the isolation and loneliness that had smothered her since her return to London. She’d clung to that hope.

Until now.

The Princess. She wanted to slap them both!

Instead she forced a laugh despite the sharp stinging in her eyes and nose. “But I’m so glad you were able to attend my party. After all, not all the gentlemen here will be allowed to call on me.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice as if sharing a secret, but the truth was she feared her voice might

break with emotion if she attempted to speak any louder. “I’m certain there will be plenty of gentlemen I don’t want who will be left over for you two.” She gave another laugh, this one filled with the desolation and anguish that consumed her. “Enjoy the ball!”

She turned on her heel and sauntered away as casually as possible even though what she wanted to do was run. Just *run*—to fly through the house and out into the darkness, not to return until every last guest was gone. Instead, aware of the two misses’ eyes on her, she glided down the hall toward the library as if she hadn’t a care in the world, crossed the room, and slipped out through the French doors leading into the garden, where the shadows welcomed her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Spenser tossed back the last of the Madeira in his glass and
S once again let his gaze wander around the crowded salon.

He wasn't impressed.

Oh, the ball was spectacle on a grand scale, he had to admit. Doves cooed in gilded cages suspended from the ceiling, long drapes of white silk hung from the walls, and dozens upon dozens of roses decorated every flat surface in every room. The scent of beeswax candles sweetened the air, and torches lit pathways stretching away from the rear terrace into the quiet shadows of the sunken garden. There was even ivy curling up the main stairs' banister to the floors above and a harpist perched on the first-floor landing, although no one could hear her playing over the din of the mulling crowd whose glasses of champagne, port, and wine were constantly being refilled by footmen.

He had to give the Duke and Duchess of Durham credit for creating an event that would be the talk of this season and most likely several more to come. But the whole party struck him as absurd.

He hated to admit that Martin had been right about wasting his time. If this was how his stepfather and half brother liked to spend their evenings, then he wanted no part of it. His nights would be put to better use making inroads with the merchant class. Where he belonged.

A footman held out his tray toward him. "Another glass of wine, my lord?"

My lord. Spenser gave a grim smile. "No, thank you." He placed his empty glass onto the tray. "I'm done for the evening."

He had made his point to society by attending tonight—or perhaps he'd made it to himself, since none of them would ever know he was here. He didn't belong in this world any

more than he belonged among day workers and manual laborers.

It was time to leave.

But as he turned toward the door, he froze. In the entrance hall stood his half brother Simon, arguing heatedly with the master of ceremonies who was blocking his way into the party and pointing angrily at his invitation.

Spenser didn't have to be any closer to know what the two men were arguing about or that he was the cause of it. After all, the Marquess of Walmesley had already arrived at the party and been announced less than an hour earlier. Even a busy master of ceremonies would be able to remember that.

The butler pointed at the bowl of collected invitations as proof that Simon couldn't possibly be the marquess—his invitation already lay in the arrivals' pile.

It was *definitely* time to leave.

Spenser casually slipped away toward the open French doors leading out onto the rear terrace before the butler could remember which man in the crowd had claimed to be the marquess...or figure out how the marquess could defy physics by being two men at once.

He strode across the terrace as quickly as he dared without calling attention to himself, then hurried down the steps into the garden. The oil lamps lighting the terrace gave way to torches illuminating the winding garden paths, only for even those to run out when he reached the far wall separating the garden from the park. He plunged into darkness so black he could barely see his hand in front of his face.

There was no way back through the house without being noticed. He'd have to wander out into the park, then take the long way around to the street where he—

Oomph!

The air was punched from his chest as he collided with another guest in the black shadows. Instinctively, he reached out to steady the poor chap, a ready apology on his tongue.

But in the darkness, his hand touched something soft and smooth—satin. *A gown.* Not a chap at all.

He froze and blinked.

So did the woman he'd run into. His gaze adjusted to the darkness, and soon, he was able to see wide eyes staring at him from behind a demi-mask, full lips parted in surprise, and a delicately oval face upturned toward him.

A very *beautiful* face.

Then he realized his hand still rested far too familiarly against her hip, his glove not tempering any of the softness of her gown beneath his touch. To have his hand on her in the darkness wasn't at all proper, yet he couldn't bring himself to pull away.

"Apologies. I didn't see you in the shadows." He quirked her a smile. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just a little jolted, that's all." Her voice lilted gently on the evening air. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

He somehow found the restraint not to caress her side. "And where were you going, exactly?"

"Out."

The simple but honest answer drew a low chuckle from him. "Me, too." Reluctantly, he dropped his hand away, but instead of hurrying on as he should have, he lingered by leaning a shoulder against the stone wall beside them. "We seem to have found our destination at the exact same time."

Her surprised expression melted into an amused smile. "Not so much a destination as an escape, to be honest." She waved her hand in the direction of the house. "It's a crush inside. I needed a moment to myself and thought I'd take a turn about the garden."

"Then I'm sorry I ran into you and disturbed your peace." *A lie.* He wasn't the least bit sorry.

"The fault was mine." She rubbed her shoulder where she'd smacked against his chest. "Next time I'll find an unused

room to hide inside instead of the garden.”

He shook his head. “And miss the moonlight and night-blooming jasmine? For that alone, I’d continue to take my chances in the garden, if I were you.”

The corners of her mouth curled into a teasing smile. “Very well, then. Blind collisions in the garden it is. The gentlemen will simply have to be wary.”

“Indeed,” he agreed with mock solemnity.

Her smile faded. She glanced back in the direction of the house, and her voice sounded a bit despondent when she said, “I suppose I should return to the party now. I hope you have a good rest of your evening.”

When she turned toward the house, a desperate urge to stop her seized him, and he couldn’t help but call after her—

““She walks in beauty like the night.””

Byron’s words came easily to him. But then, his shop *had* printed over a thousand copies of Byron’s collected poetry the previous year, and Spenser had made certain to secure an extra copy for himself. He might be nothing more to the *ton* than a laborer with ink-stained hands, but he also possessed one of the largest personal libraries in the empire. There were some benefits to being a printer, after all.

The young woman stopped, but she didn’t turn to face him.

““Of cloudless climes and starry skies,”” he finished the couplet.

She paused, as if she knew she shouldn’t linger in the darkness with him. But then... ““And all that’s best of dark and bright,”” she recited softly as she faced him, ““meet in her aspect...””

““And in her eyes.””

She clasped her hands behind her back and returned, step by slow step. She eyed him curiously. “You appreciate Bryon.”

“I appreciate good poetry,” he clarified. “I don’t think anyone should appreciate Byron.”

A light laugh spilled from her and floated to him through the shadows. “Regardless, no gentleman has ever quoted poetry to me before.”

“Fools.” He shrugged. “Or maybe they’re just boring.”

Her eyes gleamed with amusement. Like a moth drawn to a flame, she dared to lean her own shoulder against the wall opposite him and mirror his devil-may-care posture. “But you’re not.”

“I might be. You don’t know. I might be the most boring man in London.”

“Doubtful. You’re already more interesting than half the men in attendance tonight, and I’ve only just met you.”

“If all it takes to capture your attention is running into you, then that’s a dubious honor, I must say.”

“Ah, but then you launched into compliments.”

“Did I?”

She tilted her head and unknowingly gave him a tantalizing view of her slender neck. “I walk in beauty like the night, remember?”

“Well, she walks in the night anyway.” He paused to level a challenge. Every inch of him hoped she would rise to the bait. “You’ll have to remove your mask for me to be certain if it’s beauty or not.” *Please—please remove that mask and let me see you...*

She wanted to; he could tell from the way the tip of her tongue darted out nervously to sweep across her upper lip. Instead, she volleyed back, “You first.”

Damn. Whoever this girl was, if she knew his brother, he’d be in trouble. They looked too much alike to hide their connection, and Spenser was having too much fun now in her company to risk chasing her away. So he changed the conversation. “Are you enjoying the ball, Cinderella?”

“Are *you*, Prince Charming?”

He grinned. *I am now*. “What’s not to enjoy?”

She arched a brow and cheekily answered, “Men who step on your feet while dancing because they’re too busy looking down your bodice to pay attention to where they’re going?”

“I wouldn’t know,” he answered, deadpan. “I never wear my bodices that low.”

She laughed at his teasing. The soft sound wrapped around him like a velvet ribbon, drawing them together. Good lord, she was lovely.

Then her smile faded, and he felt the loss of it like the sun slipping behind a cloud on a summer’s afternoon. “You said beauty.” She bit her bottom lip. “Did you truly mean it?”

He dared to push away from the wall and close the small distance between them, then slowly reached behind her head to untie her mask. She didn’t stop him. Her only movement was a soft intake of air as he slipped the mask away and revealed her face.

Spenser stared down at her, his heart stuttering.

“Yes,” he finally answered, hearing an unfamiliar huskiness in his voice. “Very beautiful.”

“Do you really think so?” she whispered.

“Why would you doubt that?”

“Because...well...” She paused and searched what she could see of his face behind his mask. “You don’t recognize me? You don’t know who I am?” She swallowed, and Spenser longed to put his mouth on her throat to feel the soft undulation beneath his lips.

Instead, he satisfied himself by staring at her mouth. “Should I?”

“I suppose...not.”

She’d just lied to him, he knew. But if she wanted to keep her identity secret, that was perfectly fine with him. *For*

now.

“And yours?” Her hand trembled as she reached toward his mask—

He moved his head away, just out of her reach. “Mine is definitely *not* beautiful.”

“Doubtful.” She repeated her earlier words, “You’re more attractive than half the men in attendance tonight.”

“A dubious honor.” He joined in the repetition, then shrugged. “We’re all in masks.”

She gently shook her head, her eyes not leaving his. “Appearance isn’t what makes a man attractive. It’s his intellect, his wit, his character.”

He nodded back toward the house. “His lands, his fortune, his titles.”

She lifted her chin. “Not to me.”

“Then you are a very unusual woman to be at a party like this.”

She let out a long sigh and murmured, “You have no idea.”

“Why are you here, then?”

She slid him a look. “Why are *you*?”

“To run into interesting ladies in the gardens.”

“Me, too.” She laughed at herself. “Well, interesting *men*, that is.”

The devil inside him made him ask, “And did you find one?”

“I don’t know...” She tilted her head as she studied him. “What do you think of Shakespeare?”

“Wonderful.”

“Chaucer?”

“Hilarious.”

“Spenser?”

He leaned in, bringing his chocolate brown eyes level with hers and enjoying his private joke. “The best of the lot.” He winked at her from behind his mask. “A very interesting man from all accounts and more attractive than at least half the men in attendance tonight.”

She blinked, bewildered. “Pardon?”

He gave a low chuckle and pulled up to his full height again. “He was my mother’s favorite author. I have memories of her reading *The Faerie Queene* to me when I was little.”

“Memories?” she asked, hesitantly.

What a polite way to ask... “She died when I was six.”

She rested her hand apologetically on his arm. “I’m sorry. It must have been terrible for you.”

No, not terrible. *Simply hell*. But this woman’s kind touch brought a comfort that warmed through him and kept the grief at bay.

“What’s your name?” he murmured, very much wanting to know.

She hesitated. “Ella.”

“And your surname?”

Her lips parted, then closed. She gave a sassy tilt of her head and brought the conversation back from the edge of seriousness to the teasing banter of before. “Why should I tell you my name when I don’t know yours?”

“Spenser.”

Her mouth twisted. “Like *The Faerie Queene*?”

“Something like that.” *Exactly* like that.

A small pang of guilt pricked him for letting her believe he was lying. But he didn’t have a choice. He didn’t belong in her world, and a lovely woman like her certainly didn’t belong in his. She probably wouldn’t have given him a passing glance—let alone one of those beautiful smiles or soft laughs—if they met in the bright light of day.

The sound of the orchestra reached them, distant but clear, as the first flourishes of a waltz drifted from the house.

With a melancholy smile, she turned her head to listen. “When I lived in France,” she whispered, as if afraid to speak any louder for fear of drowning out the music, “I used to waltz and loved it. It started there much earlier than here, you know, and there it’s not scandalous. Even if I were in the ballroom right now, I wouldn’t be able to waltz with anyone tonight but my father.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’re not in the ballroom.” He held out his gloved hand. “May I have this dance?”

She stared at him, as if unable to discern if he were teasing or not.

“It might still be scandalous,” he cajoled, “but no one will see us here in the darkness. No one will ever know we waltzed but us.”

Her eyes gleamed at the temptation he offered, and she slipped her hand into his.

He gave her a low bow, which she returned with a curtsy, then pulled her into position, and whirled her into the dance.

With rusty movements, he led her through the waltz steps. He’d learned to dance years ago because his cousins Mary and Jane had needed someone to practice with, not because he’d be attending any society balls, and he was certainly stiff. But Ella was an excellent partner. She moved with a fluidity that hid his missteps and made him appear to be a far better dancer than he actually was.

Fitting, he supposed. Because she made him feel far more interesting and handsome than he actually was, too.

She was soft in his arms as she moved effortlessly with him, and with each tight turn, he caught the sweet scent of her on the night air...jasmine.

As they glided together, they remained in the far corner of the garden, hidden from sight of the house and protected by the expanse of park beyond the stone wall. He held her closer

than he should have but certainly didn't regret it. This was as close as he would ever come to holding her in his arms, and he planned on making the most of it.

Slowing their steps until they were dancing out of time with the music—and neither one caring if they did—he lowered his mouth to her ear. “You truly do move in beauty like the night, Ella.”

She stopped dancing and gazed up at him, but she didn't slide her left arm away from his shoulder or pull her right hand free of his. Instead, her fingers tightened their hold.

“Kiss me,” she whispered.

Sweet Lucifer, how much he wanted to do exactly that! Let the hand on the small of her back gently pull her against his front, then lower his head until his lips touched hers. The taste of her would be just as spicy-sweet as her jasmine scent, he knew.

Just as he knew he didn't deserve her. She thought he was someone he wasn't.

She thought he was one of her kind.

When he didn't move, she added in a tempting tease, “I've changed my mind, you see. I now believe you are absolutely the single most interesting man at the ball.” She caressed the side of his face with her fingertips. “And definitely the most attractive, even if you hadn't quoted Byron to me.”

He stiltedly returned her teasing, his voice suddenly hoarse, “No gentleman has ever quoted poetry to you before.”

“Fools,” she murmured.

He stared at her mouth. When her lips parted with anticipation, he could no longer resist. His hand at the small of her back tugged her gently toward him, his head lowered slowly, his lips lightly touched hers—

When her soft mouth greeted his with innocent curiosity, he bit back a groan. Her spicy-sweet taste was just as

wonderful as he'd imagined, and the moment nearly undid him.

She leaned into him and filled his senses as she returned the slow, languid kiss. Her warmth, her softness, her exotic scent... She melted against him in surrender as a quiet sigh left her, and her sensuous lips teased at his the way her conversation had teased his mind.

He raised his hand to her cheek to cup her face against his palm—

She broke the kiss with an unhappy sound of protest and moved her mouth away from his, but she didn't step out of his embrace.

"Take off your gloves," she ordered softly and trailed her lips along his jaw. "I want to feel your bare fingertips against my cheek."

He tensed. His hands were stained with ink. Although she couldn't have seen the stains in the shadows, *he* knew they were there, and he feared he might sully her simply by association.

Misreading his hesitation, she whispered, "I know I'm being forward, that I shouldn't ask a gentleman to do such a thing." Her soft breath tickled the side of his neck and sent warm shivers through him. "But I want this moment, here, with you." She explained in a voice that was little more than a purr, "I want to feel as beautiful as you claim I am."

"My hands are dirty." He could hear his shame in that confession.

"I don't care."

He shook his head, and a knot formed in his chest. "I shouldn't even be here tonight. I don't belong here." Certainly not with someone as wonderful as she was. "I'm not like the other men in attendance."

"I know. That's exactly why I like you." She placed a soothing kiss to his jaw. "Remove your glove...please."

His embarrassment wasn't strong enough to overcome his desire for her. Losing the battle, he shifted back to cautiously remove his gloves and tuck them into his waistband.

This time when he reached to caress her cheek, she closed her eyes and tilted her face toward him in invitation to be touched. And this time, he couldn't hold back a faint groan of torturous pleasure as he trailed his bare fingers across her cheek.

A ragged sigh fell from her smiling lips. She was obviously pleased with herself that she'd coerced him into giving her such a caress, and he couldn't resist smiling at her audacity as he outlined her lips with his fingertip.

"You *are* beautiful, Ella," he murmured and smoothed both his hands over her cheeks until he cupped her face between his palms. "So very special." He lowered his mouth and murmured against her lips, "You have no idea how much."

When he kissed her, there was no teasing, no hesitation. He captured her mouth beneath his, and when she opened to him, he slid his tongue inside to claim all of her kiss. Her slender arms snaked up to encircle his neck, and her soft body pressed into his in a silent plea to increase the intimacy of their embrace. He did exactly that by sliding his tongue over hers in wanton encouragement to do the same to him, and when she did, his heart nearly soared out of his chest.

Until it came crashing down when she whispered, "Spenser..."

The name she thought was as false as his mask. But he could never tell her his true identity. She would have laughed, and the sound would have simply killed him.

With his eyes screwed shut, he broke the embrace. He rested his forehead against hers while he caught back the breath she'd stolen, while he tamped down his attraction for her which had him wanting to do anything but stop kissing her.

"You need to go back inside now," he said quietly. And *he* needed to find his way back to his normal life, one that

didn't include intelligent, beautiful women like Ella.

She stepped back. "I don't want to."

"I'm sure you're being missed."

At that dismissal, the wounded look on her face nearly undid him. "Do you regret spending time with me?"

"No." *God no.*

"Kissing me, then?"

"Absolutely not."

"Then why—"

A loud boom reverberated through the park beyond the stone wall beside them, followed by a bright burst of red. Around them, the garden suddenly came to life with showers of sparks arching up in fountains of red and blue flames. Cheers went up from the guests who spilled out onto the terrace and down onto the lawn to watch the display.

"It's midnight," she explained, looking high into the sky as rockets roared overhead to strains of "Rule Britannia" played by the orchestra. Then she gave him a look somewhere between uncertainty and anticipation. "Time to remove your mask."

Time to pay the piper... He drew a deep breath. "Ella, I need to ex—"

"There! There he is!"

The light of the bursting fireworks had lit the shadows around them and revealed them to the butler and a footman. The angry butler pointed at Spenser, and the footman charged toward him across the garden.

"My lord!" the butler shouted. "I must speak with you regarding your invitation!"

Spenser blew out a low curse. He gave her a last, longing look, then said sadly, "Goodbye, Ella."

"Don't go," she protested, reaching for his arm. "You can—"

He placed a quick kiss to her lips, then turned and leapt over the wall into the park. He had to leave. *Now*. The last way he wanted her to remember him was as an uninvited trespasser being dragged out of the party. A fraud. A man led away in disgrace. Or worse—the unwanted stepson of the Duke of Pensworth.

As he dropped into the darkness beyond the garden wall, he caught a last glimpse of her bending down to pick up his dropped glove.

CHAPTER FIVE

ood morning.” Ella smiled for her parents as she walked into the dining room the next day for breakfast, although there was barely any time left in the morning. She’d slept late, having too many nice dreams of the masked man in the garden to want to crawl out of bed any sooner than necessary.

Her father lifted his attention from his freshly ironed newspaper only long enough for her to place a kiss to his cheek, then buried himself behind its pages again.

“Did you sleep well?” Mama asked as she reached to refill her cup of chocolate from the ceramic pot. “Sweet dreams?”

“Yes.” Ella turned away toward the chaffing dishes on the sideboard to keep from blushing at the dreams that had invaded her sleep. She wouldn’t exactly call them *sweet*.

“It was a wonderful party,” Mama commented. When Papa said nothing, she prodded, “Wasn’t it, dear?”

“Hmm? What?” He glanced up from the paper and blinked. “Oh, yes. Quite.” Then he returned to reading.

Ella smiled to herself as she filled her plate. When Papa was deep in his morning papers, that was the only reply he ever gave—complete agreement with his wife. It was good to know that no matter where they lived, some things would never change.

“Did you enjoy yourself, Elenora?” Mama took the liberty of pouring chocolate into Ella’s cup for her.

“I did.” She carried her plate to the table and slipped onto her chair.

“Did you make any friends?”

“One,” she covered that not-quite-a-lie by reaching for her chocolate. She *had* met someone she hoped she could

consider a friend...and perhaps more.

Her mother sent her father a conspiratorial glance that was completely lost on him as he turned a page and continued reading. “Did you meet anyone you’d like to see again?” If in doubt her meaning wasn’t obvious, she clarified by adding, “Any eligible young gentlemen?”

Ella knew she couldn’t hide her emotions from the two people who knew her better than anyone else in the world. Yet she lifted her cup to her lips to hide as much of her blush as possible and said, “I did, actually.”

That snagged Papa’s attention. As he lowered his paper, he exchanged knowing glances with Mama.

“That’s wonderful!” Her mother’s face lit up as brightly as the day outside. “Who was he?”

“What your mother means,” Papa explained as he folded the paper and placed it beside his plate at his elbow, “is that we hope you met several young men *and* young ladies because what was important was introducing you to society and helping you make friends.”

Her mother completely ignored that and leaned conspiratorially toward Ella. “Was he someone you danced with?”

Ella smiled against the rim of her cup. “Yes, he was.” Although they certainly didn’t need to know all the details of that improper waltz in the darkness. If she told them, it wouldn’t be a marriage they’d push for but a convent.

“Who was he?” Mama pressed, like a dog fixated on a bone.

The sweetness of the chocolate turned bitter on her tongue, and she frowned as she admitted, “I don’t know.”

Her mother blinked. “How do you not know?”

Ella lowered her gaze as she returned the cup to its saucer. “We were both masked.”

Confusion rang through Papa’s voice. “Didn’t he introduce himself when he asked for the dance?”

“Not really.” She shrugged a shoulder and picked up her fork to push at the berries on her plate. “It was a masquerade, so we were keeping our identities secret for the fun of the party. When the fireworks went off, we were separated.” Not *technically* a lie. “He called himself Spenser, like the author of *The Faerie Queene*. We were discussing poetry and literature, you see.”

Her mother’s shoulders deflated. “So you have no idea who this man is and no way to identify him.”

“And you only met one gentleman who pricked your interest,” her father grumbled, “among the hundreds who were invited.”

Mama silenced him by placing her hand over his. “Do you have any information about this gentleman at all?”

Ella pulled in a breath for courage. “Actually, I have this.”

She reached into her pelisse pocket and removed the glove she’d picked up from the ground when the man fled into the night. She held it out to her mother. The embroidered initials *R* and *S* were visible on the wrist.

“I know those are his initials.” She also knew he was intelligent and witty, well-educated, well-read...that he knew poetry and how to waltz. But she knew better than to mention any of that because none of that would matter to her parents. What mattered was—“Hendricks addressed him as ‘my lord.’”

When Ella looked hopefully at the butler who stood beside the sideboard to assist with breakfast, Hendricks’s eyes widened at suddenly being the center of attention. Yet in his loyalty to Ella, he gave a nod, albeit a hesitant one.

Mama’s eyes gleamed at that confirmation. “We can look for people on the guest list and see who—”

“There were a thousand people on your guest list,” Papa reminded them as he pushed himself away from the table. He waved away Hendricks, who gratefully left the room. “*R* and *S* are two of the most common letters in the English language, and the letters are entwined so you don’t even know which

letter comes first. At best, you'll narrow it down to two or three dozen gentlemen."

But Mama was undaunted. "Not everyone who was invited attended—"

"Only a few didn't."

She ignored his interruption. "We have the invitations that were presented when people arrived." A romantic glow shone on the duchess's face. Ella knew Mama hoped for a true love match for her...one with a prominent, well-respected, and wealthy peer, that is. "We can look through those."

Papa snorted at the idea and snatched up his newspaper. Years of working in diplomacy had taught him when to admit defeat and safely retreat. "Then I'll leave you to it." He pointed his newspaper at Ella to emphasize his point. "But I sincerely hope there was more than one gentleman in attendance last night whom you might consent to call upon you."

In other words...when she couldn't find her masked man, Papa expected her to avail herself to other suitors. Ella couldn't bring herself to give the answer he wanted because she would have no choice but to lie. No other man had caught her attention.

Instead she lowered her gaze to her plate.

Papa excused himself, and her mother waved to acknowledge his parting comment that he was going to White's and wouldn't return until dinner. Her attention was on Ella and the clues to Spenser's true identity. Ella was certain both she and Mama hoped for the exact same thing—that looking for him wouldn't be a wild goose chase.

"Now," her mother said, rubbing her hands together in a gesture of determination. "How shall we begin our hunt?"

Ella smiled at Mama's slip of the tongue. "I think you mean *search*."

Mama smiled like a cat who'd gotten into the cream and reached for her cup of chocolate. "My dear, where men are

involved, it is *always* a hunt.” She pointed her cup at Ella.
“Now, how shall we begin?”

CHAPTER SIX

elp yourself to breakfast.” Spenser handed to Martin
“*F*the small, wrapped package he’d brought, then
collapsed into a reading chair. He frowned into the
cold fire grate and made a mental note to have a
bucket of coal delivered.

But his worry about Martin extended beyond fuel for a
fire. A quick glance at the dish dresser behind the small table
told him that his friend didn’t have much to eat, given all the
empty bowls and baskets lining the shelves...and given
Martin’s bright smile when he unwrapped the package and
found sweet rolls, pieces of dried beef, and fruits.

“Ah! Now look at what you’ve done.” Martin
admonished Spenser for the gift with a shake of his finger, but
the scolding didn’t last long as he set the bounty on the table
and quickly began to dole out two plates’ worth of food for
their breakfast, even though Spenser wouldn’t touch a bite. He
wanted all of it to go into Martin’s belly. “You shouldn’t have
done this. I’ve got enough coin to feed myself.”

Yet he popped one of the plump figs into his mouth and
made an *hmmm* sound between chews.

“My favorite!” He gave Spenser a wink. “Well, perhaps
you can bring *these* with you whenever you’d like.”

With a tired smile, Spenser stretched out his long legs
and swept a look around. The room above the old warehouse
in Cheapside was in a neighborhood of questionable safety at
best, having seen its best days at least twenty years prior, in a
building that hadn’t seen its best days since the first King
George settled onto the throne. A narrow bed took up one
corner, but at least it was covered in thick blankets, a down
coverlet, and mattress toppers to keep Martin’s old bones
warm. The round table and dish dresser filled the other corner,
and beneath the window was a desk covered with books and
stacks of papers, as if Martin spent his days truly working

there. Two trunks along the rear wall and a coarse knotted-rag rug beneath the chair where Spenser now sat were the only other furnishings.

If Martin had any coin, he certainly wasn't using it to improve his living conditions.

"Come eat—eat!" Martin waved Spenser over to the table.

Spenser shook his head. "You go ahead. I had one of Mrs. Calloway's buns this morning on the way over."

"You're not the only man who's had his hands on Mrs. Calloway's buns!"

He gave a laugh at his own dirty joke, and Spenser simply sighed. Martin was always true to form.

"What brings you here, eh?" Martin grabbed one of the sweet rolls and plopped down on the wooden chair at the table. "Come to give me a report about your night at the ball?" He pointed the roll at Spenser. "You're not in Newgate for trespassing, so I gather it went well."

Very. Yet Spenser shrugged. "Mostly dull. Like all the aristocrats who attend those things."

"But you drank a glass of fine port for your trouble?"

"Or two."

Martin laughed around the bite of roll in his mouth. "Did you have your waltz, too?"

He smiled at the memory. "Yes, I did."

"Well then!" Martin exclaimed mischievously as he reached for a piece of beef. "Tell me all about her. Spare no details."

"There's not much to tell." Not much he was *willing* to tell anyway. "I ran into her in the gardens." *Literally.* "We discussed poetry and literature. I asked her to dance, and she said yes." *She danced like an angel, so soft and vibrant in my arms, so sweet and special. And when I kissed her, the world*

stopped, all except my heart, which pounded so furiously I'm certain she heard it. “Then I came home.”

Martin let out a long sigh. “Don’t start a career as a card sharp.”

Spenser blinked at that non sequitur. “Pardon?”

“You might be a good businessman, Spenser Rhodes,” the old man said, “but you’re a terrible liar. Far more went on than what you’re sharing.”

He punctuated that pronouncement by popping another bite of sweet roll into his mouth.

Spenser rolled his eyes, but there was no point in denying it. Martin knew him too well for that. Part of the reason he still took care of the old man was because they’d become fast friends, and Martin reminded Spenser of the father he should have had. At the very least, a troublesome old uncle he could confide in. Sometimes, he was certain the old man was proud of Spenser’s accomplishments, even though he had nothing to do with them.

“You like her, don’t you?” When Spenser didn’t answer, Martin repeated, this time as a declaration, “You *like* her!”

To hide his consternation, Spenser pushed himself out of the chair and busied himself at the fireplace. “What’s not to like?” He peered into the small coal box at the side of the mantel and grabbed out the last few black bits, then made a show of starting a small fire. “She’s smart, sharp as a whip, sassy—”

“That pretty, eh?”

“No.” When Spenser sank down onto his heels, he corrected, “That beautiful.” With a grimace, he admitted, “Her name is Ella, and she loves literature.”

Martin laughed as Spenser finished starting the fire. After a few minutes, they had a warm, if small, fire against the cold morning. Spenser made another mental note to have one of his apprentices bring over a print or two for the walls to brighten up the place, perhaps some flowers—

Spenser froze. *Flowers?* For a man like Martin? Good lord. Encountering Ella last night really *had* affected him.

“So what do you plan on doing about her?”

Spenser rose to his full height and slapped his hands together to wipe the coal dust from his fingers, although the gesture was an empty one given the black ink stains that always marked his hands. What coal dust could ever be seen against those? “What can I do? You know how society works. Her sort and mine never mix.”

“You mixed well enough last night.”

“Only because I was there uninvited.” He added a bit guiltily, “And because she didn’t know who I was.”

“You didn’t tell her?”

“Tell her that I’m the unwanted stepson of a duke? That I’m nothing but a printer? That I work with my hands for a living instead of living off the labor of others?” He shook his head as he rested his arm across the mantelpiece and frowned down into the fire. “Do you think she would have let me dance with her if she knew I might tarnish her?”

Martin scoffed. “Tarnish! You would never—”

“For God’s sake! I wasn’t invited to that ball for a reason.” He raked his fingers through his hair. He’d been frustrated since he’d had to flee the party and leave Ella so suddenly, without the chance to say goodbye. “The duke and duchess don’t even know who I am. At the very least, they might know I’m Pensworth’s stepson, but even then, I wasn’t good enough to receive one of over a thousand invitations.”

“What you are, lad, is one of the most successful businessmen in London, the second most successful printer in England, and the owner of a shop that’s the pride of Paternoster. Your library is equal to your weight in gold, one of the finest—no, *the* finest private library this side of the Channel. And you did it all through your own hard work, smarts, and sweat. None of those aristocratic dandies from last night can say the same.” He lowered his breath and added, “Certainly not your brother Simon.”

Spenser's mouth twisted. "Well, when you put it like that..." He faced Martin and leveled a hard look at him that brooked no misunderstanding of exactly where Spenser stood in the world's hierarchy. "I'm still not good enough for her."

"More than you realize," Martin countered. "The world is changing. The old order isn't as fixed as it once was."

Spenser scoffed at that. Anyone who witnessed last night's spectacle wouldn't be able to honestly argue that.

"You have to show her you're interested," Martin continued. "Send her flowers and love notes and those poems you're always reading. You have *to try*, lad, or else you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

Spenser said nothing and turned back toward the fire. What was the point in trying?

Last night was a singular, wonderful event that would never happen again. Unlike Martin, he knew how rank and rule worked in English society. He wasn't fool enough to dare think all the poets in all the world could ever change that.

Yet his foolish heart refused to accept the truth. The temptation of seeing Ella again was simply too great.

He glanced up at Martin, his eyes narrowing in contemplation. "Send her a note, you say?"

The old man grinned and popped the rest of the roll into his mouth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Illa stared out the window at the passing city as the carriage made its way from Mayfair toward home in St James's. Her chest rang hollow with disappointment, and she murmured, "We'll never find him at this rate."

Their search was not going well.

The night of the ball, everyone who attended had handed their invitations to the master of ceremonies, who dutifully placed them into a crystal bowl so that Her Grace could later send notes filled with her gratitude for attending their little soirée and for welcoming them back to London—even if the duke, duchess, and Ella hadn't spoken one word to them during the party. Even if they hadn't met them at all and wouldn't recognize them if they passed them on the street. But the card collection served a purpose, and now both she and Mama had hoped it would help them find her unknown dance partner.

Contrary to what Papa had assumed, there were only eight men who possessed the initials *S* and *R*, in either order, and the duchess decided that those eight should have their notes personally delivered by her...and Ella.

So they had set out that afternoon for Mayfair and the townhouse rented by Sir Sebastian Randolph. When they arrived, however, the short, rather pompous man who greeted them certainly wasn't the masked man in the shadows who had taken her breath away with his wit and kisses. Yet they had to stay for tea, refreshments, and superficial conversation...until Sir Sebastian asked if Her Grace might intercede on his behalf with Durham to support a canal bill he wanted to present to Parliament. That was when Mama feigned a terrible headache so they could leave and somehow avoided promising to call on him again.

The second man on their list was no closer to being her masked man. Robert Sampson, assistant to the Chancellor of

the Exchequer, was tall, skinny as a post, and pleasant enough, but watching rain dry on a window pane would have been more exciting than conversing with him. Ella was ready to take a long nap by the time they left his house an hour and a half later.

By then, the afternoon was over, and the duchess had directed the coachman to take them home.

Ella was beginning to believe she'd never see Spenser again.

"We had eight men on our list," her mother reminded her. "We are now down to only six. That is a first-rate start, I daresay. We need to have patience."

"What if we never find him?" she whispered, nearly unwilling to put voice to her fears. What if she never had the chance to speak with him again, dance with him in the shadows, kiss him...or perhaps more, if their next encounter didn't end at midnight?

"Do not give up hope." Her mother placed her hand lovingly over Ella's. "In my experience, what a person is looking for is always found in the very last place one looks."

"Of course it is," she grumbled. "Because one stops looking as soon as it's found, thus always making it found in the last place."

"And since we have not yet found what we're looking for," Mama announced confidently, "we have not yet found our last place to look."

Her mother smiled, proud of her circular argument, and leaned back against the squabs as the carriage's wheels rumbled beneath them. She gave a final pat to Ella's hand as if she'd conclusively proven her point.

Suppressing a long-suffering sigh, Ella turned toward the window. She didn't have the heart to keep arguing against logic like that.

"Tomorrow," her mother said with absolute determination, "we'll call upon the next two men on our list

and the next two the day after that, if we have to, until we've called upon all of them. We'll find him eventually, you'll see."

Ella nodded, if only because it would make her mother feel better. She wasn't certain she could continue to dash her hopes like this for the next three days.

They arrived home. The carriage stopped in the forecourt in front of the portico, and the tiger rushed forward to flip down the step and help them to the ground. The duchess linked arms with Ella and led her into the house, only for both women to halt in their tracks just inside the entrance hall.

Ella's eyes grew wide as saucers. Vases of all kinds of flowers filled the room to overflowing, along with baskets of rose petals and English ivy. Every inch of the mahogany and ivory side table was awash with flowers, while more covered the narrow tables flanking both sides of the room. Even more sat on the floor, in the corners, in the wall niches decorating the curving stairs' wall beneath the marble statues already standing there...even on the stairs themselves.

"Heavens," her mother mumbled beneath her breath. "While we were out, someone turned our entry hall into a greenhouse."

"Apparently," Ella replied. She turned toward a frazzled-looking Hendricks as the butler hurried into the hall at their arrival. "Hendricks, what on earth...?"

"They've been arriving all day, my lady," he answered, closing the doors behind them and holding out his hands as the two women dutifully gave over their wraps, bonnets, and gloves. "I started by putting them in the drawing room, but then all the tables there became covered. The same with the music room, the dining room...I didn't know where else to put them all."

"It's all right, Hendricks," Mama assured him as she crossed to the table and touched one of the roses in a large arrangement. "I'm certain you've done the best you could under these...most trying circumstances."

Not noticing the way her lips twisted to keep down at smile at his expense, Hendricks nodded with deep relief. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

The duchess asked, “But who are they all from?”

“The gentlemen who attended the ball, ma’am. And some who didn’t.” He paused, the normally unflappable butler vexed by unending blooms, and muttered beneath his breath, “Apparently from every gentleman in London.” He glanced at Ella in sympathy. “They’re mostly for Lady Elenora.”

“Me?” Ella blinked, surprised, and walked forward to join her mother by the table. Men were sending her dozens of flowers? Heavens! But it was more than just flowers, she noted as she scanned the room. Porcelain figurines, cut crystal glassware, chocolates and candies, yards of ribbons, fine lace

Her mouth fell open. Good lord, someone had even sent her a goldfish in a bowl!

“You’ve made quite the impression on London,” her mother whispered in her ear and squeezed Ella’s elbow with pride. “I daresay, some might call it a conquest!”

Ella choked down a strangled laugh of disbelief. She hadn’t conquered anything! No, she’d simply been announced. No—rather, her position as an heiress and daughter of one of the most important dukes in the kingdom had been announced. None of these gifts were truly for her. They were for her wealth and position. They were nothing but aristocratic bribery.

She grimaced. “I think we should just toss the lot of them into—” The words caught in her throat as her eyes landed on one of the non-floral gifts, tucked behind a basket of flowers almost in afterthought. *A book.*

Her fingers shook as she reached for it because she knew before she even read the title on the cover—it was a collection of Byron’s poetry.

She looked up hopefully at Hendricks. “Did the gentleman who gave me this bring it himself?”

“No, miss.” The butler had no idea he’d just dashed her hopes with that answer and continued, “It was delivered by a bookshop clerk. There was some confusion, I must say, as he thought you were one of the guests and asked if we could send it along to your address.”

She smiled as she traced her fingertips over the book’s embossed cover. The night of the party, she hadn’t wanted Spenser to know her full identity, fearing how he might behave toward her if he knew the truth. She’d simply wanted to be seen as someone who enjoyed literature as much as he did. That was only fair, she reasoned, given that he had also hidden his identity from her.

But now, perhaps, they would both know...

Her heart soared as she opened the book and unfolded the little note card tucked inside.

*Thank you for the
waltz. I will always
remember it.
And you.*

~ Spenser

Her trembling finger traced over the masculine handwriting. She didn’t know whether to laugh with happiness or cry because it was the most thoughtful, perfect gift she’d ever been given.

Yet she still didn’t know his real name.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ella stood at the edge of Lady Throckmorton's ballroom, surrounded by a group of young ladies and lords. She was very much aware from the looks her parents were sending her from across the room that they were thrilled she'd managed to find her way into society—if only by superficial appearances. None of the people around her were truly friends. Certainly, the gentlemen were all vying to win permission to call on her, and the ladies simply wanted to benefit by proximity to the men. Ella knew that.

But if allowing them to pretend to welcome her into their fold made her parents happy, then she would play her part.

Of course, though, she couldn't help but take searching looks across the room for any glimpse of a particular masked man who sent her poetry.

During the past three days, she and her mother had been unable to continue their search for Spenser; the duchess's busy social calendar prevented them from calling on any more of the men on their list until tomorrow. But he had sent her several more letters in which he revealed his heart, more books of poetry that showed his soul, and all of it only made Ella more impatient to find him. She knew she had another sleepless night ahead of her.

Just the memory of Spenser's company lightened her chest and made her lips ache to kiss him again. But would he be here, at this next society masquerade? Had her unidentified masked man been invited to this ball, too?

It would be nearly impossible to find him, even if he had been. Lady Throckmorton loved fancy dress parties, so she'd insisted that all her guests wear costumes and masks. Which was why, thanks to her mother's imagination, Ella now looked like Marie Antoinette's perverse idea of a shepherdess, right down to the large white wig perched on her head, a gown cut

to resemble a peasant's dress—if peasants made a habit of wearing satin and lace—and a ribbon-wrapped shepherd's crook she'd happily handed over to the surprised footman at the door rather than bring into the ballroom with her.

Although, as she considered the overeager attentions the flock of gentlemen cast upon her in their bids to outdo each other, she might yet need it to herd sheep and keep them away.

“This year's Royal Society exhibition is grand,” one of the young lords commented as the group around her discussed upcoming events. Baron Saxon, son of Viscount Ellery, wore a costume of all black and a feathered mask undoubtedly meant to resemble an eagle in his attempt at joining in with the masquerade. But then, did it really matter if he tried at all, given how he'd so directly approached Ella tonight and introduced himself? She knew why he was here, and it wasn't to please Lady Throckmorton. “The quality of paintings is far better than it's been in years.”

Art? Hmm...perhaps the herd of sheep encircling her weren't all so empty-headed as they first appeared. Hoping for intelligent conversation, Ella asked, “What artists stand out, in your opinion?”

Saxon smiled patronizingly at her question. “Well, I haven't been myself, of course. Why waste my time looking at pictures when there are more beautiful sights to take in elsewhere?”

He quirked a smile as he raised his glass to her in a small toast. That bit of blatant but empty flattery had the misses around her nearly swooning behind their fast-flitting fans. They found him utterly charming.

Ella found him simply cloying.

She turned away to sweep another searching glance across the room and brought her glass of champagne to her lips. If she couldn't find interesting conversation, then at least

Her breath caught in her throat. Her masked man was here.

As she stared across the crowded room, she had no doubt that the dark-haired man making his way through the crush toward her was the same one she'd met in the garden. Even though he wore yet another mask, she would never have mistaken those broad shoulders or the chest that narrowed to a thin waist, the hard planes of his cheeks below the mask, the muscular thighs beneath his tightly tailored trousers...the sensuous curl of his lips when he realized she'd seen him.

Disregarding all rules of propriety, he ignored everyone around her as he approached. The group stepped back to allow him to pass as if they recognized an inherent authority in him.

He stopped in front of her and gave a low bow. When she curtsied, she saw the sparkle in his chocolate eyes and the faint curl of a smile at the corners of his mouth. They were surrounded by hundreds of partygoers, yet for the two of them at that moment, no one else existed.

When she extended her gloved hand, unable to find her voice—for heaven's sake, barely able to breathe!—he lifted it to his lips to place a kiss on the backs of her fingers. The dashing gesture sent a ripple of jealous whispers through both the men and ladies in her group, and she simply didn't care.

When he released her hand, she acutely felt the loss of his touch. Somehow, she prevented herself from making a desperate grab to bring his hand back into hers.

““Oh my love is like a red, red rose, ”” he murmured, ““that's newly sprung in June.””

““Oh my love is like a melody, ”” she returned in a husky voice, oblivious to the puzzled stares exchanged by the group around them, ““that's sweetly played in tune.””

His eyes sparkled, pleased she knew the poem. ““So fair art thou, my bonny lass...””

She held her breath and waited for him to recite the next line...*So deep in love am I*. She wanted to hear him admit he loved her, even if only with a line of poetry from Robert Burns.

Instead, he held out his hand. “May I have this dance, my lady?”

Disappointment pierced her. How much of a cake she was! To think he would admit to loving her after only one short meeting in the garden and would say so in front of strangers was just plain foolish. Yet the thrill of having him with her again soothed away her distress. It was enough that he was here, once again making her head spin.

“Yes,” she whispered and slipped her hand into his. “You may.”

As he led her away, she handed her unwanted champagne flute to Baron Saxon, who stared after them, utterly bewildered at what had just transpired.

Yet Ella didn’t care what Saxon thought. Her masked man had returned for her, and that was all that mattered. She would grant him every dance for the rest of the evening if he asked, including the one she’d promised to Saxon.

He led her onto the dance floor, and they again bowed and curtsied as the musicians launched into a waltz. Then he took her into his arms and swept her into the dance.

For a moment, she did nothing but stare into his eyes as he led her through the steps and try to calm her racing heart. As if he knew the confused thoughts swirling through her mind, he gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze.

“You came,” she said quietly, making certain she wasn’t overheard by any of the couples dancing near them.

“Are you happy about that?”

“Very much.” *Oh, simply ecstatic!*

His smile blossomed into a wide grin, and he spun her through a series of rapid turns across the dance floor, the outcome of which was to hold her closer than before. He dared to lower his mouth to her ear and murmur, “So am I.”

He shifted back into proper position, once more putting an appropriate distance between them, which allowed Ella to

sweep a glance over him, taking in his clothes. They were the same ones he'd worn to her parents' party.

"This is a fancy dress ball," she reminded him.

"Really? I never would have noticed." He nodded toward her gown. "I think you've lost your sheep, Bo-Peep."

"I left them with the butler," she answered with a bit of sass that drew a smile from him. "You're not in costume."

"But I am."

"Oh? Who are you pretending to be?"

"A peer."

Ella blinked. *What an odd answer.* Before she could question that, he spun her through whirling turns that left her breathless and made her forget whatever it was she was about to say.

When she was able to speak again, she confessed, "You were wonderful to have sent me that book."

"You were wonderful to have danced with me." He squeezed her fingers as they rested in his. "I guess this waltz means I'll have to send you another book of poetry. Or a collection of plays." He smiled devilishly. "Or one of those romances that are all the rage right now among the ladies, about virtuous women and the wicked men who want to ruin them. Monks, highwaymen—"

She crooked a brow. "Masked men in gardens?"

His deep laugh warmed her from within. God help her, she wanted nothing more at that moment than to make him laugh again.

"Is that what you would do if we were alone in the darkness?" she pressed. "No more reciting poetry but reading wanton scenes from popular novels?"

"I wouldn't have to read any scenes." He looked away as the tempo increased. "I would simply confess all the ways I'd enjoy bringing you pleasure. I wouldn't have to make up anything."

“You mean...” She swallowed. Hard. “You’d tell me how much you want to kiss me again?”

“No.”

Disappointment panged inside her chest. “No?”

He looked down at her and held her captive beneath his gaze as he admitted, “I wouldn’t stop with only a kiss.”

Her skin tingled, and a strange longing began to ache between her thighs. She dared to whisper, “What else would you do?”

His lips curled devilishly. “Oh, I would start with a kiss, certainly, as all the truly good love poems do. But it wouldn’t be your lips where the kissing stopped.”

He expertly led her through the remaining steps of the waltz, and she was more grateful than she would ever admit aloud that he was such a good partner; at that moment, her knees were so weak and her legs shaking so much she wondered how she managed not to melt to the floor in a puddle. Only his strong arms kept her upright.

“I would trail my mouth down your body and worship every inch of you until you lay boneless on the ground with me.” He lowered his mouth to her ear, and every word teased warmly over her cheek. “Then I would slowly peel away each layer of clothing until your beautiful body was revealed to the night and to my eyes.”

Ella couldn’t speak. She’d fallen under the spell of his words and the strength of his muscular body moving so perfectly with hers. Anyone who might glance their way would assume they were doing nothing more than holding polite conversation about the weather or current fashions, as was every other couple on the dance floor around them.

But the scandalous descriptions he shared were hers alone, and the ache inside her grew more intense until she trembled.

“I would make love to you in the moonlight,” Spenser murmured, daring to look boldly into her eyes as the music ended and the other couples slowed to a stop around them.

“Your softness and spicy-sweetness would fill my senses until the rest of the world faded away, until there was only you.”

He stepped away to end their waltz, and Ella bit back a despondent cry at the loss of him. She wanted to throw herself back into his arms and beg him to sweep her off her feet, to carry her off into the night, and to do exactly as he’d described. And more. Because she wanted his poet’s heart for her own, for the rest of her life.

She trembled as she went through the motion of dipping into a curtsy to acknowledge his bow. She knew he could feel her fingers shaking when he placed her hand on his arm and guided her off the dance floor. Then he led her in a slow circle around the room, taking the long way back to her group.

She stopped in front of the open set of French doors leading out into the garden and turned to face him. The fire in his eyes had grown so heated as to twine a low flame down her spine. It landed with a fierce thud between her thighs and turned the dull ache already beating there into a yearning throb.

Her overwhelmed heart could think of no other word for all she was feeling at that moment and all she wanted from him than, “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes to all of that. With you.”

And so much more! She didn’t care if those desires made her wanton. She’d found him again, and he wanted her as much as she wanted him. She’d never been happier in her life.

With giddiness swelling inside her, she rushed out her confession, “I’ve been looking for you, ever since the party.” Then a light laugh of embarrassment bubbled from her lips. “I’ve been trying to discover who you truly are in the daylight, who you are without that mask, and what kind of man you might prove to be. I’d thought I’d lost all chance of that, until you sent that book of poetry. Even then it was almost lost.”

His mouth pulled down into a puzzled frown. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, all those silly gifts from the other gentlemen who attended the party.” She waved her hand to dismiss their

importance. “I almost didn’t see your book because it had been put behind all the flower vases and whatnot.” She laughed at the absurdity of it all. Certain he would agree with her assessment of it, she placed her hand on his arm and leaned in as if sharing a secret. “Someone even sent me a goldfish! Can you imagine?”

His bicep stiffened beneath her fingers. “All from other gentlemen who want to court you?”

Her chest tightened at the sudden change in him. Was he jealous? He had no reason to be. She cared nothing for any of those other men. “Well, not just for me. They also wanted to send their gratitude to my parents for being invited to our party.”

“*Our* party?” he repeated. If he hadn’t been wearing a mask, she was certain she would have seen his face turn stony. Then he tilted his head as if he couldn’t quite fathom his own question as he asked, “You’re the daughter of the Duke of Durham?”

“Yes.” Sudden tension prickled over her bare arms and made her uneasy. “But what does it matter? Aren’t daughters of dukes allowed to waltz with interesting men?”

“No.” A stiff smile pulled at his lips. She didn’t need to remove his mask to know that smile never reached his eyes. “Not with men pretending to be peers.”

He stepped back, releasing her hand with a final squeeze to her fingers.

Ella stared at him, utterly confused. Such a sudden change in him—what had she said wrong?

“Spenser, I don’t understand.” When she reached for him, he took another step away, keeping himself just out of her reach. “What does it matter if—”

“Coming here tonight was a mistake. I know that now,” he said quietly as the musicians struck up the opening flourishes of a new dance, one she knew they would not be sharing. “I wanted to see you again, but now I know I was wrong to want that.”

Her heart plunged to the floor as the realization of what he was saying slammed through her. He was breaking off with her before they'd even had the chance to begin. "No, you're not wrong. I wanted that, too." Heedless of the guests watching them, she reached for his arm. "That's why I've been looking for you and—"

He took her hand and set it away from him. "You have to stop searching." Anguish edged his voice. "You have to stop wanting more from me than I'll ever be capable of giving you." The light vanished from his expression. "I'm not who you think I am."

"But that's just it— I *don't* know who you are." She was desperate to grab for any straws of reason to change his mind. "But I want to know you better, so very much, if you'll let me."

What she could see of his face turned somber. "And if you don't like what you learn about me?"

"But I will." She was certain she would. In fact, she already begun to fall in love with him, and every moment with him going forward would only prove it more. "Those other gentlemen don't interest me at all. It's you I—"

"Lady Elenora, there you are!" A portly man with an old-fashioned wig nearly as old as his clothes smiled broadly as he strode up to them. "Your father is looking for you."

Ella's chest turned hollow. Of course he was. She didn't have to glance across the ballroom to know her parents were watching, that in their desire to find suitors for her they thought they were helping by not letting one gentleman dominate all her time this evening. So they sent this man to herd her back to the flock.

Her gaze never left Spenser even as she said, "Please tell my father that I'll be with him shortly."

"Durham was insistent that you return right away. He wants to introduce you to Lord Truss." Then he smiled good-naturedly at her masked man, as if suspecting nothing more amiss between them than an argument over whether to have a

glass of punch or Madeira. “You won’t mind, will you, sir, if I escort her ladyship back to His Grace?”

“Not at all.” Spenser retreated a step and gave her a stiff bow. “It was a pleasure to meet you, my lady.”

The private meaning behind his ordinary words nearly broke her.

“Good night,” he murmured. Then he turned and disappeared back into the crowd like a ghost into the fog.

CHAPTER NINE

penser sat in his office at the print shop and drummed his fingers against the piece of wood that served as a desktop. Hell, to call the piece of furniture a desk in the first place was a dubious assertion. It was an ordinary table, big and sturdy, stained, and scarred from years of hard work. Just like him, he supposed.

He looked down at the letter he was attempting to write to Ella and bit out a curse.

Nothing. He couldn't think of anything to say that would make this easier, except he knew he had to say goodbye.

When he'd learned the full truth of her identity, he nearly fell over in surprise. Of all the women for his foolish heart to long for, she had to be the most impossible one of all. His wonderful Ella was Lady Elenora, the only daughter of the Duke of Durham, and the most sought-after miss in England. Fate was surely laughing at him.

What on earth was he supposed to say to her now? She was the daughter of a duke, for God's sake, and he was nothing but a printer. What kind of future could they possibly have, except for someday hiring him to print the invitations to her wedding to a duke or prince?

He shouldn't write her another note, shouldn't have any contact with her at all. He hadn't lied to her. She *wouldn't* like what she discovered about him when she learned the truth of who he was and how he made his way in the world.

But he couldn't help himself. He had to explain. She deserved that much.

"She trusted you when she had no idea who you were," he reminded himself in a mutter, "when all you did was discuss literature. So be that man again. Let her trust that you never meant to hurt her and that this is for the best."

He dipped his quill into the ink and swept it over the paper.

Dearest Ella ~

There are so many things I want to tell you, much I want to explain, yet nothing can come of it. If we were free of the world and our places in it, there would be so much to share with you, so many ideas we could discuss. I would eagerly learn all your philosophies and insights, your beliefs, your hopes and dreams... When I think of you, these lines from Shelley's poetry come always to mind—

*The fountains mingle with the river
And the rivers with the ocean,
The winds of heaven mix for ever
With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single;
All things by a law divine
In one spirit meet and mingle.
Why not I with thine?—*

*See the mountains kiss high heaven
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister-flower would be forgiven
If it disdained its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth*

*And the moonbeams kiss the sea—
What is all this sweet work worth
If thou kiss not me?*

*And so you have it here: my heart's
desires and frustrations made plain on
the page. As Shelley asks in his lines, I
ask the same of myself— what was the
point in our meeting if not to share
ideas and thoughts, to delve into our
philosophies about the world, for our
minds to kiss, our spirits to mingle in
their own ways? I wanted to make you
smile and laugh and sigh. For one
precious moment, we had exactly that.*

*Yet none of that can happen again. We
now must be nothing more than
strangers passing in the night. This
must be our goodbye.*

*I can do little to ease your distress
over our parting except assure you
that someone out in the world is
thinking of you...*

*And
always will.*

~
Spenser

CHAPTER TEN

Illa looked up from the note that had been tucked into the book delivered that morning and stared out her bedroom window. She could see little of the dreary day outside, all of it lying behind a sheet of raindrops slipping down the glass. Her heart felt as dark and cold as the drizzly day outside.

Her masked man was saying goodbye.

She held the book open on her lap—this time, Spenser had sent a collection of works by Shelley—and let her hand drape numbly across the page. She looked back down at the note, only for the handwriting to blur from her tear-filled eyes as much as the world through her window was blurred by the rain.

She hadn't handled their last meeting well.

No—*she* had handled it perfectly fine. *He* had behaved inappropriately, and she didn't mean the way he'd whispered such titillating words to her that her head filled with scandalous images and her body ached to be touched. It was what came after that proved him a blackguard. After all, what kind of gentleman would say such things to seduce a woman, only to reject her when she said yes?

"A man who only appears in masks, apparently," she grumbled.

She tossed the book aside and shoved herself to her feet, to pace the length of her bedroom. He claimed he couldn't see her again, yet he wanted to—she *knew* it! He wouldn't have sent her that book otherwise. He said they couldn't communicate anymore, yet he had sent her that note when he could have not contacted her at all. That's what any other proper society gentleman would have done. Just ignore her and pretend they'd never met. But not him. Oh no—*he* had to be apologetic, kind, polite...

She clenched her fists and let out an angry cry. What a monster he was proving to be!

She stopped pacing and let her shoulders slump. No. Not a monster. Apparently only just as confused about the whole situation as she was.

If only they could spend more time together. If only she could prove to him that being the daughter of a duke meant absolutely nothing as far as she was concerned. If only they could talk—

Yet she still had no way of finding him except to continue her search for the owner of the glove. But none of the men she and Mama had called on so far was Spenser. Only two names were left on their list, and Ella's hope of finding him now hung by a thread.

"A very thin thread," she muttered.

"Pardon?" Her mother opened the door with a delayed knock.

"Nothing." Ella dropped her hands to her sides and gave a long sigh as she crossed back to the window seat and collected the book and note to place them with the others in her dresser drawer. She gestured toward the glass. "I don't think the rain is ever going to let up."

"It's springtime in London, so it's to be expected. But it will stop. It always does." She stepped into the room, and her mouth twisted grimly. "By July."

Ella rolled her eyes and closed the dresser drawer. She paused with her hands still resting on the dresser top, almost addressing the piece of furniture when she asked quietly, "Do you miss France and our lives there?"

"Occasionally. We had many good times there." She glanced out the window at the rainy day. "And more sun." She smiled. "But we all grew up here in England. This is our home, and we need to give ourselves time to ease into new lives. You'll make just as many wonderful friends here as you had in Paris, perhaps even more. You'll see." She paused, and

her voice softened with reassurance. “You’ll have a good life here, Elenora.”

“And if I don’t?” she asked, putting voice to her fears as she finally turned to face her mother. “If I’m not accepted by society, if I don’t make friends...if I don’t *want* to fit in?”

“Don’t give up just yet.” Mama took Ella’s shoulders and gave them a reassuring squeeze. “It might take time to find your footing, but I have every faith you’ll be happy here.”

“And if I’m not?” she whispered. “Can I return to France and live there?”

Her mother didn’t answer for a long moment. Then, in an impossibly quiet voice, she said, “Yes, you can. We have friends there who would enjoy having you stay with them. But your father and I will miss you terribly, so will Geoffrey, even though he would never admit it.” Her face softened with love and concern. “So for our sake, give it a try here first, all right?” She placed a kiss to the top of Ella’s head just as she’d done since Ella was a toddler, although she knew her mother couldn’t help but see her as the grown woman she’d become. “For me.”

Ella gave a jerking nod, hoping Mama was right. She pulled in a deep breath and forced a weak smile to make her mother happy. “Is it time to go out calling, then?”

“Yes.” Mama strayed toward the window to take a better view of the gray day, then shrugged. “Or we can just stay here out of the rain, all warm and dry. No one would fault us if we spent the day having chocolate and biscuits all by ourselves instead.”

Ella would. She’d blame herself for giving up. There were only two men left on their list, and one way or another, by the end of this cold, dreary, wet day, she would have exhausted all attempts to find her masked man. She had to go through with this, or she would never be able to live with herself.

“I would enjoy leaving the house for a while,” Ella decided.

“Very well. I’ll have Hendricks call for the carriage, then.” Her mother turned to leave but stopped, then frowned down at the carpet. “What’s this?” She reached down and picked up Spenser’s note, which had fallen unseen to the floor when Ella had been putting it away. She held it out. “I think you dropped this.”

“Thank you.” Ella took the note and placed it on the dresser. She would read it again when they returned and decide what, if anything, she would do then about—

Her eyes landed on the printer’s mark on the stationery, and her heart skipped.

The printer’s mark. She’d seen it before. Quickly, she pulled open the dresser drawer and took out the other notes she’d received from Spenser since her introduction. A slow smile curled her lips. They all possessed the same watermark—*B&Q*. She opened the two books and looked at the printer’s plate in the front of each. The Book & Quill, Printers and Shop, Paternoster Row, St Paul’s, City of London.

Her heart bounced. Whoever Spenser was, he had a connection to this specific shop. If he purchased books and expensive stationery like these exclusively from there, then surely the clerks would recognize him and be able to identify him.

Oh, she simply had to try!

She ran to her little writing desk, sat down, and pulled a note card from the middle drawer. She was so excited that she could barely keep her hand from shaking as she dipped the quill in the ink and began to write.

“What’s the matter, Ella?” her mother asked with concern. “Did that letter bring bad news?”

“No,” Ella answered, barely able to contain her excitement. “Wonderful news!”

She finished her note, not daring to stop to think if what she was doing was at all proper...and truly, not really caring. She sprinkled sand across the page to dry the ink, then poured it away, folded the card, and reached for her wax to seal it.

Not bothering with lighting a candle, she hurried to the fireplace to melt the wax. “Before we make our calls this afternoon, can we make a stop in the city near St Paul’s?” she asked breathlessly. She gazed hopefully over her shoulder at her mother as the wax dropped onto the card. “I have a message I need to deliver in person.”

She held up the note. On its cardstock, she’d placed down her heart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

penser paused in the narrow hallway leading to his office in the rear of the print shop and gazed out across the floor. The room was alive with activity despite the cold drizzle falling over London and the layer of fog drifting up from the river. The sun seemed a distant memory this afternoon, forcing the workers to light the oil lamps sitting on the front counter and hanging over the three presses behind it.

Yet even this snap of bad weather didn't stop customers from coming into the shop.

Good. He'd worked hard to build his business, and pride warmed his chest at all he'd accomplished. He'd become a master printer at an age when others were just beginning to learn the craft, opening his own print shop, and growing it into one of the busiest in the City. Its reputation for quality was second to none.

Most of the customers stopping by today wanted print orders that would keep his presses busy for days; the consistency of those orders kept a roof over his head and his workers employed.

But others came inside to purchase one of the books displayed in the windows or sheets of fine stationery—including ladies in their straw bonnets and stylish walking dresses. *Those* customers were a growing segment of his business and a market he hoped to capture. After all, why should he only print the books when he could also sell them? Why only print invitations to fancy parties to be addressed by hostesses in grand houses when he could also sell all the goods to go with them—quills, ink, blotters, seals. Then, when they came to pick up their orders, he would sell them linen note cards and double his profits.

“Don't limit your dreams,” he mumbled to himself, the old phrase one his mother used to tell him all the time as a boy.

Yet the dirty apron covering his clothes and the black stains on his hands reminded him that those dreams would never bring him fully into society, while the money and respect he earned as a successful businessman excluded him from the world of the working class. This shop might have been the one place where he felt the most at ease, but outside its walls, he was a man caught between worlds. Most likely he always would be, despite his grand plans to parlay his work into a business that would take him far beyond printing and into all kinds of merchandise, shipping, and warehousing.

“The account books are going to be filled by day’s end if business continues like this,” George Nantes, his foreman and most trusted employee, commented as he approached Spenser.

“Let’s hope so,” Spenser agreed. “I just leased the old warehouse we were looking at, the one on Addle Hill near the wharf.”

His foreman was surprised. “I thought you were planning on waiting until fall to expand the business.”

“I’ve decided to take the opportunity now. I’m tired of waiting.”

He was also tired of being buffeted about by the whims and intolerances of others. If printing would be his life—if he would never be the sort of man deserving of a duke’s daughter—then he’d do everything he could to make his business the grandest in England, and damn to hell anyone who dared stand in his way. In this, at least, he would prove himself worthy.

“We’ll move the presses there and expand our printing capacity,” he explained, casting a slow look across the shop. “Then we’ll turn this place into a proper stationery shop and bookseller. I want a storefront on Oxford Street and another under Burlington’s arcade by the end of next year.”

Nantes gave a low whistle. “That’s ambitious.”

He nodded firmly to convince himself as much as Nantes of the validity of his plans. “Fortune favors the bold.” Or at least he prayed it would when it came to his business, in recompense for forsaking him when it came to love.

The front bell jangled as the door swung open, and two ladies hurried inside from the rain. They paused near the doorway to brush off the raindrops on their coats and bonnets, fussing and flapping and laughing at themselves.

Spenser smiled. Ladies who dared venture into a print shop were always a refreshing sight, especially in weather like this. That meant they shared his love of books and fine stationery. Kindred spirits amidst a bleak day.

Then the younger woman turned, and Spenser glimpsed her face—

Ella.

He ducked inside the hallway, out of sight. His heart pounded furiously. *Damnation.* What was she doing here?

He couldn't let her see him, not like this, smeared with ink and in his dirty work clothes. At the very least, she'd hate him for pretending to be someone he wasn't. At worst, she'd laugh at him. And if she did that, she would simply kill him.

"Mr. Rhodes?" Nantes leaned around the corner, concern darkening his expression. "What's the—"

"The woman who just entered the shop, the one in the yellow dress." Good Lord! His voice was hoarse, and he'd barely laid eyes on her. God help him if she discovered he was here. "Would you please attend to her?"

Nantes frowned as he glanced over his shoulder at the door. "She's quality. You usually wait on those ladies yourself."

"Not this time." He jerked his thumb toward the front of the shop. "Find out what she wants. *Don't* tell her I'm here."

A sly smile stretched across Nantes's face. "I understand."

"No, you don't," Spenser corrected sharply. "Just wait on her, will you?"

With a nod, Nantes walked toward the counter.

Spenser felt like an idiot hiding in his own shop. And a coward. But he couldn't have borne it if she discovered that the man who sent her poetry and waltzed with her wasn't part of her world, who at that moment had grime under his nails from putting in a day's labor before the clock had even struck noon. He knew she was accepting and tolerant, but she'd also thought he was part of society, at the very least some sort of scholar or university don. Nothing good could happen if she saw him here and realized who he was.

She'd think he'd played her for a fool...although hadn't he?

Nantes returned a few moments later.

"Lady Elenora Darby has a letter she'd like to be delivered to one of our customers," the foreman explained. Nantes was a hard worker, dependable, and serious about this craft, but even he couldn't hide the touch of amusement in his voice at finding his employer unwilling to approach a young miss in a bonnet and pastel muslin. "A man who has purchased several books of poetry and card stock from our shop. Dark brown hair, tall, muscular...someone who goes by the name of Spenser." He shook with barely concealed laughter. "Any idea whom she might mean?"

Christ. He rolled his eyes. "Just take it from her, will you? Tell her we'll make certain the man receives it, but we can't reveal his name. Understand? We owe our clients privacy and discretion."

"Do we now?" Not so much a question as verbalized laughter.

Spenser folded his arms across his chest. "Remind me to fire you in the morning."

Then Nantes truly did laugh at that empty threat as he headed back into the shop to speak to Ella, whom Spenser could see waiting anxiously at the counter as he peeked around the corner at her. He didn't dare move further into view.

His heart stuttered. Dear God, she was lovely, even on a dark day like this. Or perhaps because of it, with her yellow

dress lighting up the room like a ray of sunshine against the dreary gray outside. Her bonnet framed her lovely face, its blue color offsetting the pink of her lips, the color in her cheeks, the brightness of her emerald eyes. Her full lips parted delicately when Nantes explained to her that they would be happy to deliver her letter but could not reveal their customer's name.

Her brightness dimmed as disappointment darkened her countenance, and she slowly handed over her letter.

The other woman with her—her mother?—leaned down to whisper something that made Ella nod faintly. Then the two women linked arms and left the shop, heading back into the cold drizzle and to the stately town coach waiting for them in the street.

Safe in knowing she couldn't see him, Spenser hurried forward through the shop to the window and watched the coach roll away. Nantes chuckled as Spenser snatched the letter from his hand.

Biting back a curse at himself and at the unfair world that put him here and her in a duke's coach, he snapped the wax seal and opened the letter.

My dearest Spenser—

*Shall I compare thee to a
summer's day—in London? Thou art
more lovely and more temperate...and
decidedly far more warm and bright. I
am beginning to think Mr. Shakespeare
spent hardly any time at all in London.*

*To be blunt—I want to see you
again. We need to talk. When and
where can we meet?*

*You know where to find me. I
hope I now know how to find you.*

*Your
most
admirin
g—*

*E
lla*

Spenser's gut tightened. A sonnet by Shakespeare. As if he weren't already intrigued by her mind and poetic nature, she had to go and send him a message like this.

He wanted to see her again more than anything in the world.

But he also knew he shouldn't.

He glanced up as the bell jingled over the door, for one foolish moment hoping Ella had returned. Instead, he saw Martin bustle inside, more likely to escape the rain, dry off, and warm up than because he needed to visit Spenser.

But the old man would always be welcome here. In fact, Spenser was still hoping to convince Martin to take a position here, if only to give Spenser a more convenient way to give him money than to keep coming up with excuses that wouldn't hurt the old man's pride. It would also give Spenser the chance to check on him daily rather than whenever he could make it to Cheapside.

Each time Spenser had raised the idea, though, Martin declined. *I've long ago pensioned myself, lad*, he always protested, *and I don't need to work anymore to make my way through the world*.

Martin cast a broad, friendly smile around the shop and nodded to the workers, whom he all knew by name. His smile broadened when he saw Spenser, only to sink into a frown when Spenser's grim expression greeted him. His gaze darted

to the letter in Spenser's hand. Then he shucked off his wet overcoat and hat, hung them on the hooks by the door to dry, and approached Spenser.

Martin nodded at the letter. "Bad news?"

The worst. "Ella's found me." He folded the letter and shoved it into the pocket of his worn apron. "Well, she's traced the books and notes back to the print shop anyway. So nearly the same thing."

"Oh? What did she say?"

Spenser grimaced and looked out the window, although there was nothing to see except drizzling rain and thickening fog. "She wants to meet me."

Martin let out a happy laugh and slapped Spenser on the back. "That's wonderful!" He winked at Spenser. "She likes you, I know it! All that poetry and waltzing must have paid off."

"No." His chest felt like a lead ball sat on it. "She wants to see the man she met at the ball, the one who looked and acted like a gentleman."

Martin scoffed. "The one who also recited poetry to her the way no society gentleman ever has! Nor ever would. That's what she noticed about you, lad, what pricked her attention. Not the cut of your waistcoat or who your family might be." He shook his head. "No woman you've garnered an affection for would care about such meaningless things as finery and breeding."

Spenser didn't dare hope for the same. No, he needed Ella to remain just as unreachable as ever, or he might just start believing she could be his. What a damnable fool he'd be then.

"She's a duke's daughter," he muttered. *Untouchable.*

"And you're a duke's stepson who's well on his way to fame and fortune."

Spenser slid him a narrowed glance. "That's not enough."

Martin tossed away that comment with a wave of his hand. “She wants to see you again, so make it happen,” he ordered. “Time and tide wait for no man!”

“For no printer and common laborer, you mean,” Spenser corrected. “It seems to stop all the time for the aristocracy.”

“Then make it stop for you. And for her.” He placed a fatherly hand on Spenser’s shoulder. “Look around you. You’re far from being a common laborer. Besides, you owe her an explanation, and she deserves to have you meet her in person to deliver it.”

Spenser nodded, his gaze fixed on the rain-wet street. Martin was right. He did owe her that. So he would find a way to meet with her and explain.

And then never see her again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ella looked out the window of the town coach as it stopped in front of the grand Piccadilly house known as Albany and stared up at the façade. Seven bays wide in formal Palladian style, complete with Greco-Roman columns, pediments, and symmetry so perfect it was painful, the house had been turned into one of the most prestigious addresses in London. *Albany*. So famous—or was that infamous?—that it didn't even require an article to introduce it. Just Albany...like the eponymous duchy of the royal duke who had once owned it. She only hoped the building's foundation was far less damaged than the reputation of the duke it was named after.

In recent years, the building had been divided into rentable sets of rooms, most of which were let to society bachelors. Well, best to corral them all into one place, Ella supposed, then to let them roam unrestricted in the wild like packs of roving dogs.

“Or shoot them,” she muttered beneath her breath.

“Pardon?” her mother asked, distracted as she pulled her delicate kid gloves into place and checked the tiny pearl buttons at her wrists.

“I said...what a grand building,” Ella lied, knowing even as she said the words that the two utterances sounded nothing alike.

But if her mother noticed, she didn't comment. Instead, Mama warned, “Remember, if anyone asks, we are here only upon your father's bidding, conducting business on his behalf.”

“What kind of business?”

“Oh, who knows? Ladies aren't expected to know the details of such things that exit in the provenance of men, just as men should know little to nothing about corsets.”

Ella bit her lip to keep from laughing. At least her mother's unwitting sense of humor had brought Ella her first moment of distraction since leaving the print shop. But then her smile faded when she remembered why they were here.

The last man on their list resided in Albany.

They'd just left the next-to-last man—Mr. St John Radner who lived in a small but pretty terrace house near Hanover Square. Of course, she knew at first glance he wasn't her Spenser. He was about a foot too short and as round as an apple, and instead of the dark brown hair she itched to run her fingers through, Mr. Radner was completely bald. If that wasn't enough to prove he wasn't her masked man, he was also happily married and promptly introduced Ella and her mother to his wife. They shared a pleasant conversation and a cream tea, and Ella would have enjoyed herself if in the back of her mind wasn't the persistent knowledge that only one name remained.

The last man *had* to be her Spenser, or she would be lost. She simply couldn't tolerate the uncertainty that her future happiness might very well rest on an unaddressed letter left in a print shop, trusting it would arrive to the right man. She'd never been that lucky.

Her mother knocked lightly on the wall of the coach. The tiger opened the door and held out his hand to help them down. Ella took a steadying breath and followed her mother to the front door, where a uniformed footman blocked their way.

"Elizabeth, Duchess of Durham, and Lady Elenora Darby," her mother told the man with an imperial air Ella doubted she would ever possess herself. "We are here to call on Simon Radcliff, Lord Walmesley"—then Mama's imperiousness faltered—"regarding parliamentary business on behalf of the Duke of Durham. Would you be so kind as to inquire if the marquess is accepting callers?"

The footman blinked. Obviously, this was the first time a duchess and her daughter had called on anyone at the house. Nor would they have done so today if not for love and

desperation...the two always seeming to go together. The poor footman didn't know what to do except gape.

"Is there somewhere we can wait while you go up to his rooms to inquire if he's at home?" Mama prompted when the man seemed at a complete loss at what to do.

"Oh yes, Your Grace! Of course." The tips of his ears turned red as he opened the door and stepped aside to let them pass. "If you would, please wait right here in the entrance hall."

Her mother smiled graciously. "Thank you."

The man hurried away, down the hall and up the flight of stairs at the far end, disappearing into the grand building above.

The two women waited patiently in the elegant entry hall with its checkerboard marble floor and finely crafted woodwork, where a small gold and crystal chandelier dangled from the ceiling whose plasterwork was clearly inspired by Robert Adam. The fanlight above the door and tall windows in the twin stairways brightened the wide space even on today's gray day. Ella immediately understood why the most notable unmarried members of the *ton* chose to live here—the entire building radiated luxury and exclusivity.

When Ella went to sit down on a velvet settee just inside the front door, her mother stopped her.

"No, dear," Mama explained in a low voice. "For us to be here is borderline scandalous as it is—an unmarried miss should never call upon a bachelor in his rented rooms." She shook her head at the settee. "The *very last* thing we should do is settle in as if we belong here."

"But we called upon all the other men on our list without worrying about scandal."

"Half of whom were married, and *none* of whom resided at Albany."

Ella bit back a smile. She'd never seen her mother looking so...trapped. Once again, Ella realized exactly how

much her parents loved her. No other society mother would go to the extremes that the duchess was going to today for her.

“I love you, too, Mama,” she said and placed a kiss to her cheek.

Her mother flushed.

“Your Grace and Lady Elenora.” A deep voice calling from the end of the hall twined down Ella’s spine. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Ella held her breath in desperate hope as she turned to face—

Not her Spenser... *Was he?*

She blinked. The man who sauntered toward them could have been her masked man’s twin. *Almost*. They were both of the same height and breadth, same high cheekbones. Even his wavy hair was the same, a shade somewhere between chestnut and black. But his eyes were different as he gazed curiously at her, lacking the crinkling warmth and quiet intensity of Spenser’s brown depths that had always reminded her of warm chocolate.

No, not a twin... a doppelganger?

As he came forward to greet them, her mother looked hopefully at Ella, who faintly shook her head. *No, he isn’t the man we’re looking for...* Confusion passed through her that two men could be so very much alike. And yet, the marquess simply wasn’t her Spenser.

Her heart ached with disappointment.

“A pleasure to see you both again,” Walmesley said as he sketched a shallow bow to the duchess and a nod to Ella. “Your ball was the event of the season. Everyone is still talking about it.”

“Thank you, Walmesley,” her mother returned with pride. “We hope the party expressed our gratitude to everyone for welcoming us back to London so warmly.”

A lie. Their reception by London society had been anything but warm, or they wouldn’t have needed to throw

such a grand affair in the first place. Ah, but that was the rub when it came to interacting with the *ton*. Lies were always better received than the truth.

“You did exactly that, Your Grace.” His eyes gleamed. “I hope we’ll have the opportunity to see each other at more events this season.” He paused, puzzled. “But what brings you to Albany today?”

“Durham asked us to call on you on his behalf.”

“What about, Your Grace?”

“Parliament.”

He frowned, confused. “I don’t sit in Parliament, ma’am.”

“Don’t you? Oh, well, our mistake then.” Her mother waved away her feeble excuse for calling on him, then caught her breath as if an idea had just occurred to her. “Perhaps, while we’re here, you might be able to help us identify one of our guests?” She cast a glance at Ella and added beneath her breath, disheartened, “Although now it doesn’t seem to be quite so important.”

“Which guest?” he asked.

“That’s just it, you see. We don’t know his name. He waltzed with Lady Elenora, but everyone was in masks and—”

“He left this behind,” Ella interrupted. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to think her pathetic for searching out a man, or foolish enough to have given him a waltz without even learning his true name. “A glove.” Ella pulled it from her reticule and held it out toward the marquess. “We wanted to make certain it was returned to its owner.” Another lie, although not completely. She *did* want to return it, just for different reasons than she’d implied. “It has the initials *S* and *R* embroidered at the wrist, so we thought perhaps it might belong to you.”

He took the glove to examine it. “Alas, no. I’m afraid it’s not mine.” He smiled broadly. “And doubly sorry since it also means I missed my chance to waltz with you.”

Oh, he resembled her Spenser so very much! Too much for coincidence. A familial connection, perhaps? New hope blossomed inside her at the possibility. “Are you certain you don’t know whose it might be?” Throwing caution to the wind—and swallowing down her pride—she admitted, “He called himself Spenser.”

Ella sensed an instant change in the marquess. A hardening. A cooling. Although she couldn’t have pointed out exactly where his expression or demeanor had changed, she *felt* it, the way old sailors felt approaching storms in their bones.

“Spenser, you say?” he repeated, his smile still present but now oddly tight.

She nodded. “After the author of *The Faerie Queene*. He said it was his mother’s favorite. Do you know of anyone who might use that name who attended the ball?”

“No, I don’t. And unfortunately, he wasn’t me. My favorite author is Sir Walter Scott.” Then he clasped his hands behind his back, leaned in, and lowered his voice as if sharing a secret. “But you can call me Scott, if you’d like.”

She gave him a weak smile. She appreciated his teasing, yet he wasn’t her Spenser. How she was able to stand there and not break down in tears she had no idea. When she felt a sob rise inside her, she bit her inner cheek to force it back.

“If you have no objections,” he began with a charming smile at Mama, clasping his hands behind his back, “I’d very much like to call on you soon, Your Grace.”

No. What he meant was that he’d like to call on Ella.

Her heart sank. She should have been relieved he didn’t think her a silly goose with a glove, searching for some man whose real name she didn’t know. Oh, more than that, she should have been thrilled that someone like him would want to call on her. He was everything a young miss should want in a suitor...handsome, young and fit, witty, heir to a dukedom. Moreover, the marquess was everything *her parents* wanted for her.

But she could tell already that he didn't possess a poet's heart.

Without that, he would never possess hers.

"We have no objections at all," her mother answered, her bright smile telling Ella how pleased she was. "We would very much enjoy your company, wouldn't we, Elenora?"

Prompted by her mother's fingers squeezing her elbow, Ella had no choice but to answer, "Yes, very much."

"Wonderful. I look forward to it." Then, almost in afterthought, he added, "Are you attending the Whitwell ball?"

"Yes," Mama answered.

His attention landed completely on Ella as he murmured, "Then perhaps Lady Elenora would be kind enough to save me her second waltz."

Ella frowned. "Why not the first one?"

He shrugged a broad shoulder. "I simply assumed you'd dance with your father for your first waltz. Most ladies do during their first season."

That pleased her mother to no end, based on the way she beamed at him. Refined, heir to a dukedom, and knowledgeable about how to behave properly around an unmarried miss—the marquess had just proven himself the perfect potential son-in-law.

Ella's heart tore just a little more.

"Would you do me the honor of saving your waltz for me?" he pressed with a smile that surely sent other women fainting at his feet.

For Ella, all it did was remind her of Spenser. This man was a poor imitation.

But she knew her role and how to make her mother happy after the wild goose chase she'd taken her on, only to end up knowing nothing more about Spenser's true identity than when they began. So she agreed with a tight nod, on the verge of tears despite her smile.

“We should be going now.” Her mother linked her arm through Ella’s to take their leave. “Good day, sir.”

Ella halted, turned back toward the marquess, and held out her hand. “May I have my glove, please?”

He blinked. “Pardon?”

“The glove. You still have it.”

“Oh?” He brought his hands from behind his back and seemed surprised to find the glove still clenched in his grasp. “So I do. I forgot all about it.” He held it out to her, then added quietly with meaning, “Perhaps you should, too.”

Never. She might have to go on without ever knowing the truth about Spenser, but she would never forget him.

Ella took back the glove and pressed it to her bosom as her mother led her toward the door. She barely heard Mama give her thanks to the uniformed attendant who was back at his post at the door because every bit of concentration she possessed was focused on not crying.

Her mother hurried her into their waiting coach, then gave orders to the driver to take them home.

As soon as the door closed and the coach rolled forward, Ella swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. All she could manage around the tight knot in her throat was a hoarse whisper. “He wasn’t him... He wasn’t my Spenser.”

“No,” her mother said softly and placed a reassuring arm around her shoulders. “He wasn’t. None of the men on our list was.” She gave Ella a loving squeeze. “We did all we could to find him, darling. You need to believe that.”

Ella nodded sharply, afraid that if she tried to speak she would break down in sobs. She *did* know that, yet knowing didn’t lessen the anguish of it. Her last hope had slipped through her fingers.

“It wasn’t all for nothing,” Mama continued. “We had a lovely time calling on people, and we met that nice marquess again. What was his name? Simon Radcliff?”

Ella's chest tightened. She knew where Mama was headed in this attempt to make her feel better, and it wasn't at all the direction Ella wanted to go. She wasn't ready to even consider letting someone else into her heart so soon. Or ever.

"He's very handsome and charming, and someday, he'll be a duke, just like your father." Mama placed a kiss to the top of her head. "You might just like him and bump along well."

He won't recite poetry to me. He's not the kind to think to send books as gifts. He won't make me feel brilliant, beautiful, special... Somehow she managed not to cry at the desolate thoughts swirling in her head, but when she glanced out the window at Piccadilly as the carriage rolled toward home, the street blurred under her unshed tears.

Their search was over, and she hadn't found the man she loved. In her heart, she knew the note she left with the printer would come to nothing. She had never been lucky in finding love before, and it seemed she never would be.

"Let Simon call on you," Mama cajoled gently, "and don't dismiss him out of hand simply because you don't know him yet. Spend time together. Share stories with each other and your favorite pastimes. Give him a chance." Mama squeezed her arm. "And then you can decide if you want to tell him to cease visiting. The final decision will always be yours. You know that your father and I will never press you into a marriage you do not want."

Ella nodded stiffly in an attempt to maintain her composure, but she lost the battle when a single tear slipped down her cheek. She turned her face away so Mama wouldn't see.

The carriage finally rolled through the wrought iron fence and up to the wide front portico. When the tiger lowered the step and opened the door, it wasn't a moment too soon for Ella. She slipped from the coach and hurried up the front steps and through the door, held open wide by Hendricks. She fled upstairs to her room where she could be miserable in peace.

Just inside the door, she halted in mid step and caught her breath. Her eyes were still blurry and stinging, but she

blinked several times, unable to believe what she was seeing.

A large bouquet of flowers sat on her dressing table. The vase was filled with all her favorite blooms, right down to the yellows of miniature sunflowers and the dark reds of roses, with pink and blue carnations nestled in delicate baby's breath. A book and sealed note rested on the table against the vase.

Not daring to let herself hope, she came forward slowly and reached for the note. She knew before her shaking fingers broke the wax seal that it was from Spenser. Her heart pounded fiercely against her ribs as she scanned the message.

Dearest Ella,

*I will meet you tonight at
midnight in the park, just beyond your
garden wall, so you can grace me with
another dance, with one of your smiles*

*Or simply to give me the favor of
a few minutes to apologize and
explain. I never meant to wound you.*

*'I will fly to thee, Not charioted
by Bacchus and his pards, But on the
viewless wings of Poesy...'*

~ Spenser

"Keats," she whispered, recognizing the quote, and pressed the note against her bosom with a long sigh. Oh, she could have danced with joy!

She glanced at the small mantel clock and let out an impatient groan. Midnight was still an eternity away.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

penser stood in the darkness of the park just beyond the Duke of Durham's garden wall and waited. The rainy day had given way to a warm but overcast night, with the full moon shining in the cloudy sky like a street lamp through the fog. In the distance, the church bells of St James's Piccadilly tolled softly through the night. He held his breath and counted...ten, eleven, twelve.

Midnight. *Finally.*

Yet the parkland around him was just as still and silent as before. Green Park was private, with direct access granted to the wealthy owners of the grand houses lining it, such as Spencer House, whose silhouette loomed less than a hundred yards away. When he was a child, his mother would walk with him past these houses, and even then, his little chest would swell with pride. In his young mind, he heard *Spencer's House* and wrongly thought it was somehow his, even though he didn't live there. Their own Mayfair townhouse, owned by his stepfather and located only a few streets away, was nearly as grand. Yet tonight, when he'd tossed the basket over the park fence, then illegally scrambled over after it, he realized exactly how far apart in wealth and power the Duke of Pensworth and the Earl Spencer actually were. Pensworth had not come out on top.

But the park, with its tall wrought iron fences and gates that kept out the riffraff of London—like him—was the perfect place to meet Ella. No one would think to look for them here, hidden away in a magical bubble in their own private Eden.

Until he would have to destroy it by telling her the truth about who he was.

She'd hate him for it—God help him, she might even laugh at him—but she deserved better than a man who could only walk in the park because he'd scaled the fence, not because he possessed a key to it. And never would.

Movement along the stone wall snagged his attention. He caught his breath.

Ella stepped out from the darkness, leaving open the little iron gate that connected the villa to the park. Air eased from his lungs with relief. He'd been half afraid she wouldn't come, that she'd figured out his connection to the print shop and had already decided he wasn't worth meeting.

But there she was, moving through the shadows toward him like a ghost. No—like an angel, ethereal and wholly untethered to the real world except where her dainty feet deigned to touch the grass.

In the moonlight, her eyes gleamed like emeralds, the only brightness in her appearance, having wrapped herself in a long coat that covered her from ankles to neck to wrists. If she were worried about looking too alluring tonight, he could have told her not to bother. She could have worn burlap and rolled in the mud, and she would still have been the most beautiful woman he'd ever known.

“He walks in beauty like the night,” she said quietly as she stopped in front of him. Her soft voice floated on the warm night air and reached him like the scent of the night-blooming jasmine covering the nearby wall.

He arched a brow. “No, he doesn't.”

“He wears no mask,” she whispered the realization on a deep breath, as if she'd been uncertain if she'd finally see his face or not.

“Perhaps he should have.”

“No.” She slowly caressed her delicate fingers across his cheek and murmured, “So many hours I spent wondering what you looked like behind that mask...”

Her touch both soothed and heated him. But then, she'd always been a contradiction. “Disappointed?”

“Not at all.” When she brushed her thumb across his chin, he turned his face into her hand and placed a kiss to her palm, and she rewarded him with a tremble of vulnerability. “Your appearance isn't at all repulsive,” she repeated back to

him his words from the night they met. "I would venture even tolerable, if I were feeling charitable." When the corners of his mouth curled up with amusement at her teasing, she outlined his lips with her fingertip. "Some might say...handsome."

"And what would you say?"

"Perfect." She rose onto tiptoes and touched her lips to his.

He froze, not daring even to breathe. The kiss was little more than chaste, but the innocence of it nearly undid him. He fought the urge to pull her into his arms and devour her.

"And me?" she asked, lowering herself away slowly. "Should I put my mask back on?"

If you do, I'll rip it away. "No. You're not at all repulsive," he tossed her teasing words back at her.

A lilting laugh spilled from her. "Some might say pretty." Her eyes could have rivaled the moon for their brightness. "What would you say?"

He cupped her face between his hands and lowered his mouth to whisper against her lips, "Simply beautiful."

This time, there was nothing at all innocent or chaste about the kiss. Instead, he kissed her languidly, reveling in the sweet taste of her lips and the warmth of her soft body as she pressed against him. He took his time in touching the tip of his tongue to the right corner of her mouth, then sweeping over her bottom lip to the other corner, which tasted just as unbearably delicious as the first. When a sigh escaped her, he nearly groaned.

He stepped back and dropped his hands to his sides. This wasn't why he'd asked to meet her, and the sober reminder frustrated him. She deserved better, in every way.

Ella stared at him and blinked, as if seeing him for the first time. But then, he supposed, she was.

How would she look at him when she learned his true identity?

“Come with me.” He held out his hand to her, needing a distraction. “I have a surprise.”

“You’re already a grand surprise,” she murmured and slid her fingers into his, to be willingly led away.

He crooked her a grin, then guided her carefully away from the stone wall and into the shadows. He led her to the spot he’d found for them, where a small patch of grass spread out beside tall trees.

Her fingers tightened around his in surprise. “Is that...a picnic?”

He grimaced. “An attempt at one.”

The idea was Martin’s. The old man had arrived at Spenser’s rooms with a basket filled with all kinds of cold plates and half a dozen blankets flung over his arms and shoulders. There was even a wide oil slicker to keep the damp earth from soaking through the blankets. Breads, roasted chicken, fruits, cheeses, a bottle of wine—Spenser had no idea where Martin had gotten the money to buy such things or if they’d been acquired by nefarious means, and he’d been afraid to ask. He was simply grateful for his friend’s help.

“A success,” she acknowledged in an awe-struck murmur as she took it all in.

A picnic was the last thing he should have brought, given why he’d wanted to meet her. It would have been better to simply tell her outright and have it over with quickly rather than delay the inevitable.

But now that he saw her wondrous expression, he was glad he had. Perhaps this small act of kindness would soften the blow when he revealed who he was and attempted to somehow convince her that he never meant to harm her.

She slipped away from him as she moved toward the small spread, and he resisted the urge to take her hand back in his. She sat on the layers of blankets and tucked her legs beneath her as she reached to pluck a grape from its bunch.

She did a poor job of hiding her pleased smile when she brought the grape to her lips and whispered, “Oh, this is

simply wonderful!” She looked up at him and held out her hand toward him. “Join me.”

A siren tempting sailors to destruction on the rocks couldn't have been more alluring.

He couldn't fight his attraction for her. Seeing her in the moonlight and hearing her poetic teasing, he couldn't bring himself to tell her his true identity before he had to. Tonight would be the last time he'd see her, and selfishly, he didn't want to ruin it too soon.

Instead of joining her on the blanket, though, he took her hand again and pulled her to her feet. “Dance with me.”

She paused for a beat, confused. Then she laughed. “There's no music!”

“Oh yes, there is.” His heart overflowed with it.

Before she could protest again, he drew her into his arms and danced with her, scandalously close in the darkness to a tune of their own making. The skirt of her long coat swirled against his legs with every slow turn he led her through, and he could feel her soft warmth beneath his hand at the small of her back. But their steps grew slower and slower until they were barely moving at all, until their dance became nothing more than an excuse for him to hold her in his arms. Finally, they stopped altogether, and Ella nuzzled her cheek against his neck.

“I'll never forget this night,” she whispered, her voice breathless.

Guilt pricked him. She would remember it for all the wrong reasons.

He released her from his arms, then sat on the blanket and tugged her hand gently to bring her down beside him. Without a word, he took the grape she'd dropped onto the blanket and brought it to her lips. She opened her mouth so he could place it on her tongue, and the sight of her sensuous lips nearly undid him.

When he went to feed her a second grape, she covered his hand with hers and searched his face. “Who are you? Tell

me your name.”

“Spenser.” She’d get nothing more from him. Not until he was forced to.

She gave him a chastising scowl. “Your *real* name.”

“Spenser.” If he touched her at that moment, he would have been lost, so he stretched out on his side along the length of the blanket, strategically placing several plates of food between them. “I told you. My mother loved *The Faerie Queene*.”

Her lips parted in surprise. “I thought you were bamming me.”

“I know. I suppose I should apologize for misleading you, but I couldn’t resist.” He shrugged a shoulder. “You thought it made me poetic and romantic.”

“It did.”

He pulled the cork from the bottle of wine and poured two glasses. “And the reality?”

“Still poetic.” She accepted the wineglass from him. “And very romantic.”

“Not so much.” He hesitated. It was time to feel out the waters before plunging in completely up to his neck. “I also told you that you needed to stop looking for me because I couldn’t see you again. I meant that.”

“And yet, here you are.” She ran her fingertip around the rim of the glass and studied him in the moonlight. “I found you, and you’re very much seeing me.”

Damnation. This conversation wasn’t going at all as he’d planned. He warned gently. “I’m not the man you think I am.”

“And who do you think *I* think you are?”

“A peer for one. But I’m not.” The wine was bitter on his tongue. “Your butler called me ‘my lord’ the night of your ball, but I’m not.” His chest tightened not from shame of who he was but guilt that he’d hidden the truth from her. “I’m not

even a gentleman, certainly not one who's part of your family's social circle."

"But you were at the party."

"I wasn't invited."

She stiffened with confusion. "Then...who are you?"

A printer with stained hands and no prospects of ever becoming part of the ton. A man who had to work hard for every scrap he's ever possessed... But he couldn't bring himself to reveal any of that. Carefully choosing his words, he told her instead, "An unwanted stepson of a peer who has to make his way through the world by working." *Worse—by working with his hands.* He admitted with chagrin, "Who only managed to be at your party because I forged an invitation and pretended to be someone else on your guest list."

Her eyes grew wide. "That's why you weren't any of the men who attended the ball with the initials *S* and *R*. That's why I couldn't find you by tracking them all down."

Thank God it wasn't accusation he saw in her expression when the pieces finally came together for her. He couldn't have borne it.

He frowned into his wineglass. "You shouldn't have gone to all that trouble."

"But I wanted to see you again. I thought..."

He finished for her, "You thought you could be like Cinderella, except with a glove instead of a glass slipper."

She said nothing for a moment, then her voice filled with embarrassment as she admitted, "Yes, I suppose I did." She looked away into the darkness. "You must think me a goose."

"Not at all." He grimaced. "What I think is that you're far too brilliant for your own good. No one else but you would have thought to track me down through a print shop."

Her chin rose slightly. "I won't apologize for that."

He smiled at her obstinacy. “Nor would I want you to.” He swirled the wine in his glass. “And now that you know I’m not the aristocratic gentleman you thought—” He paused as the weight of the moment settled upon his shoulders, dreading her answer even as he asked, “Are you disappointed you did?”

She didn’t immediately answer. Instead, she lowered her glass and stared at the dark wine.

He watched her closely, and with each pounding heartbeat of silence, he gauged her reaction. If she didn’t react well to this, how would she react at the end of the evening when he told her who he truly was? When she learned why they could never see each other again, why the poetry and waltzing and letters had to stop?

“You must think me a great snob,” she answered softly. “What matters to me is a man’s deeds, not his titles or wealth.” She lifted her gaze to his and pinned him with a look of brutal honesty. “How could I ever regret searching for a man who quotes poetry to me and send me books?”

His chest warmed with relief, although he had no right to feel it. He knew this moment was a mere reprieve until she learned the full truth. She could protest all she wanted about what mattered most to her, but he knew how society worked. A duke’s daughter deserved a better life than a mere printer could ever provide, both in terms of luxury and social acceptance.

Yet he deftly changed the topic before he was forced to reveal anything more about himself until he was ready. “What makes you like poetry so much?” He reached for the plate of cheese and held it out to her in invitation to settle in and share more about herself. “Most people would say the world is anything but poetic.”

She smiled as she selected a small slice from the plate. “That’s because most people don’t actually see the world.” She pointed the cheese at him. “Or at least, not the way you and I do.”

“And how do you see it?”

“Full of wonderful possibilities revealed by discoveries in science and philosophy.”

“Careful,” he warned. “If anyone in society hears you talking like that, they’ll brand you a bluestocking.”

“I wouldn’t care if they did.”

No, he supposed she wouldn’t, which was exactly what drew him to her. “How can science and philosophy possibly be poetic?”

That simple question launched them into hours of talking and nibbling at the plates of food, and the full moon traversed the overcast sky as they shared the night together. He learned so much about her—her life on the Continent, her relationship with her family, her likes and dislikes, and all of it only made him cherish her more, only made the evening even more bittersweet.

Always, though, he was careful to avoid telling her anything that would have divulged his true identity.

Yet before the night was over, he would have to tell her. He couldn’t let her go on thinking they had any kind of future together. Not the daughter of a duke with a printer with dirty hands. No matter how successful his business became, he would never be able to provide the kind of wealth needed to give her the life she deserved. He couldn’t imagine her living in his cramped rented rooms, couldn’t imagine the coarse dresses that would have to replace the soft muslins and silks she was used to wearing...couldn’t imagine any of those people who filled her father’s house for the party inviting them to any social event whatsoever. Even if they did, he would never fit into that world. At best, the people she associated with would only condescend to them; at worst, they’d insult them directly to their faces. When the initial love and passion dimmed, as it always did in any marriage, would those emotions be replaced with shame?

She was struggling with establishing a new life in England, he knew, but he also knew that struggle would be nothing compared to what she would have to endure as his wife.

Yet all too soon, the food and wine were gone, along with the night. During their conversation, they'd moved all the plates out of the way and stretched out across the blanket beside each other to stare up at the night sky in a futile attempt to find stars. But the moon had been too bright for that, the hazy London sky too overcast. Not that they minded anyway. They both knew it had been little more than an excuse for her to curl up next to him, held close in his arms.

But now the stillness falling over the city told him dawn was only a few hours away. Already missing her, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the backs of her fingers before resting it on his chest, right over his heart.

The time had come to part, and the moment for him to tell her the truth about himself.

"Morning is coming soon," he said quietly, afraid his voice would crack if he spoke any louder. "You need to be back in your bed before your maid comes to wake you."

She leaned up on her elbow to face him, then quirked a brow. "How do you know so much about ladies' maids and bedchambers, hmm?"

But even her teasing couldn't bring him to smile, not this time. "The evening's over." He brushed a stray curl away from her cheek, fearing it might be the last time he ever touched her. "We need to say our goodbyes now."

"You're mistaken." She curled her fingers into his waistcoat. "I'm not going anywhere."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Illa felt Spenser catch his breath. Her own breath came shallow and ragged, helped not at all by the racing of his heart under her fingertips.

But she wasn't being coquettish with her comment. She didn't want to part with him. Not tonight. Not ever.

"I want to stay here with you," she whispered. "I want to be with you." Then, gathering all her courage, she added, barely louder than a breath, "In every way."

He said nothing for a long moment, and when he finally did, his voice was strained and husky. "What I think you're suggesting... You can't—we can't."

She nearly laughed to see him so flustered. Thank God she wasn't the only one who was nervous! "I'm pretty sure we can." Her stomach wasn't filled with fluttering butterflies—there was an entire storm-tossed sea churning away there. But the thought of letting this magical night pass without confiding in him how much she loved him, if only to show him with her body what she couldn't put into words—simply unbearable. "Especially when you seem to know so much about sneaking in and out of ladies' bedchambers."

"I would never treat you like."

"I know." She dropped her gaze to her hand as she began to caress the satin of his waistcoat. "And that's why I want... I mean, I trust you to not..." Oh, she was bungling this so badly! She took a deep breath and threw caution to the wind. "I want you to make love to me."

He closed his eyes and shook his head, his expression pained. "I can't."

"Because you don't want to be forced to marry me afterward?" she guessed in a soft whisper. "I wouldn't force you to." *Although I would sincerely hope you would want to, and that you love me as much as I've grown to love you, that*

you want to spend the rest of your life with me, too... But she had too much pride to utter that aloud. “I’m a grown woman and not some foolish goose of a girl. I know what happens between men and women—I did live in France for several years, you know—and I would take full responsibility for anything that—”

“I don’t want to ruin you.”

Nervous worry bubbled inside her, and she deflected with forced humor, “But that’s the whole idea.”

He sent her a narrowed glance void of all humor. “Not in that way.”

“In what way, then?”

“*Ruin* you, in every sense of the word, not just by taking your innocence.”

She feared she was losing him, even while he lay less than a foot away. “What do you mean?”

He sat up, raked fingers through his hair, and bit back a curse a second too late, letting her hear most of it. “I don’t want to sully you, Ella. I will only make you dirty. I’ll stain and smudge you. You’re light and bright—everything good. Everything I don’t deserve. I could only ruin that.”

“I’m not some kind of pure angel.” Shaking her head, she sat up beside him and rested her hand on his bicep, almost beseechingly. “But you...I’ve seen the real you in all your letters and the thoughtful gifts you’ve sent, in the poetry you’ve given me. A man with a dark heart would never have done anything like that.” She squeezed his arm. “You could never sully me.”

Frustration pulsed from him so intensely she could feel it. “Don’t you understand? I don’t wear gloves because I’m a gentleman who wants to show off his expensive clothes. I wear them to hide who I am. My hands are marred from work ___”

She took his hand and placed it on her breast, then murmured, “Your hands are perfect.”

He tensed, for a moment frozen like a statue. But her heart pounded so hard she knew he could feel its beat beneath his palm.

And then, she felt it...the small movement of his fingers as they lightly caressed her.

Joy surged through her. Whispering his name, she arched her back to bring her breast harder against his hand.

With a low groan of surrender, he kissed her. There was none of the languidness of before, no slow teasing of lips that cajoled her into increasing the intimacy. This time, his kiss was hungry and demanding, and his mouth captured hers in a hot kiss that made her tremble from its intensity. There was no tentative touching of tongues; this time, he simply ravished her mouth, thrusting deep inside and drawing a soft moan of need from her.

He lowered her onto her back and followed down beside her, never breaking the kiss. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck because she refused to let him slip away from her now, and her hold on him remained secure even when she finally tore her mouth away from his to catch back the breath he'd stolen. But even then he sparked tingles through her by sliding his mouth down to her neck, nipping at her throat and flicking the tip of his tongue against the racing pulse in the hollow at the base of her neck, as if he simply could not have enough of her. As if to prove that, his hands slipped down her front, unbuttoned her coat, and pushed it open.

Holding himself over her on one forearm, he gazed down at her. The corners of his mouth curled to find her wearing her night rail instead of a dress. "You lied to me."

Her heart skipped. "I never—"

"You said you weren't an angel," he murmured.

"I'm—I'm not." The trembling in her body reached her voice.

"Then you simply look like one." He lightly caressed his hand over the soft cotton and even softer curves beneath. "All soft and warm, white and clean..."

“But a bit wanton, too,” she whispered and reached up to untie the bow at her neck. She didn’t want to be pure and angelic; she simply wanted to be loved for herself. That included the very scandalous thoughts now spinning through her head of what they might do together in the shadows.

He chuckled softly. “Just a bit.”

She held her breath as he gently tugged the soft cotton out of the way and bared her bosom to his eyes. Her nipples tightened into hard little points in the cool night air, aching when he circled each with his fingertip.

“‘She walks in beauty like the night...’ You *are* beautiful, Ella. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever met, because you possess a beautiful mind and soul.”

He strummed his thumb over her bare nipple, and a streak of pleasure shot from her breast straight down between her legs. It landed with a jolting thud, then began to throb in time with her heartbeat. Suddenly, she felt warm and achy—goodness, he’d only barely touched her! How much might she feel if he made love to her? Anticipation swelled inside her, yet the swirling storms in her belly now calmed from certainty.

Tonight, he would be hers.

“‘That I might drink and leave the world unseen,’” he recited to her in a husky rasp as his hand folded over her breast and cupped her against his palm, “‘and with thee fade away into the forest dim.’”

He lowered his head and took her nipple between his lips.

She gasped. Her body tensed at the new sensation of having his mouth on her, and her fingers dug into the hard muscles of his shoulders. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe.

Then a wonderful warmth blossomed inside her, and she relaxed beneath his lips’ tender kisses with an aching sigh—No. He wasn’t kissing her. He was *worshipping* her. She felt it with every soft pull of his lips, with every swirl of the tip of his tongue around her nipple. She arched against the ground to bring her breast deeper into his mouth, and he rewarded her

trust in him with an affectionate caress of his hand along the side of her body.

But his hand didn't return to her breast to fondle her as he'd done before. Instead, he stroked his palm along her outer thigh, and beneath her cotton night rail, goose bumps sprang up in the wake of his touch. She wiggled slightly in a silent plea for him to keep his hand on her leg, and when he moved it away, a frustrated cry rose from her throat.

"Shh," he murmured against her lips to soothe her. "I know...."

Then his hand returned to her leg, and her kiss-fogged brain realized why he'd lifted it away—so that he could slip beneath her hem and caress his fingers against her bare calf. She shivered from the heat his touch sparked against her flesh and the way the aching throb at her core increased as his palm slid up her leg, past her knee to her thigh. With it, he brought the hem of her night rail.

Even the cool night air against her bare legs couldn't tamp down the rising heat that flushed her cheeks and spread into her breasts. When he slipped his hand along the outer curve of her hips to her waist, she also couldn't stop a pang of disappointment that he'd avoided the aching place between her legs that longed to be touched, now inexplicably both hot and damp.

He slowly drew wide circles across her bare belly. Each caress only left her yearning for more.

"If you don't touch me...*there*," she whispered, knowing he would understand what she craved, "I think I'm going to explode."

He bit her earlobe. "If I do touch you there," he countered, the hot breath of his words tickling the sensitive skin behind her ear, "that's exactly what you'll do."

Confusion spun through her. He must have felt the change in her, because he pulled back only far enough to gaze down at her as she lay so scandalously spread out on the blanket, half-dressed, beneath him.

“You, my darling, are a love poem,” he murmured. “With your challenging wit positing the conceit.” He softly caressed her temple, then trailed his fingers down her cheek to her lips. “Your words as lilting as any sublime rhyme and rhythm ever created by the greatest of poets.” His hand swept lower to tease once more at her breasts. “Your form... incomparable.” He caressed down her front and slipped his hand once more beneath her night rail. “The delights of your verse just waiting to be discovered.”

He combed his fingers through the dark curls at the apex of her thighs, and every soft caress flamed the aching heat lying only inches from his fingertips. She wanted his touch there—no, she *needed* him there, not knowing how she could keep breathing without him. So she writhed her hips in a silent plea for more.

He placed his lips against her forehead and whispered, “Your deepest secrets...pure enchantment.”

Then he touched her between her legs.

She gasped at the caress, which was somehow both strangely exhilarating yet calming, somehow both stoking and appeasing the fire threatening to consume her.

As he caressed her with long, slow strokes of his hand along the seam between her legs, her surprise faded into pleasure. What he was doing was wicked and wanton...and so very, *very* delicious. She shifted her hips to spread her legs wider and grant him even more access to this secret part of her.

“I want to show you how special you are, how precious to me,” he whispered. “Will you let me?”

“Yes.” Her arms tightened around him to keep him close.

But he slipped out of her arms and slid himself down the length of her body, until he reached her thighs. He lifted her night rail higher, then lowered his head to bring his lips against her...right *there*.

This time, it wasn't a gasp of surprise that tore from her but a sigh of delight as he kissed her intimately. His lips were

a blissful contradiction as they moved against her, so very strong yet impossibly tender, and she closed her eyes to absorb the wonderful sensation, to imprint it on her mind forever.

The tip of his tongue licked her—

“Spenser!” she cried out, her body arching and her hands going to his head.

“I want to taste you, my love,” he whispered against her, his warm breath tickling her wet folds. “I want to discover if you’re as sweet and delicious as you seem.” When she didn’t relax, he reassured her, “I won’t hurt you, I promise. I only want to please you.”

With a ragged exhalation, she gave a jerking nod in consent and tried to relax. But when he continued to caress her with his lips and give her those wonderfully wanton kisses, her nervousness was unfounded—oh, what he was doing was simply divine! The tension melted from her, and her fingers curled into his silky hair in silent encouragement.

This time when his tongue took a gentle lick, the pleasure sparked through her, standing on end the little hairs on her nape. Then another and another...each teasing its way deeper into her folds, and with each one, soft mewlings of need fell from her lips. She never would have believed a man’s mouth could feel this good, or that the wet sounds of his lips could be so erotic.

She’d wanted him to quench the fire he’d put between her legs, but he was stoking it instead. Soon, flames licked at her toes, and the ache at her core began to throb in time to the sinful thrusts of his tongue, now plunging deeply inside her. She arched her hips against him and pulled his head down tighter against her, her body longing to have him even deeper inside her.

Instead of doing what she desired, he lifted his head away from her. The rush of cool night air across her wet heat drew a soft cry of loss from her, only for it to fade to a moan as his hand found her again and his fingers slid completely inside her. He stroked slowly and smoothly into her, and now she welcomed the slick wetness that had embarrassed her

before. Her body knew to do what she didn't, so she gave over to her mounting desire and spread her legs wider.

He groaned. "Dear God, Ella...you feel so good."

"So do you," she panted out, barely able to form the words. "What you're doing..." The rest was lost in a long, throaty moan that swelled up from inside her. "More—oh, please, more!"

Keeping his hand between her legs, he slid back up the length of her body, covering hers with his.

"I won't take your innocence from you," he murmured and placed a kiss to her temple. "But I can give you this small pleasure."

His fingers stroked into her in a steady and intense rhythm that left her breathless. She buried her face against his neck. If she could have found a way to crawl beneath his skin and become part of him, she would have done it. The magical feelings of poetry and desire he swirled inside her were more overwhelming than she'd ever experienced before in her life, and while a part of her somehow knew he was capable of giving her much more, she gave over to this moment and surrendered.

The ache built inside her, and every teasing stroke of his fingers only increased the throbbing and turned the tingling into electric pulses of need. When he rubbed his thumb over the hard little point at the top of her folds, her hips bucked, and her body clenched down hard around his fingers. *All* of her clenched for one breathless moment—

"Spenser!" she cried out as a wave of sweet pleasure rushed over her, heating her through and surging out to the ends of her fingers and toes. The tension that had been building inside her vanished in a flash, and she fell back against the blanket, boneless. Now the ache that throbbed inside her felt much different. It was no longer an ache to be quenched but one her body gratefully claimed as waves of residual bliss dulled her senses and left her feeling tingly and alive, in a way she'd never felt before.

Spenser turned onto his side on the blanket next to her and pulled her into his arms. She nestled herself between his chest and the curve of his arm. She couldn't remember ever feeling this protected before, this wonderful.

She couldn't look at him, keeping her eyes closed and her lips slightly parted to enjoy the last of the joyous sensations he'd given her. She should have been embarrassed at how she'd so shamelessly behaved, but she wasn't. He made her feel beautiful and special, precious and perfect, and she would never regret that.

Finally, she found the strength to rise up and kiss him, then sank back down into his arms.

"Spenser?" she whispered.

He nuzzled her hair. "Yes?"

"I love you."

Her whisper drifted away into the silent shadows. For a moment, she feared he wouldn't say it back. That he didn't love her. That she wasn't anything more real to him than moonlight and magic, the same ethereal illusions found within the pages of his poetry books. After all, he'd claimed she was a poem—

"I love you, too, my darling Ella," he whispered.

His quiet words were little more than a breath. But her heart heard them, and they filled her with a joy she'd never known. She slowly reached for his hand and laced her fingers through his.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

enser held her in his arms, forcing his heartbeat to slow and his breath to steady. She'd undone him, and he hadn't even properly made love to her. It was all he could do to keep himself from doing exactly that, to roll her onto her back and claim all of her. She was the perfect contradiction—an innocent seductress who made him want to ravish her yet also protect her at the same time.

Yet he knew the best way to protect her was to let her go.

The woman lying in his arms could never be his.

He closed his eyes against the anguish of that realization and placed a kiss to her forehead, one meant to soothe him more than her. "Ella, we need to talk."

She nodded against his chest where she rested her head, her hand once more lying over his heart. "I know."

No, she couldn't possibly know what he had to tell her. Dawn was less than an hour away, and he could no longer delay the inevitable. He simply hoped she wouldn't hate him for it after the intimacies they'd shared tonight.

"You'll call on me tomorrow." She rose up onto her elbow and smiled sheepishly down at him. "Well—today, that is." With a soft laugh at herself, she brushed her cheek against his, and he could feel her smooth flesh against the faint prickling of his morning beard. "Papa will be home today, and you can ask him for permission to formally court me. He won't say no, not if I tell him how much I want that, but he's dreadfully old-fashioned and will make you approach him in person."

His heart stopped. "To what end?"

She sat up and frowned, bewildered. "Why, marriage, of course."

"No."

The confusion on her face melted into anguish. With that, his heart simply shattered.

“Because tonight was nothing more than poetry and moonlight and magic?” she whispered, blinking rapidly as she looked away toward her parents’ house. “Because you don’t really love me after all? That it was just something men say to women after they...”

She shrugged her slender shoulders as her words drifted into silence.

“Because I love you too much,” he corrected. He sat up and cupped her face between his hands to prove to her with his kiss how much he cared about her.

When he finally pulled back just far enough to gaze into her eyes, the pain he’d seen there was gone, but a confused expression once more marred her beautiful face.

A sound came from the villa’s service yard and pierced the shadows surrounding them. The noise chased away the magic of the night and let reality crash over them. She climbed to her feet and looked nervously toward home.

“I have to go,” she told him. “The servants are waking up.”

He rose and nodded solemnly. Then, he said quietly, “Ella, I need to tell you—”

She jumped as a door banged loudly in the pre-dawn silence.

“I have to go.” She grabbed his lapels and drew herself close to him one last time. “Call on me this afternoon.”

“I can’t.”

Her lips pursed in aggravation. “Then meet me again here at midnight. We’ll talk about everything.” She rose up on tiptoes to give him a long parting kiss, then slid her mouth back to his ear and promised, “But next time, I won’t let you stop at only a touch.”

Then she was gone, slipping out of his arms and running toward the house before he could stop her.

He watched her until she disappeared into the shadows, like a ghost chased away by the oncoming day. He blew out a harsh breath and raked his fingers through his hair, his entire body shaking.

I won't let you stop...

That was exactly what he was afraid of.

He looked down at the blanket and let out a fierce curse. He was no better than a rakehell for touching her like that when he knew they had no future. She would come to realize that, too, as soon as she learned the full truth about him, which he'd been too distracted and ashamed to confide in her tonight. All the loving touches on all the picnic blankets on all the moonlit nights in the world couldn't overcome the obstacles that would keep them from having a life together.

Then he cursed himself for wanting exactly that future.

He collected the blankets, tossed away the food, and shoved it all into the canvas bag, then slung it over his shoulder and headed across the park. He didn't belong here. Even during the day, when London's quality drove their fine carriages through the parklands and paraded along its avenues to show off their expensive clothing, he barely belonged enough to be let through the main gates.

"Someday, I *will* be welcomed here," he promised as he looked out across the dark park one last time before slipping over the wall. "I will possess enough wealth and status to draw the attention of everyone in the *ton*, no matter how long it takes."

But by then, Ella would belong to another.

Pushing down that unbearable thought, he made his way toward home. His shoulders were hunched against the first blues of dawn as the rising sun prepared to peek over the horizon.

The walk was long and tiring, but he craved the release of energy it gave him, especially with frustrations over Ella still seething inside him...frustration at being unable to find his own release with her tonight, frustration that he never

would. Most of all, frustration that he would never be able to love her the way she deserved.

The sun was shining brightly over London by the time he reached the street where he rented the top floor of a terrace townhouse. The area was still quiet, although the streets around it were stirring awake with servants coming and going to the houses where they worked, with clerks and shop employees scurrying toward the merchant enclaves near Bond Street and St James's, with porters sauntering toward the river and sellers either heading to the markets or into the streets where they would call out their wares. As with most mornings, an unseen energy was building in the city, one Spenser loved being a part of. Let the so-called quality sleep in until noon. They would never be part of this thriving city and all the possibilities it could generate.

A group of four men loitered in the street in front of his house, and he slowed as he approached. They wore the coarse wool clothing of dockers and warehouse porters, with red handkerchiefs tied around their necks and brown jackets and plain waistcoats over baggy trousers. Their sleeves had been pushed up to reveal forearms and hands scarred from years of punishing physical work. But Spenser knew if they were put into Bond Street finery and fancy gloves, they could have passed as easily in Mayfair as he had.

More proof that appearance had little to do with substance.

"Excuse me." He nodded as he passed the men to reach his door and pulled his key from his pocket. He would have just enough time to change and hurry to the print shop before his—

A large hand grabbed his shoulder, spun him around, and shoved him back against the door, pinning him there.

The man leered down at him, then spat on the ground. "Ave a message fer ye," he drawled. "Leave alone women who are out 'o yer reach, an' keep t' yer print shop where ye belong."

Then the man drew back his arm and threw the first punch. The other three men descended upon Spenser like a pack of wolves.

He futilely fought back, but for every punch he threw, four came his way. Mercifully, he slipped into unconsciousness. The last thing he remembered was the sound of the men's laughter.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two days later, Ella paced the length of the front drawing room, chewing on her bottom lip and wringing her hands. She paused only to glance out the tall windows at the busy road beyond the stone and wrought iron fence. Nothing. No sign of anything out of the ordinary.

No sign of Spenser.

She should have been practicing the pianoforte in the music room, she supposed, or studying her watercolors and floral arrangements. To be honest, none of those pursuits that marked an aristocratic woman as accomplished were anything she normally enjoyed anyway, but today she could have used the distraction. Yet nothing appealed to her. Not even the library with its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves could keep her mind off Spenser. Rather, off how he'd not tried to contact her.

So now she lingered in the drawing room at the front of the house where she could glance down into the street for any sign of his arrival.

If he arrived.

"If you keep pacing like that," her mother called out from the royal blue brocade sofa where she sat attempting needlework but only seemed to be producing a series of misshapen knots, "you'll wear a trench through the carpet, and then the Duke of Arlington won't renew our lease. We'll be cast out, homeless, into the square."

"Homeless?" Ella laughed grimly at the absurdity of that. "Papa owns over half a dozen properties across London."

"Yes, but they're all let. Would you rather we make others homeless in our stead?"

Ella halted mid step and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling, letting her arms sink to her sides. It was impossible to argue with logic like that.

“Come sit by me.” Mama patted the cushion next to her. “Your tea is growing cold.”

Ella didn't want tea, but she did as Mama wanted and joined her on the settee. Once there, though, she couldn't stop fidgeting, plucking at pieces of invisible lint on her day dress, and tapping her foot.

“Oh, very well,” Mama conceded with a long-suffering sigh. “Go on and pace, then.”

Ella gratefully jumped to her feet and raced back to the window, afraid she might have missed something—or someone—important on the street. She held her breath as she swept her gaze down one end of St James Place to the other.

“But at least tell me why you're so restless.”

Oh, Ella could never tell her that!

“Did something happen this morning?”

“No, not this morning.” *Something happened two nights ago. Something absolutely wonderful.*

But since then, she hadn't seen or heard from Spenser.

The first day, she'd thought he hadn't wanted to frighten her by pressing his suit, so she hadn't worried. She'd spent the day in her room, napping to catch up on missed sleep from the night before and remembering the precious hours she'd spent with him. She'd filled her time by rereading all his letters, even the sad one in which he had tried to break off with her but couldn't bring himself to, and committing to memory the lines of poetry he'd marked for her in the books. When midnight finally came, she could barely contain herself and slipped out into the park, her feet barely touching the ground as she hurried back to the same place where she'd shared her heart.

But he wasn't there. No picnic, no blankets...no Spenser. She'd been upset and on the verge of tears, only to convince herself that perhaps there had been a miscommunication, and he'd simply confused which day—or midnight—he would return. After all, she had done the same when she'd asked him to call on her. Somehow she'd managed

to keep from breaking down in tears, even if the rest of the night had been spent in fitful tossing and turning.

But he also wasn't there the following night, and this time, she couldn't blame it on a miscommunication. Instead of being in his arms, she'd spent the hours until dawn crying herself to sleep.

Now, the following afternoon, he had yet to send a single note of explanation—no letter, no book, no lines of poetry...not even to say goodbye. *That* wasn't at all like him. Neither was the complete lack of response to the note she'd had the footman deliver to the print shop this morning.

Now she was past the point of worry. If she didn't hear from him soon—

"I should like to visit that print shop we stopped at the other day," she announced to her mother with a decisive nod as she turned away from the window. "I need stationery and sealing wax."

Her mother glanced at the little writing desk beneath the window. A stack of linen note cards and a new stick of wax sat on the desktop. "Oh?"

"Yes." And while she was there, she planned on demanding answers. Lots and lots of answers. She wouldn't leave until she had them.

A commotion went up from the courtyard, and Ella hurried back to the window, her heart thumping with desperate hope. She braced her hands on the sill and watched a man on horseback trot through the wrought iron gate and up to the front portico. From a distance, he looked like Spenser... *Was* he Spenser? The same broad shoulders and easy posture, the same thick brown hair she could just see beneath the brim of a beaver hat that hid his face.

That *had* to be him! She could feel it in her bones. Relief swelled inside her, and her shoulders sagged as she let out a long breath, unaware until that moment that she'd even been holding it.

But when the man dismounted his horse and glanced up at the house, the sunlight revealed his face, and she could see

Not Spenser. But the Marquess of Walmesley.

She sank into the little desk chair and hung her head in her hands.

“Ella?” Concern thickened Mama’s voice. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” she lied. Her mother didn’t need to be swept up into her romantic life again...or learn exactly what kind of fool she’d raised. “I just...suddenly felt a bit dizzy.”

“That’s because you haven’t eaten today. You didn’t come down for breakfast, didn’t touch your lunch, and now you’ve shunned the tea biscuits. They’re your favorites, too. Lemon and lavender. I had Cook bake them specially for you.”

Ella bit back a pained laugh. What plagued her couldn’t be solved with something as simple as biscuits!

“Perhaps I’ve worn myself out with all that pacing,” she muttered and reached for the book she’d left open on the desk. “Perhaps I should just sit quietly for a while and read.”

Not that she could. As the minutes passed, her swirling mind simply could not focus on the words, and there was no point in attempting to read at all. But it gave her an excuse for not keeping up conversation with Mama or having to choke down a biscuit.

“We have a visitor,” she finally admitted quietly and set the unwanted book aside.

“Oh?” Mama looked up from her needlework. “Who?”

“Simon Radcliff.” She forced a lightness into her voice she certainly didn’t feel. *Not Spenser...* “The Marquess of Walmesley. He rode up a few minutes ago.”

Her mother’s mouth fell open. “The marquess is here, and you didn’t think to tell me before now?”

Mama set down her needlepoint and shot to her feet, sending Ella up onto hers in surprise. Then the duchess hesitated, not knowing whether to sit back down and wait for the marquess to be shown up to them or if she should go down to meet him. So she straightened her dress, then sat back down. And waited.

Ella watched her mother with detached curiosity. She didn't care if the marquess ever set foot inside the room or not. But Mama was simply beside herself and began to pace exactly where Ella had left off.

After several minutes, when Hendricks didn't come into the room to ask if they were accepting callers, Mama let out an aggravated, "Oh, bother!" and charged across the room to the bell pull. She gave the cord a fierce yank.

Within moments, Hendricks appeared at the door and bowed shallowly to both ladies. "Yes, Your Grace? Lady Elenora?"

"We have a visitor?" Mama asked, although in much more of an announcement than a question.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Well, where is he? Why isn't he here in the drawing room with us?" Her mother narrowed her eyes in cold accusation. "What have you done with the marquess?"

The butler yanked up straight. "I—I—" He blinked, clearly confused. "Yes, Your Grace—I mean, the marquess arrived a few minutes ago, but he didn't come to call on you, ma'am."

It was Mama's turn to blink with confusion. "He didn't?"

"No, ma'am. He called upon His Grace. I showed him into the study."

"Durham?" She shot a bewildered glance at Ella. "Why on earth would he want to see... *Oh*."

Oh was right. Ella sank onto the sofa, knowing exactly why.

So did her mother after a moment's rapid spinning of thoughts. The duchess clapped her hands together with glee. "Oh, this is absolutely wonderful! Elenora, isn't it simply fabulous that he would call on your father so soon after we—"

Her words choked at the stricken look Ella knew showed on her face. After all, she would never be a good enough actress to hide her feelings about something like that.

No, it wasn't fabulous. It was nothing of the kind.

The excitement on Mama's face melted into an expression of concern, dismay...and acute disappointment. Dismissing Hendricks with a wave of her hand, she went to Ella and sat beside her.

"We tried to find your masked man, Elenora," her mother reminded her quietly, reaching for her hands. "We truly *tried*, and there is nothing more we can do."

A dark part of Ella's heart knew that, too, because she hadn't *tried* to find Spenser—she'd *found* him. Yet he still kept himself from her.

After their night together in the park and what they'd shared—only now to be rejected by him so out of hand, without even a word of explanation—she knew she'd reached the end of her attempt to find love. But knowing that didn't lessen the pain.

Mama squeezed Ella's hands. "The marquess is the son of a well-respected duke, and he shows all kinds of promise for becoming an accomplished politician and someone who will enact real reform. I've heard nothing but good things about him, including that he serves on the board for St Bartholomew's Hospital. Give him a chance? That's all I'm asking. I'm not saying to accept a marriage proposal. Just give him the chance to come to know you better, and you him." She sent Ella a hopeful smile. "Perhaps you'll find him to be as romantic and dashing as your Spenser."

That would never happen. Yet Ella gave a jerking nod of surrender.

Her mother hugged Ella tightly to her. Oddly, her attempt to soothe her only caused Ella more anguish, but she didn't push herself away because she knew her mother needed comforting as much as she did.

Mama sat back but she continued to hold Ella's hands in hers, as if she were afraid her daughter would attempt to flee right then. "This doesn't mean that you have to allow the marquess to court you exclusively, that it has to be anything more than him simply calling on you. You can still dance with other men and spend time with them." She squeezed Ella's hands once more and released them. "But I think it's time you considered looking beyond your masked man." With a sad expression, she reached up to affectionately brush a stray curl from Ella's forehead, just as she'd done since Ella was a little girl. "We tried to find him, Ella, we truly did. But there's nothing more we can do now, and my heart would hate for you to miss wonderful opportunities with other gentlemen who might make you just as happy as he did."

Ella looked away to keep her mother from seeing her unshed tears.

She had no idea how she managed to keep from breaking down as she pushed herself to her feet and pretended she was interested in the biscuits and cold tea on the tray. She forced a smile as if she hadn't a care in the world and selected a biscuit to bring to her lips, then pretended to nibble at it as she turned toward the fireplace, more to keep her back to her mother than because she was chilled.

The next hour of waiting passed in sheer agony. While her mother returned to her needlework and occasionally muttered a soft curse beneath her breath at yet another needle prick, Ella spent her time wandering aimlessly around the room. She couldn't sit still, yet she couldn't find the strength to return to pacing. She paused to glance out the window, now more from habit than expectation. She was still waiting for a perfectly handsome, cultured, and charming man to call on her.

What utterly devastated her was that he was already here...and the wrong man.

Finally, the faint reverberation of the front door opening and closing reached them. Her mother paused, needle poised in the air mid-stitch. Ella almost wept at the hopeful expression on the duchess's face.

Ella went to the window and watched Simon Radcliff leave the house. He practically bounced down the wide front steps and across the drive to his waiting horse. With a pat to his hat to keep it in place, he swung up onto his gelding, nodded at the groom to release the bridle, and then tapped his heels to make the horse trot away.

Although her mother didn't say a word, only went back to not-so-carefully embroidering the piece of linen in its wooden hoop, Ella could practically feel the hope and anticipation radiating from her, which only made her desolation worse. That she could feel so horrible about something that made Mama so happy knotted feelings of guilt in her belly until they sickened her. Ella glanced at the tea tray and was certain she'd never eat another biscuit again in her life after today.

The door opened, and Papa sauntered into the drawing room. With a loud sound registering somewhere between a tired sigh and a pained groan of age, he flopped onto the settee, snatched up a handful of lemon biscuits from the tray, and kicked out his short legs.

Her mother gave her own frustrated sound at his nonchalance and tossed down her needlework in a tangled mess onto the floor beside the settee. "Well?"

"Well what?" Papa asked as he bit into a biscuit. "Hendricks said there was already a refreshments tray up here, and I didn't want to wait for a new one to be brought to my study." He rested the biscuits on his round belly beneath a purple-striped waistcoat. "Thought you might not mind sharing."

Mama stared at him as if he'd gone mad.

Misunderstanding her consternation, he explained, "Cook always sends up twice as many as you two can eat. I don't see what difference it makes if I help myself to—"

“Durham, for heaven’s sake!” Her mother shoved herself to her feet, her hands clenching at her sides. Impatience poured from her. “The marquess!”

“Who?” He blinked. Then understanding fell over him. “Ah, yes—Walmesley. Fine fellow.” He bit off another piece of biscuit and said between chews, “Knows his horses. Can tell his winners from his nags.”

That provided no comfort to Ella.

“He called on you.” Mama pointed out the obvious. Then she actually pointed toward the door in the direction of his downstairs study. “For the past hour.”

“Yes, he did. Knows a good brandy, too, when he tastes it. He was full of compliments for my 1762 Gautier.”

Her mother crossed her arms impatiently. “Why was he here?”

Papa shrugged. “Said the Darby ladies called on him at Albany a few days ago, on my behalf regarding Parliamentary business, and wanted to return the favor.” His eyes gleamed mischievously. “I had no idea I had any business, Parliamentary or otherwise, with him. Good thing he came by then, eh?”

“Durham!” Mama fumed. “If you do not tell us this minute what he wanted, I swear—”

“He wanted exactly what you think he wanted.” He tossed the rest of the biscuits back onto the tray and brushed the crumbs from his fingers. “He asked to court Elenora.”

Both women lost their breaths, although for completely different reasons.

“And?” her mother asked with barely concealed excitement.

“He’s asked for permission to take her driving.”

“And?” Ella asked with barely concealed anguish, still at the window and as far away from this conversation as she could possibly be without running from the room.

“I told him that all decisions would be yours to make—and yours, of course, too, dearest,” he added wisely at the cutting glance Mama threw his way. “I told him I would agree only to whatever my daughter wanted.” He paused, his expression softening on Ella. “What do you want, my dear? Do you want the marquess to court you or no?”

For a long moment, Ella could do nothing more than focus on remembering to breathe. She didn’t want to mislead Simon into thinking he had any chance at marriage with her. She simply couldn’t envision that life for herself.

Yet her parents both stared at her, waiting. How could she disappoint them?

“Oh—I almost forgot.” Papa reached beneath his waistcoat. “This arrived for you by messenger while the marquess was visiting.”

He held out a note card to her.

Ella frowned as she took it. It was small and plain, of inferior and thin stock, folded but not sealed.

I am not the man you deserve. I cannot see you again.

Spenser

She read it again, her numb mind unable to fathom the message. Short and precise—no flatteries, no charmingly sweet nothings...no poetry. But it was Spenser’s handwriting; she knew his masculine style by heart now and recognized his swooping strokes.

Her heart shattered. The pain was so intense she pressed her hand against her chest as if she could physically contain the anguish.

“Elenora,” her mother asked softly, “what is it? What’s the matter?”

Her eyes blurred as she looked up at her mother and father until she could no longer see their fraught expressions of concern for her. *Thank God.* She couldn't have borne it.

"It's nothing," she lied, her voice hoarse from the effort of holding back tears. "Just news about...a canceled social event, that's all." She swallowed hard and forced a smile. "Just a disappointment. I was...very much looking forward to it." She steeled herself against the sobs gathering inside her hollow chest and forced her smile not to waver. "Nothing for you to be concerned about."

Her mother clearly didn't believe her, yet she said nothing even as she laid her hand on Papa's arm.

But Papa only chuckled. "Ah, youth! You young things think a canceled party is the end of the world. But there will be dozens of more parties to come yet this season and hundreds more the next. In a sennight, you'll have forgotten all about it."

"Yes," Ella forced out. "I'm certain you're right."

Never. She'd go to her grave remembering this terrible moment and the loss of her love.

"Well?" Papa pressed.

Ella blinked, but that did little to clear the tears from her eyes. "Pardon?"

"The marquess! Mustn't keep the man waiting for your answer. Will you ride out with him tomorrow?"

Ella crushed the note in her hand and nodded.

"Excellent." He clapped his hands together. "I'll send word immediately."

As ever oblivious to the female heart, Papa paused only to snatch up another handful of biscuits before heading to the door.

But Mama wrapped her arms around Ella in a comforting hug. Yet despite that gesture, Ella knew her mother was thrilled to her core that she had agreed to let Simon Radcliff court her.

“As I said before,” Mama repeated as she lovingly brushed a stray curl from Ella’s forehead, “nothing more has to come of this than simply spending time with him. You will never be forced to marry a man you do not love.”

That was the problem. Ella knew she’d never love any other man but Spenser.

With a silent nod, although she had no idea exactly what she was agreeing to, Ella crossed to the fireplace and tossed the crumpled note into the small flames. They flared up and devoured it until nothing was left but ashes.

She returned to the chair, closed the book of poetry, and pushed it away.

Her heart was dead.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Spenser's eyes slowly blinked open, only to snap shut again against the painfully bright light. A piercing ache shot through his head, and the gasp of breath that followed was agonizing as his chest convulsed from the excruciating expansion and contraction of his lungs.

"Just lie still, lad." A deep voice reached him through the fuzzy edge of consciousness, barely heard above the pain that seemed to radiate from every inch of his body. "Don't try to sit up."

Certainly not! Spenser had no intention of moving. He'd gladly stop breathing, too, if he could, to quell the pain in his chest and abdomen.

Not that he could breathe much anyway. As the fog of sleep cleared from his mind, he realized that part of the pain in his chest came from being constricted by something wrapped around his middle, from armpits to hips.

"Squeeze my hand if you can hear me."

His fingers were numb, but he did as asked. Well, at least *that* part of him didn't hurt.

He had no idea where he was, what time of day, why his body had turned so brutally against him. He didn't dare try to open his eyes again, although his eyelids felt heavy enough that he most likely couldn't anyway. If he did nothing—not even take deep breaths—then the pain was bearable. *Almost.*

If his hand didn't hurt, maybe his lips wouldn't hurt either if he tried to move them. "Where—"

Christ. His lips felt swollen like sausages and throbbed with heated pain.

"It's all right. Don't try to talk. Don't try to do anything."

The deep voice pierced the pain and filled him with a familiar warmth—

“Martin,” he whispered, letting his tongue do most of the work in speaking because it even hurt to smile.

“Yes, lad, it’s me. I’ve been right here with you this whole time.”

This whole time... Where the hell was he? What had happened? The last thing he remembered was being with Ella, her softness and warmth, the delicate touch of her hands, and the lilting song of her laughter.

No. He remembered walking home at dawn, the barrage of fists and kicks—

“Ella!” His eyes flew open, and he cared nothing about the sharp pain of the light or the brutal throbbing in his lips. “Is she all right? Where is she?”

“She’s fine.” A large hand on his shoulder kept him pinned to the bed, although it didn’t take much effort to keep him there. His body felt leaden, as if he could sink so far into the mattress beneath him that he might never find his way back out. “She’s at home with her parents. She wasn’t with you when you were attacked.”

Attacked... That was exactly what had happened, he remembered now. Four large men the size of mountains with arms as big as barrels and boots as hard as steel had come after him outside his own door. But only the memory of the first few blows came back to him. The rest was darkness.

He squinted against the light and realized it was sunlight pouring in through a window. *His* window. He was in his own bedroom, safe in his rooms, with Martin at his side.

The old man sat on a wooden chair that had been pulled up alongside the bed and leaned over to apply a damp cloth to his forehead. Then he dabbed at Spenser’s swollen lips with a small sponge. Spenser could taste medicinal herbs in the water. So...Martin had been worried enough about him to call a physician. It must have been a bad attack.

“What happened?” Spenser whispered.

“Someone jumped you when you were at your door,” Martin explained. “I came by for breakfast and found you.” The old man’s voice cracked. “I thought you were dead.”

“Almost,” Spenser rasped out.

The moment’s silence told Spenser his friend didn’t find that amusing. “I had you brought up here and sent for a doctor. He said you were damned lucky to still be alive.” Martin’s fingers tightened around Spenser’s. “I’ve been right here with you the whole time.”

“You’re a...sorry sight...for a nurse.” He would tease to put the old man at ease, but he definitely didn’t let himself laugh. His lips still hurt too much, and the movement of his abdomen would have been agony. The pain had transformed from sharp and blinding to throbbing and relentless, but he could speak a little. Well, he could whisper a bit. “I came home.” He licked his dry lips and felt the split in his bottom lip with his tongue. “They were...waiting for me.”

“They wanted to rob you.”

Not at all. They’d been sent to warn him. A message to be delivered, their leader had said. *Leave alone women who are out of your reach...* In other words, leave Ella alone. But who would have known he’d been spending time with her? How would they have found out?

Damnation, he couldn’t think!

His fogged mind refused to work, and his body was growing heavier by the moment, drawing him back toward the sweet oblivion of healing sleep. His clarity wasn’t helped by the way Martin thoughtfully refreshed the wet cloth on his forehead, then placed a piece of ice into Spenser’s mouth. He was too tired and sore to question where Martin had gotten ice or how the man had paid for it. He simply savored the soothing coolness as it melted on his tongue, closed his eyes, and slipped back into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Three days later, the fog had cleared from Spenser's mind, if not the pain from his body.

The same physician who had attended to him when he'd still been a bloody and bruised mess after the attack returned every day to check up on him and deliver more medicinal concoctions to drink. Now, Spenser appeared more bruised than ever, with ugly patches of blacks and blues fading into even uglier patches of purples and browns. But the physician assured him he was healing and ordered him to drink more medicine and remain in bed.

Spenser had crawled out of bed anyway.

After several days of doing nothing but lying about, he would have gone out of his mind if he'd had to remain in bed a moment longer. So with Martin's help—and seemingly not served at all by the mummy wrapping around his middle to immobilize what the doctor was certain were broken ribs—he painfully rolled out of bed and levered himself to his feet, panting down the pain after every small movement.

Martin had barely left his side, and with the help of a nurse who had been hired to help Spenser until he could fully care for himself, he'd managed to eat some of the bread and broth Martin had brought to him. Spenser didn't dare consider how much this situation was costing the old man, or what Martin had promised in payment to the physician, the nurse, and the owner of the nearest chop house who brought over food twice daily.

His mind was too preoccupied with worry over Ella. He'd promised to meet her at midnight the day of the attack, and he'd broken that promise. She must have hated him for it.

Now he stood half-dressed in an old banyan in front of the window and gazed down at the street, absently drinking a mug of hot medicine that made his tongue furry and his belly queasy. He frowned into the mug. How many people had

quacks killed with their so-called remedies over the years? At least the physician hadn't tried to leech him. *Yet.*

"Don't stay out of bed too long, lad," Martin warned as he stepped back inside the bedroom. "Don't want you to use up all the energy you've gained back."

Spenser nodded. Martin was right. He'd been on his feet only ten minutes and already he was lightheaded. The restriction around his chest and abdomen didn't help. He grimaced into his mug. Neither did this disgusting tea.

"Where did you sneak off to?" Spenser asked. For the first time since the attack, he'd awakened and not found Martin sitting at his bedside. That meant he was healing well enough to be beyond immediate concern.

"Just wanted to tell the nurse how much we appreciated her chicken broth."

"The nurse, you say?" Spenser made a face at a swallow of medicine, then set the mug away. He couldn't stomach any more. "Something tells me it's more than her broth you want to appreciate."

The old man grinned as he came up to Spenser and gently helped him into bed. "If a man has to be nursed back to health, then what does it hurt if the woman is easy on the eyes, eh?"

"Is that why you hired her?" Spenser held his breath against the pain of sitting up far enough to allow Martin to slide a pillow between his back and the headboard.

Martin winked at him. "Didn't hurt."

Spenser knew better than to encourage the man, so he ignored that and instead gestured at a row of books on the shelves at the foot of his bed. Some men put their wealth into horses and houses. Spenser preferred books.

"There's a small pocketbook of Shakespeare's sonnets on that shelf there," he told Martin. "I need you to deliver it for me."

Martin approached the shelves and reached up for the book. “To where?”

“Ella.”

Martin glanced over his shoulder at Spenser. “Does this mean you want to court her? That you’ve finally come to your senses about her?”

“No.” She was still a duke’s daughter, and nothing that had happened between them had changed that. But he owed her an explanation and an apology, now more than ever. “Just take that book to her and explain I couldn’t meet her as planned, but don’t tell her why.”

He rubbed his sore jaw. He was damned lucky that it wasn’t dislocated or shattered. Same with his nose. At least his face stood a good chance of returning to how it was, even if he would now sport at least two new scars by his mouth and left eye.

“Tell her I still need to talk to her and will write again in a day or two to arrange a new meeting.” His mouth twisted. “But don’t tell her who I am or where to find me. Not yet.”

Martin gave a curt nod as he took down the book, but Spenser knew his friend well enough to know the old man did not approve of that message. Ella deserved more, they both knew that, but this was all he could offer right now. *If ever.*

Spenser closed his eyes. Fatigue swept over him, lulling him toward sleep, and he murmured, “Tell her to read sonnet one-sixteen.”

“Aye, lad.” Martin walked toward the door to start his errand.

“And Martin?” Spenser stopped him just as he reached the door. “Thank you. For everything.”

Martin’s wrinkled face softened, and he repeated quietly, “Aye, lad.”

Then he left, and Spenser sank back into a deep sleep, this time not bothering to lie down completely first.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Martin strode along Pall Mall toward St James Street, his old legs sauntering as quickly as they could go. Well, perhaps *not* as quickly as they could. They were old and arthritic after all, but otherwise in fine shape for a man his age. And it was too nice a day to waste money on a hackney or hurry along when the sunlight falling through the trees cast a pretty dappled light onto the street. Besides, the longer he was away, the more time the lad had to sleep and heal, which he certainly needed. Nurse O'Connor was there in the house with him should he need anything.

Thank the sweet Lord that Spenser was doing well. Martin had thought he was dead when he came upon him that morning, lying crumpled on the footpath and pulped to a bloody mess, and more than once since then, he feared death might just take him after all. Martin hadn't offered up a serious prayer in years, but during the past few days he'd offered nearly a dozen to whoever in heaven might listen. Now he had to remember what all he'd promised God in exchange for sparing the man who had become more than a mere friend. Spenser had become the son he no longer had.

He'd always wanted to repay Spenser for saving him from the footpad who had nearly killed him. He just never thought their situations would prove so damnably similar.

He tightly clutched the book Spenser had asked him to deliver as he turned up St James Street and passed the row of grand houses lining Green Park. Miniature palaces, the lot of them, with fancy gates and courtyards in front and grand mews and gardens in back—some even had big gas lamps standing at the wrought iron gates and hanging over the porticos. And what did any of those men do to deserve to own houses like that?

“Not work, that's certain.” He snorted in disgust. “None work as hard as most of the men in London. Certainly not as hard as Spenser.”

He shot the Palladian edifices a scoffing sneer as he passed in his well-worn boots and old coat. *Threadbare*, Spenser had called the misshaped thing and offered to buy him a new one. But Martin always refused. Didn't need a new coat. Preferred the one he already had. It was comfortable, and old age had taught him the benefits of comfort over fashion and the joy of possessing only what mattered.

He glanced down at the book, then blew out a hard breath and slowed his steps even more. "Tell her to read sonnet one-sixteen," he muttered to himself. "Tell her to read a bloody sonnet instead of offering courtship, marriage, a future of happiness..."

The hell he would.

Oh, he would give her the book all right, explain it was a gift from Spenser...Spenser Rhodes, stepson of the Duke of Pensworth and the natural son of a war hero who had died saving the world from a dictator and his men from a French cavalry charge. A man who had dedicated long hours every day to making the most of his school education, then even more from his work's education. A man whose determination had taken him to the top of his field and put him in position to become an even more successful merchant. A man with good character, a pure soul, and a heart of gold. Any woman should count her lucky stars to have the love of a man like him. *Especially* the daughter of a duke.

Martin planned on doing far more than simply delivering a book and a message. He would sit Lady Elenora down in her fancy drawing room and not leave until she knew everything. Spenser deserved that.

The lad just didn't know it yet.

Martin stopped in front of the grand house the Duke of Durham had leased for the season and stared up at its wide front through the tall wrought iron fence. A façade designed to look like a Grecian temple overlooked a sunken garden behind and the park beyond that, all crafted from gleaming white stone and stucco.

The front door opened, and a smartly dressed butler stepped aside to let a couple pass onto the Corinthian-styled portico, with a maid scurrying behind. The man wore a tall beaver hat low on his head that hid his face, and the woman was safely tucked behind the wide brim of a straw bonnet. They walked arm-in-arm, although the gentleman leaned in far more than the lady, and Martin could just see the man's amused smile as they came down the steps. An expensive red phaeton with a pair of oversized swan-neck springs at the rear, its body mounted daringly high, waited in the gravel forecourt. Its team of perfectly matched horses were held by a young groom.

The man helped the young woman onto the front seat and left the poor maid to scramble onto the rear bench by herself, but the lady turned to inquire if her maid was comfortable. *Ella*. Martin recognized her at once. Her pretty face, chestnut hair, and bright green eyes were exactly as Spenser had described. So was her kindness.

When the gentleman circled the rear of the rig and jumped onto his seat to take the reins, Martin saw his face and knew—

Simon Radcliff. Spenser's half brother.

Bloody Christ.

The young groom darted out of the way as Simon flipped the ribbons and set the team off, the horses tossing their heads and prancing in anticipation of racing. Lady Elenora gripped the bar on the side of her seat with one hand and placed the other over her bonnet. Simon laughed as the team sped out of the courtyard and into the wide street, turning south toward Pall Mall and the park entrance.

Martin watched until the rig was out of sight, then he stepped into the courtyard and called out to the groom. The young man saw him and jogged over.

The groom nodded at Martin. "What can I do fer ya?"

"Was that the duke's daughter I just saw riding off with the Marquess of Walmesley?"

“Aye!” The boy grinned. “Sure a pretty rig, ain’t it?”

“Yes, it is.” Martin frowned down at the book in his hand. The marquess’s visit here couldn’t be good news.

The groom spat on the ground. “He’ll be coming ‘round more often now, I suspect,” he grumbled. “Bet the bloke still don’t toss me any coins, though. Tight-fisted to a fault, that one.”

Martin slid him a look. “And why would the marquess be coming around more often?”

“He’s courting Lady Elenora.” The groom didn’t seem at all happy about that.

But then, neither was Martin.

“Is there anythin’ else I can help you with, sir?”

Martin slowly shook his head and tucked the book inside his coat. “No, nothing.”

The young man pulled at the brim of his Harris tweed cap and jogged away, around the side of the house toward its private mews.

Martin headed back the way he’d just come, his footsteps heavy.

The attackers hadn’t killed Spenser. But this news about his brother just might.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Spenser glanced at Martin's reflection in his dressing mirror as the old man appeared in the bedroom doorway behind him. He paused in his attempt to tie his neck cloth. "You're back. Good."

Good Lord, even smiling hurt! So did gesturing at the tray the nurse had left on the bedside table while he'd been napping. It sat untouched. Between his concern for Ella and the dull aches in his limbs, he had no appetite.

"Help yourself," Spenser offered.

He would let Martin have all the food. At least while the old man was here, nursing him back to health in his own way, Spenser could make certain he ate well. Perhaps he could find a way to buy his friend a new coat and pair of boots, too. It was the least he could do to repay him.

Spenser slowly lowered himself onto a nearby reading chair so he could put on his boots, although how he'd ever manage to lever himself back up onto his feet from the deep cushioned seat, he had no idea.

While Martin had been gone, Spenser had finally managed to dress himself. Partially. He was far from decent, with his waistcoat hanging open and still in his shirt sleeves. But he'd managed the rest, including the pair of braces, although he'd sent up a round of curses so fierce at having to bend his arms to pull them on that he wondered how the paper hadn't peeled off the walls from the force of it.

He was stiff and sore and most likely would be for a couple of weeks more at least, but he couldn't remain still a moment longer. Movement would be good for his aching muscles. Besides, if he remained in bed another day without working or tending to his business—or contacting Ella—he would go mad.

Martin shook his head at the offer for food.

Spenser's gut tightened with unease. The old man never refused food. "Did you see her, then? Was Ella home?"

Martin frowned as he finally stepped into the room. "No—that is, she was just leaving as I arrived."

"But you left the book and the message anyway?"

"No." Martin slowly reached into his coat and withdrew the slim volume of poetry. He set it down on the dresser.

Spenser finished putting on his shoes and straightened as much as he was able beneath the wrapping around his middle. "Why not? The butler would have made certain she received it."

"Because she wasn't alone when she left." Martin turned to face Spenser like a criminal facing the court, his face drawn. "She has a new beau now, someone officially courting her."

He steeled himself. "Who?"

"Your brother."

The news was a gut punch. The world dropped away beneath him, and finally, despite the pain of the wounds, he turned numb clear through to his bones. The only emotion he felt was a flash of searing fury, because he instantly knew why he'd been attacked, why he'd been given the message to leave Ella alone—

"I'll kill him for this," he muttered beneath his breath. "I'll call him out and—"

"No, you won't!" Martin countered, taking an angry step forward. "It's one thing to pretend to be him to make fun of all those rich dandies at their balls, to slip in and out of their world and curse them for not letting you be a permanent part of it. It's another to do what you're planning."

"So I should just let him get away with this?" Spenser shoved himself out of the chair and clenched his teeth against a burst of pain. "Is that your answer?"

"No. You deserve to be with that woman. But calling out your brother in a duel won't solve a damn thing." His gray brows shot up to make his point. "Lose, and you could spend

the rest of your life maimed or bed-ridden. You'd be lucky if you were killed."

Spenser stopped in front of him, his face level with Martin's as he promised, "I won't lose."

"And if you win, do you honestly think Pensworth will let you get away with murdering his only son and heir? At worst, you'll swing for it. At best, you'll be locked up in Newgate and never again see the light of day. You'll lose your business, your reputation, everything you've worked so hard to achieve—and you'll lose Ella, whether you win or lose. Is that what you want your life to become?"

The weight Spenser carried on his shoulders—had carried *for years*—snapped something deep inside him. He suddenly had enough. Enough of being excluded simply because of who he was, because of his work, because of his informal education, because he wasn't good enough to please those who thought he was their inferior. Enough of being trapped in a life he didn't choose for himself. Enough of being thought of as nothing more than a man who could be beaten and thrown away like garbage.

Enough.

He spun on his heel and stormed toward the door.

The old man's voice cracked as he called out, "And then *I'll* lose you, too. What am I supposed to do without you?"

"Exactly as you did before." Spenser paused in the doorway, but he couldn't bring himself to look over his shoulder as he threw out in anger, "You won't be my responsibility then."

Guilt pierced his chest, but he didn't stop. *Couldn't* stop. He'd stood by long enough in his life and let others kick him down. Never again would he let someone like Simon Radcliff threaten and torment him simply because of the difference in their birth status.

So he hurried through the house to the front door, not slowing even when he heard Martin call hoarsely down the

stairs after him, “No, lad, you’re wrong! Haven’t you figured it out yet? I was never your responsibility. You are *mine!*”

But Spenser charged out the door without stopping.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Spenser paused at the front door of Pensworth Place, the London home of the Duke of Pensworth and the first childhood home he could remember. He clenched his jaw against the pain as he ignored the lion's head brass knocker in favor of relentlessly pounding his closed fist directly against the hard wood.

He didn't feel the need to be polite. This wasn't a homecoming, and he sure as hell wasn't here as the prodigal son. He hated this place. His mother had died here, and the last memory he had of her was her limp and feverish body on her deathbed in a suffocating, dark room that smelled of medicine and stagnation. Only a few years later, he'd been torn even from this place and banished to live with relatives he had never met and didn't know. Nothing in his life had been the same after that.

He gritted his teeth and began a new round of pounding.

The massive door opened, and the scowling butler froze when he saw Spenser. He blinked, and his mouth fell open as if he were staring at a ghost.

"Hello, Fergus," Spenser bit out, itching to pound his fist one last time against the door for good measure. And for spite. "Is Simon home?"

The man's eyes grew wide. "Master Spenser—I mean, Mr. Rhodes." The well-trained butler was so flustered at finding him on the doorstep that he didn't know whether to bow or step aside to let him pass. So he simply stood there in the doorway, gaping.

Spenser didn't blame him. He hadn't visited this house in years, not since he first returned to London from the north when he was nineteen. He'd called on his stepfather then because he had wanted to see the bastard's face when Spenser announced he wasn't going into the army or the Church or any one of those other so-called gentlemanly professions sought

after by younger sons of peers— No. He was there to announce that he was opening a business and planning to work with his hands on a print shop floor.

His stepfather had simply stood there in the entry hall, saying nothing. When Spenser finished his announcement, the duke nodded, wished him luck, and told Spenser to give his regards to his mother’s family. Then he turned on his heel and walked back into his study.

Spenser hadn’t been back. Until today.

“Is my brother at home?” he repeated.

Fergus finally found his voice. “No, sir. Lord Walmesley doesn’t reside here any longer.”

“Where does he live?” He clenched his hands into fists.

Fergus hesitated. “I’m not at liberty to say, sir.”

Spenser blew out a harsh breath. It wasn’t Fergus’s fault that his stepfather had ordered him to treat Spenser this way. After all, the old butler was even more at the duke’s mercy than he was. But he also wouldn’t be stopped in this confrontation with his Pensworth family, one that had been a very long time in coming.

“Then how about my stepfather? Is Pensworth home?”

He hesitated again. “His Grace isn’t accepting visitors.”

“You mean he isn’t accepting visits from *me*.”

The tips of his ears reddened with shame as he answered quietly, “Yes, sir.”

“Then I’ll be sure to tell him you attempted to stop me so he doesn’t blame you.”

Fergus blinked, bewildered. “For what, sir?”

“This.” Spenser stepped past the old butler and stormed inside. “Pensworth!”

“Master Spenc—I mean—sir!” Fergus followed behind, the old butler flustered, his face beet-red. “Sir, please! You mustn’t—”

“Where is he, then?” Spenser strode down the hall into the heart of the house. “Pensworth!”

Spenser threw open the door to the duke’s study and stopped. The old duke stood in front of the tall window and looked out over the garden, his hands clasped behind his back.

Pensworth cast a single glance over his shoulder at Spenser, then nodded to Fergus to leave them be. When the butler apologetically bowed and left, the duke turned his attention back to the window. Beyond the glass, black shadows replaced the orange-purple light of the setting sun which had already sunk below London’s horizon.

“Your mother loved this garden,” Pensworth said quietly, as if more to the garden itself than to Spenser. “She spent hours out there among its rose bushes and little fruit trees, even in the winters when the weather was so cold and damp that it should have driven her indoors. I think it reminded her of the countryside.” He dropped his gaze to the floor. “She never liked living in London, but I couldn’t leave you three alone on the estate at Skeldale while I was here.”

“Because you didn’t trust her,” Spenser accused.

“Because I couldn’t bear to be separated from her.” His stepfather turned to face him. “She was the single best thing that ever happened to me. There isn’t a day that goes by when I don’t thank fate for bringing her into my life and then curse it for taking her away far before her time.” He paused before admitting, “I dearly loved your mother.”

“You had an odd way of showing it.” Spenser stepped into the study without invitation, not caring if he was intruding or not. “You abandoned her child when he needed help most.”

“Of course you would see it that way.” He crossed the study to the corner liquor cabinet and opened wide both glass doors. “But you were never abandoned. You were given the best life possible.” He reached for a bottle of port and poured two glasses. “The life your mother wanted for you.”

His stepfather held out the second glass as a peace offering, but Spenser would never accept it. The man might

have truly loved his mother as he claimed—what man wouldn't have? Elizabeth Rhodes was beautiful, vivacious, well-educated, cultured, and kind to a fault—but he certainly didn't love her child.

In disdain, Spenser sent a dismissive glare at the glass. It was poison as far as he was concerned. “Thrust into a life among strangers, ignored by my stepfather and half brother, and cast aside like unwanted garbage?”

Pensworth set down the refused glass with a shrug and took a long sip of his own port. He paused to study Spenser over the rim of the crystal glass, eyes narrowing, before lowering it away. “Is that why you're here, then—to attack me over decisions made nearly two decades ago?”

“No. I'm here because of this.” He gestured at his bruised and cut face, but he knew Pensworth had already noticed the damage and chosen to say nothing. He probably thought such wounding was commonplace among the working class. “Your son did this. Rather, he hired men to pulp me because he was too spineless to do it himself.”

Pensworth stiffened.

“Where is Simon?” Spenser demanded. *That* was why he was here. And God help his brother when he found him.

“Well, a confrontation like this has been coming for a while now, I suppose,” Pensworth murmured. “You two never did bump along well, even when you were children. Odd that, considering you both shared the same mother.”

“Not long enough to make a difference in Simon's character,” Spenser pointed out.

Pensworth set down the glass on his desk and circled behind the mahogany monstrosity to sink into his leather chair. He leveled his hard gaze on Spenser. “Because your brother was jealous of your relationship with your mother.”

“*Jealous?*” Spenser laughed at the idea. “How could he be jealous? She died before he even knew her.”

“Exactly.” The duke sat forward and laced his fingers together on the desktop. “You had her for six years. You have

memories of her and her love. Simon has none of that. He was too young when she passed to even remember her at all.”

“For that I’m supposed to forgive this?” He drew a fingertip down from his swollen eyes to the black and blue bruise on his cheek.

“No.” Pensworth lowered his voice in a contemplative warning. “But taking your revenge out on him gains you nothing. You know as well as I how society works. He’s the son of a peer and so untouchable.”

“While I’m just the *stepson* of a peer and so worthless.” The words bit like acid on his tongue. “That’s why you sent me away when I was a boy, wasn’t it? Because I was nothing to you but an inconvenience you would have been forced to raise.”

“I’m a duke,” he reminded Spenser coldly. “No one forces me to do anything but His Majesty himself.” His lips twisted into a wry smile. “And your mother. She came into our marriage with nothing but the pittance the government paid her as a war widow. Under our marriage settlement and my entailments, there was nothing to be given to you upon her death except a small allowance I was required to pay your relatives for taking you in, raising you, and educating you. I merely followed her wishes in that, as I did in all things.” He nodded at Spenser. “Including sending you north.”

Spenser clenched his fists. “Why would she have done that? This place and Skeldale were the only homes I’d ever known. You and Simon were my only family.”

“Not your only family. Just the only family you’d ever met.” Pensworth slumped back in his chair, this time bringing the glass of port with him. “But did you ever consider what sort of life you would have had as the stepson of a duke? As the child who would always finish in second place to the younger heir and who had no allowance or inheritance of his own? A life in the army if you were lucky, or perhaps a living the Church. Even when you were just a child, your mother knew you would never have thrived in a position that either killed men or saved their souls. Not you.” He swirled his dark

port and watched it sheet down the sides of the glass. “That’s part of the reason she wanted you to be raised by her family if anything happened to her. She knew you would have more opportunities with them than you would have with me. Even then, it took me years to come to that same realization.”

Pensworth tossed back a long, healthy swallow of port, then stared down into the empty glass.

“I waited until you were ten before carrying out her wishes to send you north to your cousins in York,” he continued quietly. “By then, you and Simon were already fighting, even with him barely out of leading strings. As for me, seeing you every day—seeing *her* in you—had become too much of a reminder of all I’d lost. Sending you away was the right decision for all of us. Your cousins had a thriving business and children of their own, and they were able to provide a good life for you.”

“What was Simon, then, if not the same reminder?”

“A disappointment.” Pensworth practically snarled out that admission. “And the heir, like it or not.”

That was the answer, Spenser knew. The key to everything his stepfather had done to him—and had refused to do *for* him.

Spenser wasn’t of high status, wasn’t independently wealthy due to birth...wasn’t the heir. For that, Simon would have been forgiven anything, including having him nearly beaten to death in order to steal Ella for himself. Spenser would be given nothing.

“As for you,” Pensworth continued, “your mother was right.” He nodded a look over Spenser from head to boots. “Look at the man you’ve become...accomplished, independent, respected— You’ve made more of yourself with your business than you ever could have as the stepson of a duke.”

Spenser yanked off his gloves and held up his hands. “Stained.”

Pensworth shrugged. “Proof that you earned your way all by yourself. The only people who sneer at success like yours are people who haven’t earned theirs. People like me.” He frowned into his glass. “Your mother charged me with raising you to be a good man, and I did that. You might not agree with the way I did it—”

“You mean selfishly, uncaringly, and protecting your blood son above all else?”

His eyes snapped up to Spenser’s. “You might not agree with the way I did it,” he repeated, “but you’ve gotten all you’ve wanted out of life, or at least been in a position to get it. So let that be the lesson for you.” He set down the glass, placed his hands flat on the desktop, and slowly pushed himself up to his feet. “If there’s anything you want, don’t come here looking for it. Go find it yourself.”

His stepfather returned to his position at the window, once more gazing out at the darkening garden and dismissing Spenser with his silence. Their conversation was over.

Go find it yourself. Spenser would do exactly that. He turned on his heel and walked out toward the front door. He knew he would never come here again.

He paused only for a moment in the three-story tall entrance hall with its marble floors and stone stairs that curved up through the floors above. A bespoke banister of gun metal and brass crafted to look like ivy, a finely plastered Robert Adam ceiling, Corinthian columns guarding the arched doorways of the reception rooms, a wide hallway that lead back into the rest of the house—it was exactly as Spenser remembered. For a moment, he felt as if he’d been dragged back in time, back to being nothing but the helpless little boy who had been sent away.

But he wasn’t. He was a grown man now, and the Duke of Pensworth no longer had any control over his life.

He walked out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ella cast a weary glance around Lord and Lady Whitwell's ballroom and forced down the urge to sigh. Again.

The night was still early, and the party was at its height. A crush of bodies filled the edges of the room, framing sets of dancers on the dance floor who roiled together in intricate knots. Even more people spilled out into the large square that fronted the house, while others lingered in the supper room, drawing room, and retiring rooms. Oil lamps and beeswax candles made the sea of jewels and satins shimmer, and music from the quintet in the corner drifted through the house.

Ella was tired of it all already. No, not tired—

Bored. Mind-numbingly so.

This annual ball might have been one of the most anticipated events of the season, but Ella simply wanted to go home to her books.

“Champagne?” Simon smiled down at her as he snatched a flute from the tray of a passing footman and offered it to her.

What would he have done with the drink if she'd refused? But she wouldn't. If several glasses of champagne were what it took to survive the evening, then she would gladly take all he offered and let her head suffer the consequences in the morning.

Simon hadn't left her side since she'd arrived with her parents, when he'd come forward through the crush to escort her into the ballroom, with a deep bow and bright smile. Tongues began to wag the moment everyone in the room saw her enter on Simon's arm, and she knew what they were all thinking...it was only a matter of time until the duke's son married the duke's daughter. A perfect society pairing.

Her parents certainly thought so. Ella only had to glance across the room in their direction to see the hope lighting her mother's face at the budding courtship and the relief on her father's.

Unease sat heavily on her chest. She'd agreed to give Simon a chance, just as her parents wanted, but so far, he hadn't snagged her heart.

Oh, he was perfectly charming, she supposed, with an easy smile, sparkling eyes, and perfect turns of phrases. But something about all that charm struck her as hollow. No, *shallow*. Not as if he were trying too hard, but that he *knew* he was charming and found himself simply wonderful for it.

Far less wonderful than Ella did, for certain.

Yet she could have overlooked all that as gentlemanly arrogance had he simply been able to engage her intellectually. But he hadn't. Simon preferred meaningless conversations about entertainments and the season's events to deeper, more profound matters. He preferred discussing racing to Rousseau, saddles to Shakespeare, philandering to philosophy. He hadn't once brought up any matters of science, political reform... poetry. There had been none of that.

Occasionally, during the time they'd spent together in the past few days, driving through the park or having tea, she threw out a line of poetry to him as bait, just to see how he would react. So far, he'd not taken the hook. Not once.

Truly, though, he hadn't done anything wrong. Hadn't mistreated her or her parents, hadn't been rude or domineering, hadn't attempted to take any liberties beyond holding her hand and occasionally giving a squeeze of affection to her elbow when they walked together in the park. He treated her better than any other society gentleman would have, with genuine likeability and respect. That was far more than most society marriages possessed, she supposed, and it should have been enough to calm any doubts she had about their courtship.

But it wasn't enough for her heart.

“Lovely ball, isn’t it?” Simon gestured at the room with his champagne flute. “Everyone who’s anyone is here. Lord Whitwell must be thrilled about the turnout.”

“That’s the mark of a good party, is it?”

“Of course it is. It’s the reason anyone hosts grand balls like this during the season.” He slid her an amused smile. “You were away on the Continent too long. You’ve forgotten how English society works.”

She forced a smile and took a large sip of champagne. She hoped Lord Whitwell possessed a deep wine cellar for the evening.

“The whole point of affairs like this is to see and be seen,” he explained as he leaned down to bring his mouth close to her ear, even though the noise of the party wasn’t so loud as to require it. “To make contacts with influential people.”

“Silly me,” she muttered. “I thought it was simply to dance and have a good time.”

“That, too.” He straightened as he gave her a wink.

Well, at least she might dance several times tonight, and not all of them had to be with Simon. She could look forward to that, at least.

““When you do dance,”” she recited, a pleased smile pulling at her lips that the moment was right to inject literature, “I wish you a wave ‘o the sea, that you might ever do nothing but that.””

Simon blinked. “Pardon?”

“It’s Shakespeare.” Her heart seized with hope that he would discuss the bard with her. Oh, she so much wanted that! “*The Winter’s Tale*. What do you think of it?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen it.”

“Oh?” Her heart foolishly bounced. “It’s playing at Drury Lane this month.” Perhaps they could attend the theatre together, finally share a cultural experience they could discuss, and—

“I’m not fond of theatre prattle-prattle.” He shrugged a shoulder. “Bores me stiff.”

“Oh.” With that, her heart plummeted right through the floor.

She took a sip of champagne to hide any traces of frustration on her face and turned away under the pretense of looking around the room, as if searching for someone. For anyone. For *any* reason she could find to excuse herself from his company and seek out a quiet place where she could cry in peace.

At that moment, she knew she would be unmarried for the rest of her life.

Simon couldn’t compare to Spenser—no one could. If she couldn’t have the man she loved, then she didn’t want any one. Her parents would simply have to realize that the same way she had.

A commotion at the top of the stairs caught the room’s attention. Everyone who wasn’t in the midst of dancing turned toward the landing where guests were announced by the master of ceremonies before descending into the ballroom. Necks craned, fans halted in mid-flutter, old hens silenced themselves in the middle of salacious gossip—and Ella prayed she could use the distraction as an opportunity to flee.

“I don’t give a damn if I’m not invited. I have business here.”

Ella caught her breath, recognizing that voice—“Spenser!”

She watched, dumbfounded, as he pushed past the master of ceremonies and approached the balustrade, where he stopped and stared down into the crush that filled the room. He searched the crowd, and she knew exactly whom he was looking for.

She raised her glass into the air.

“What the hell are you doing?” Simon hissed from beside her. “Put your glass down!”

So Ella raised it even higher, fixed her attention on Spenser, and held her breath as she waited for him to find her in the crowd.

He saw her and shoved himself away from the banister. He ignored the master of ceremonies and a footman who came forward to physically remove him from the party and hurried down into the ballroom, straight toward Ella. Behind him, an old man in a threadbare coat blocked the way of the footman and master of ceremonies, allowing Spenser to slip away into the crowd.

It was only when Spenser stopped in front of her that she realized he hadn't been looking for her.

His gaze burned into Simon, and he ground out through clenched teeth, "Get away from her, you bastard."

She saw the terrible bruises and cuts on Spenser's face, and worry seized her. "Dear God, Spenser," she whispered, stunned. "What happened to you?"

But he didn't answer and didn't look away from Simon as he repeated, "Get away from her."

"Didn't you hear the master of ceremonies?" Simon countered and placed his hand possessively on the small of Ella's back. "You're not invited. But then, your kind would never have anything to do with a party like this, except to print other people's invitations."

Instead of reassuring her, Simon's touch sent a chill down her spine, and she stepped away from him.

But she didn't go to Spenser. She was too confused to know what to do as her gaze darted back and forth between the two men. *Goodness*, the similarities... She'd always seen a resemblance between them—the same strong build, the same wavy brown hair and high cheekbones. Only the eyes were so very different.

Seeing them together like this, she finally realized exactly how similar they were. And what she was certain it meant about them—

“You’re...brothers,” she whispered, her mind trying to absorb that truth.

“*Half* brothers,” Simon corrected. “My father is the Duke of Pensworth.” He folded his arms dismissively over his chest and cast a disapproving glance over Spenser from head to boots. “*His* father was a common soldier.”

“My father was a decorated major who gave his life at the Battle of Lincelles in order to save dozens of his men and stop a tyrant from enslaving all of Europe.” Spenser scoured the same withering look over Simon. “And far braver than yours could ever be.”

Simon clenched his jaw. “Are you calling my father a coward?”

“No! No, no...*no*.” The old man who had followed Spenser into the ball reached them after losing the footman in the crush, but it wouldn’t be long before they were found and both tossed out. He put his hand on Spenser’s shoulder. “He would never disparage your honor or your father’s like that. Would you, lad?” He forced a laugh. But his face was red with the exertion of running through the party, and his lungs were winded, making each forced word as breathless. “Just a misunderstanding. That’s all.”

“Those men who attacked me were not under any misunderstanding,” Spenser corrected.

Ella’s heart jolted. “You were attacked?”

Spenser’s gaze locked with Simon’s, his voice harsh and cold. “Tell her what happened,” he demanded. “Show her the kind of man you truly are.”

Simon smiled coldly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You did this.” Spenser gestured toward the bruises and cuts on his face, and Ella inhaled sharply. “Rather, the men you hired did this because you’re not brave enough to wage your own battles. Never have been.” He stepped forward until the two of them were separated only by a half-foot of space,

their faces level. “You don’t even have the spine to deliver your own warnings about Ella yourself.”

Ella blinked. “What warnings? I don’t understand...” She wheeled on Simon. “Did you hurt him?”

“Obviously not enough.” Simon muttered. Then he gave her one of those charming smiles she’d grown to hate. *Patronizing*. As if she were nothing more than an ignorant child. “Don’t worry yourself, Elenora. *Mr.* Reed was just leaving and won’t bother us again.”

Everyone in the room was craning their necks to look at them now, and whispers rose around them as the dancers came to a slow stop. Even the musicians ceased playing, sensing something was amiss in the room. From the corner of her eye, Ella saw the master of ceremonies conferring with Lord Whitwell about whether Spenser and his friend should be physically ejected from the party.

“What is going on?” she demanded, darting her confused gaze between the two men.

“My brother wants you for himself,” Spenser explained. “But not because he wants you, not really. He just doesn’t want me to have you.” Finally, he turned his grim gaze to Ella. “I was attacked by three men after I left you in the park. They delivered a warning to stay away from you. Simon wanted me out of the way so he could court you.”

Her mouth fell open. She knew it was true. “Simon, what did you do?”

“Not a warning,” Simon clarified, “but a reminder of who my brother is and how he shouldn’t go reaching for things beyond his grasp. Like the daughter of a duke.” He slid a narrowed glance at her. “Did he tell you who he was? And I don’t mean the stepson of a duke, because that would make him seem so much more important than he truly is. He’s nothing but a *tradesman*.” He sneered out the word. “A printer. No social status of any kind, no wealth or position.” He paused before adding, “His dirty hands shouldn’t be allowed to touch anyone like you, Elenora.”

Her chest constricted so painfully with feelings of betrayal that she winced, although at that moment she couldn't have said which man had betrayed her more.

She took a step back. "That's why I was able to trace you to the print shop," she whispered, unable to find her voice, as she stared at Spenser. "Why you sent me all those poetry books..." She swallowed hard. "What you meant that night in the park about your hands—" She wheeled on Simon, her own hands clenching into fists. "And you—you knew I was searching for your brother, yet you hid the truth from me."

"Because he's not good enough for you," Simon told her. "Because he's nothing."

Spenser pulled back his arm and punched Simon on the chin, snapping back his brother's head and sending him staggering backward.

"No!" Ella jumped between the two men before one of them could kill the other.

"Not here, lad." The old man in the threadbare coat put his hand on Spenser's bicep. "Not like this. You'll have to live with these people once this is over. No need to make life any more difficult for you and your future."

Spenser shrugged away the man's hand and advice, but he made no further move to attack Simon, who rubbed at his chin and the bruise already forming there.

"The old man's right," Simon seethed. "We won't settle it here. We'll settle it out on the field."

Spenser's face turned as stony as Simon's. "Are you calling me out?"

"If that's what it takes to—"

Suddenly, the old man let out a tremendous shout and gripped his chest. He staggered backward, his right hand grabbing at his left arm as it dangled uselessly at his side. His body jerked, stiffening like a board, and his face contorted with pain. Then he gasped for breath and tumbled to the floor at Spenser's feet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Spenser let out a long and worried breath but otherwise didn't move from his position in the chair beside the bed where Martin lay, his eyes closed and his body so very still. He'd been like that for the past hour, ever since

Spenser had brought him back to his room in Cheapside, put him in bed, and sent for a physician. But the doctor said nothing more could be done for him except to make him comfortable and hope he recovered. They would know by morning if he'd survive.

"You'd better live," Spenser muttered, his attention glued to Martin to watch for any sign that he was waking up. "I've invested too much time and concern in you for you to sneak away like this."

Martin didn't move. Only the steady rise and fall of his chest signaled that life still pulsed inside him.

"We were even, do you hear me? I saved you when you were beaten, then you saved me. Don't you dare think that this gives you one up on me again." He swallowed. Hard. "So wake up and tell me what you want for dinner, and I'll fetch it, just as I always do. Martin?" He reached for the old man's hand. "Martin, wake up now." His voice cracked with emotion. "You can't die on me, do you hear? What would I do without you?" Frustration at being powerless bubbled to the surface. "Damnation, I won't let you die on me, you stubborn old man!"

"Neither will I," a soft voice called from the doorway.

Spenser looked up, and his heart thudded painfully. *Ella*.

"After all," she continued quietly as she stepped into the room, "he has to dance at my wedding."

At that, his heart stopped completely.

"It might even be a marriage to you." She stopped at the foot of the bed and slanted Spenser an irritated glance.

“Maybe.”

Knowing he had that verbal slap coming—and more—Spenser rose slowly to his feet. “What are you doing here?”

“I followed you. Mama and Papa are waiting downstairs in the carriage. They wouldn’t let me come alone.” She grimaced. “I also think they’ve become a bit nosy about my love life since the whole lost glove incident.” She looked down at Martin and bit her bottom lip. “How is he?”

He shook his head. “The doctor said we need to make him comfortable.”

She nodded, understanding exactly what he meant. But then, hadn’t she always understood him better than anyone else? “And how are you?”

He stopped beside her. Good lord, he was happy to see her, even as his heart was breaking for Martin, for her, for the future they would never have. “Sore, stiff...swollen.” He gestured toward his face and shrugged, then looked down at Martin. “Worried.” Then his gaze lifted back to Ella. “And terribly sorry for ruining your evening.”

“For what, exactly—for proving to me that Simon isn’t at all the man I thought he was...” She slowly arched a brow. “Or that you aren’t?”

He deserved the sting of that. “I was afraid that if I’d told you who I truly was the night we met, you would have laughed in my face and walked away.”

“Is that why you sent that note, then?”

“What note?” He had no idea what she meant.

“The one in which you said you never wanted to see me again,” she said, her words clipped with anger, “even after all we’d shared at midnight in the park.” Her shoulders dropped with exasperation. “But then tonight, when you came to Lord Whitwell’s... What am I supposed to believe?”

“That I would never send you a message like that. And I couldn’t have. I was too wounded to even pick up a quill let alone compose a coherent note.” Cold realization sank over

him, and he *knew*—“But Simon wasn’t. I’m certain he forged my name.”

She blinked, confused. “But it was your handwriting...”

“We’re brothers. We were both taught to write by the same nanny when we were children. We have similar handwriting.” His voice lowered into a heartfelt promise. “I would never wound you like that, Ella.”

Her lips parted, and he could see her confusion on her face. She didn’t know what to believe about him.

He didn’t blame her. She deserved an explanation, and he couldn’t put it off any longer.

“Simon said a lot of harsh things about me tonight.” He grimaced. “But he wasn’t completely wrong. I *am* the unwanted stepson of a duke, a man who makes his way through the world with dirty hands. To dare think I could capture the heart of duke’s daughter, that I wouldn’t stain you, as well... Nothing but a fairytale.”

He held out his hands to her so she could see the ink that marred his palms, fingers, and nails.

“Make no mistake, Ella—I’m very proud of the life I’ve built for myself. Everything I have has come from hard work, a lot of sweat, and sheer determination.” He looked down at his hands, unable to meet her gaze as he continued, “But any woman who wants a life with me is going to have to take *all* of me, including these. Are you truly willing to take for a husband a man with stains on his calloused hands?”

She took his hands and laced her fingers through his.

“Damn those ink stains,” she whispered. Her eyes glistened as they met his. “Damn Simon for misleading me.” She lifted her chin. “And damn *you* for not having more faith in me.”

She released his hands and stepped back, crossing her arms over her chest as if she were afraid she’d reach for him again. Or slap him.

“You lied to me about who you really are.” She paused, and that moment’s hesitation only ground a knife into his chest when her voice broke with emotion—“Did you also lie about loving me?”

“Never.” That single word emerged with so much confidence that he shook from it. “You can doubt a lot about me, Ella—God knows I’ve given you good cause. But *never* doubt my love for you.” He stared fiercely down at her. “I love you, more than I ever thought possible to love any woman, and certainly not a woman as wonderful as you.”

Her lips parted tremulously. “Then *why* won’t you—”

“Because that’s the problem.” He pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her hair, squeezing his eyes shut. The pain was nearly unbearable. *So close*...he was so very close to having everything he’d ever dreamed of. Yet even though she stood encircled in his arms, she was still a world away. “Because you don’t deserve me. You deserve a gentleman who can keep you in a life of luxury. You deserve jewels, satins, furs, the grandest townhouse money can buy... I can never give you that. You also don’t deserve to be cut, disinvited from events, whispered about behind your back, or insulted straight to your face—all for becoming the wife of a printer.” His voice choked. “I love you, Ella, and want nothing more than a life and home with you. But I can never be that man.”

“Well, thank God you’re not.” She pulled back just far enough to cup his face between her hands. “We’re a perfect pair, don’t you realize that? I don’t want a man like that, and you don’t want any woman who would be so shallow as to place all that before love. And I certainly don’t want any man who would want that kind of woman.” She shook her head. “I’m not part of society and their world now, and I’ve come to accept that I never will be. I’m a bluestocking’s bluestocking who doesn’t fit in anywhere except when I’m with people like you. I want a husband who understands my poetic heart—I *need* a husband who understands that.” She paused. “Spenser, I need *you*. I need you to accept me just as I am, the same way I love and accept you.”

She leaned in to place a soft kiss to his lips.

Then she stepped back out of his arms and put her hands on her hips, sizing him up with a critical glance.

“My mistress’s eyes are nothing like the sun,” she recited from Shakespeare’s sonnets. “Coral is far more red than her lips red. If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun.” She touched his chin and tilted up his head. “Look at me, Spenser. See me for who I really am. ‘I have seen roses damasked, red and white, But no such roses see I in her cheeks. And in some perfumes is there more delight than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.’ Do you see my cheeks, Spenser? Do you see any damasked roses there? Of course not. ‘I love to hear her speak, yet well I know that music hath a far more pleasing sound. I grant I never saw a goddess go; my mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.’ How does it finish? You know.” She paused, then gently prompted, “And yet...”

“And yet,” he finished, his voice rough with emotion, “I think my love as rare as any she belied with false compare.”

“Good. Then you know exactly the kind of woman I am. Look at me.” She stepped back and held out her arms before slowly turning in a circle. “I don’t walk in beauty like the night. I’m not Keats’s nightingale, and I’m not some princess looking for her fairy-tale prince. I’m just me. Someone who wants to be loved for who she is. By you.” She dropped her arms to her sides, and her eyes glistened. “Someone who wants to love you in return, if you let me.”

He silently held open his arms.

She stepped into his embrace and kissed him, and on her lips, he tasted her love for him. The world seemed to stop for one precious moment, when the only people who existed were the two of them, and in that moment, everything changed.

They had a long struggle ahead of them, they both knew that, and in the coming years, they would have to depend upon themselves for strength and resilience. In that, he had complete faith. He might never fully know what she saw in him, but he

knew their love was strong. That was all that mattered. They could survive the rest together.

She broke the kiss and whispered in his ear. “You need to ask me now,” she ordered gently. “It’s time.”

With a smile at knowing exactly what she meant, he caressed her temple with his lips. “Will you let me read you poetry for the rest of our days? Will you let me waltz with you beneath the moonlight? Will you let me love you with all my heart and soul and let me worship you with my body?” He took a deep breath and asked nervously, “Will you marry me, Ella?”

A long sigh fell from her as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “I thought you’d never ask!”

She rose onto her toes and kissed him. No, not a kiss—a promise for the future they would have together. One he would let no one and nothing break.

A knock rapped on the door.

Ella moved quickly away, her cheeks blushing prettily at being caught kissing him. Her hands shook as she reached to fuss with her hairpins.

Spenser looked toward the doorway, expecting the physician again. Or, God forbid, her parents.

Instead, a plump, bald man with large spectacles and rumpled clothing stepped tentatively into the room. In his arms, he held a large, leather-bound book and a satchel. But he didn’t look around, as if he were already familiar with the cramped room, and instead stared blankly at Spenser and Ella, as if he simply couldn’t fathom why they were there.

“Yes?” Spenser asked.

“I’m Mr. Gordon.” When Spenser didn’t recognize the name, the man added for clarification, “I’m Mr. Henslow’s solicitor.”

Solicitor? Spenser blinked. “You must have the wrong address. I don’t think Martin—”

“Ah, Gordon! Perfect timing!”

Dumbstruck, Spenser wheeled around at the sound of Martin's voice, just in time to see the old man throw back the blanket, toss his legs over the side of the bed, and push himself onto his feet. He practically bounced across the room to welcome Mr. Gordon, whose face melted into a smile at the sight of him, completely well.

Martin pumped Mr. Gordon's hand in greeting. "Thank you for coming at short notice and at such a late hour."

"Of course, Mr. Henslow." The solicitor set down his book and satchel on the small wooden table where Martin took his meals, as if he had done so many times before. "I'm always available to you around the clock, sir."

Spenser felt Ella slide her hand into his and lean closer when she whispered, eyes wide, "What's going on?"

"A miracle healing, apparently," Spenser muttered in return, scowling at his old friend. "Martin, what the devil are you—"

"I know, lad. This isn't at all the way I wanted to do this." Martin wagged a finger at Spenser. "But you left me no choice."

"You collapsed in the ballroom," Spenser reminded him, scanning a disbelieving glance over him. "I thought you were dying. The doctor said to make you comfortable, and I thought..." He broke off, unwilling to put voice to his fears. "Now look at you. Healthy as an ox."

Martin rested his hand on Spenser's shoulder and said, as if confidentially, "He doesn't seem to be a very good doctor. I wouldn't hire him again, if I were you." Then he gleefully clapped his hands together and turned toward Mr. Gordon. "Ah! You brought them, then?"

The solicitor smiled smugly and reached for his satchel. "As requested."

As Mr. Gordon untied the gold braid tie of his satchel and pulled several papers from it, Spenser released Ella's hand and stepped forward. "Damnation, Martin! What is going on?"

“I summoned Gordon while you were off at Pensworth House with your stepfather,” Martin explained as he reached for his pair of bent spectacles and perched them on his nose, “and before I tracked you down at the Whitwell Ball. I had to stop you before you did something you would regret.”

“What are you talking about?” Spenser spread out his arms wide to indicate the cramped, poorly furnished room around them. “How can you summon a solicitor? You live here and wear threadbare clothes. You have no money and depend on me to bring you food.”

“Because it makes you feel good to help me, and because I enjoy your company. We need each other.”

Spenser pointed at Martin’s threadbare clothes. “You’re one step above being a beggar.”

“Actually, I’m not.” He shook his head. “But money and the things it can buy stopped being important to me a very long time ago. I have a good life here with what I have and friends like you to share it with.” He scanned over the documents and nodded approvingly. “Very good, Gordon. These agreements will do nicely, I think.”

Mr. Gordon smiled, pleased at the compliment, and looked up at Spenser. “Mr. Henslow is one of the wealthiest men in the United Kingdom, with business interests spreading across several industries and reaching all the way to the Americas and India.”

Spenser blinked, unable to fathom that. Then anger flashed over him. “You’re bamming me!”

“Not at all.” Mr. Gordon straightened his shoulders, as if offended on Martin’s behalf. “Mr. Henslow is one in a very rare club of men whose wealth reaches over one million pounds.”

“Now, now, Gordon,” Martin muttered as he examined the pages again. “No need to brag. You know I don’t care about that.”

Spenser’s mouth fell open, and a quick glance over his shoulder at Ella proved she was just as stunned as he was.

“One...”

“Million pounds, yes,” Mr. Gordon finished, as casually as if naming the price of hosiery in a Burlington Arcade shop. Spenser could tell from the man’s expression that he wasn’t lying. “He’s the sole owner of the Henslow Company. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?”

Heard of it? Spenser nearly laughed. Every businessman in England knew that company. It reportedly owned a large swathe of properties across the City and the East End, including several warehouses near the wharves at Wapping and Limehouse. Spenser had always assumed the company was a conglomerate of influential partners and that the connection to Martin’s last name was simply a coincidence. But now...

Damnation. “You lied to me,” Spenser bit out.

“The same way you lied to me?” Ella interjected.

Double damnation. The irony grated. “For completely different reasons.” He cast an apologetic glance at her. “I did it to protect you.” Then, much quieter, “Because I care about you. You mean the world to me, Ella.”

“Not so completely different, then,” Martin corrected.

Spenser turned to him, aghast. “You let me believe you needed me!”

“I *do* need you, lad, more than you know.” A wounded expression darkened Martin’s face. “You’re the dearest friend I have in the world. You care only about me, not how much money I have, what connections my business has, or what I might be able to do for you.”

“I wouldn’t have cared about any of that. I cared about ___”

“About keeping me safe, warm, and fed. Aye—you cared about *me*.” Martin approached him and tapped him on the chest with the sheath of papers. “I let you bring me food, coal, blankets—all of it—because I knew you cared about me. If I’d have told you I didn’t need all that, everything between

us would have been ruined. You never would have treated me the same way again.”

“You took advantage of my kindness.”

“Actually,” Mr. Gordon rushed to defend Martin, “he revised his will last year to—”

“It’s all right,” Martin hushed the solicitor. “Spenser doesn’t need to know all that. He just needs to know that I appreciate him and his kindness.” His voice cracked. “That I love him like a son, and that I have every intention of protecting him exactly as a father would.” He gently pushed the papers into Spenser’s hands. “Read these. You’ll understand.”

Spenser blew out a sigh and read through the papers. Three agreements—no, two agreements and a will. But the more he read, the more confused he became.

Ella came up beside him. “What are they?”

“Your future,” Martin answered her. He nodded at the papers, then crossed the room to the old dish dresser in the corner. “I’ve had Gordon put together new business arrangements.” He lowered himself slowly with his arthritic knees to search the bottom cabinet and explained, “Originally, after you’d saved me, I’d changed my will so that you’d inherit all my interests in the company upon my death and—”

“*What?*” Spenser choked out. He simply couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“I had no one else to leave it to.” Martin’s voice took on a faraway quality, and he didn’t dare look over his shoulder at Spenser. “My only son Benjamin died thirty years ago before he could marry and have children of his own. My dear Betsy passed on shortly after that, and I had no other family. I’d spent too much time at my business to have more children. Friends were few and far between, and I couldn’t completely trust the ones I had.” His voice lowered as he added, “Until you came along.” He cleared his throat to remove the emotion from his voice. “But I realized tonight that I might live for a few more decades—”

“I very much hope so!” Ella exclaimed.

Martin paused in his search of the cabinet to smile at her over his shoulder. “Spenser said you were a kind one. And pretty, too.” He winked at her. “He didn’t lie.” He turned back toward the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of port and two glasses. He carried them to the table. “Gordon, bring two more glasses, eh?”

The solicitor quickly did as asked. Clearly, he respected Martin and had worked with him for years, holding the same loyalty for the old man as Spenser did.

But Spenser was also angry. And completely confused. “What are these new arrangements?” Spenser set the papers down on the table. “What are you scheming at?”

Martin poured port into the four glasses. “I want to stop you from making the same mistake I did.” He held out one of the glasses to Spenser. “I don’t want you to end up old and alone like me.” He offered a second glass to Ella. “This was the only way I could ensure the two of you had a chance of being together.”

Her fingers closed around the glass. “How so?”

“You’re the daughter of a wealthy and powerful duke,” Martin explained, gesturing for Mr. Gordon to help himself to the last glass as he raised his own to his lips. “I’m not oblivious to how society works, my lady, and I know how torn you are between accepting the kind of man your parents want for you and your love for Spenser.”

Her shoulders slumped beneath the weight of that truth, and she whispered, “I won’t marry for anything less than love.”

“That’s a good lass.” Martin’s face glowed with approval. “But that choice might cost you dearly.” He pointed his glass toward her. “Of course, you’re old enough to defy your parents and marry whomever you wish, including a Paternoster printer. But it would cost you your family, and I wouldn’t ever want that for you. Yet if Spenser weren’t just a

printer—if he were the fourth wealthiest businessman in England—”

“The *third* wealthiest,” Gordon corrected. “Your overseas interests did exceedingly well last year, sir.”

Spenser stared at the solicitor and how calmly he had said that. *Good God.*

“The third wealthiest,” Martin repeated. His mouth quirked into a self-deprecating smile. “As I said, I couldn’t care less about the money.” Then his smile turned somber. “But it *will* be important to you two. Having all that wealth will make Spenser acceptable to everyone—including your parents—and all those society lords and ladies wouldn’t dare cut you for being his wife.”

“I don’t care about any of those people.” She reached for Spenser’s hand. “I keep trying to tell him that.”

Spenser grimaced. “Because I know how hard life will be as my wife.”

She squeezed his hand. “And how wonderful.”

His chest warmed. Dear God, he loved her. Yet unanswered questions still spun inside his head. “What arrangements did you make on our behalf?”

“No,” Martin corrected. “I made arrangements on *my* behalf.” He selected a sheet of paper from the stack and pushed it across the table toward Spenser and Ella. “This one says that you’ll take care of me for the rest of my life. All the details are stated herein. You’ll treat me as family, care for me, and provide for me, and in return, I will sell you all my business interests for a single penny.” He slid over additional pages. “I’ve also redone my will to take this new agreement into account.”

“I’ve laid it all out in proper legal language,” Mr. Gordon assured Spenser with a nod at the papers. “All you have to do is sign them.”

“No.” Spenser shoved the documents back toward the solicitor.

Martin's face fell.

He slipped his arm around Ella and drew her against his side. "We will welcome you into our lives as family and take care of you as long as you'd like," Spenser explained. "But I don't need a binding contract for that. We wouldn't do anything less for you, simply because we love you, you frustrating old man." He paused and pulled in a deep breath, his voice hoarse. "You truly think of me as a son?"

His eyes glistened. "Aye, lad."

"Then most sons would be given no more than a forty percent share of the family business while their fathers are still alive. You can do whatever you want in your will, but that's all I will accept now." He cleared the knot of emotion from his throat. "To be treated like a son and no more."

Martin nodded and blinked hard as he looked away.

"I'd be happy to take care of that in the morning," Mr. Gordon assured them. "But there's more. We have another agreement to discuss."

Good Lord. Another one? "For what?" Spenser asked cautiously.

Mr. Gordon sorted through the pages on the table. "Mr. Henslow asked me to prepare an offer for the Duke of Pensworth. Mr. Henslow will pay off all of Simon Radcliff's rather mountainous debts in return for the Duke of Pensworth sending his son away from England until the marquess inherits."

Spenser understood completely. *That sly old man...* He leveled a knowing glance at Martin. "So he can't interfere with our marriage."

"Exactly." Martin paused. "Do you agree with that proposed arrangement?"

"Yes!" Ella answered quickly for him.

With a wry smile, Spenser echoed, "Yes."

"Very well," Mr. Gordon said. "I will approach the Duke of Pensworth in the morning and provide all arrangements for

the marquess, including passage to France, rooms in Paris, and an adequate allowance. I have no doubt that His Grace will agree to our terms.”

Martin chuckled and lifted his glass in a toast. “To the marquess—may he have a long stay abroad!”

Relief swelled in Spenser’s chest. For the first time, he could finally let himself believe that he and Ella would have a wonderful life together, a home filled with children and books...and poetry. Lots and lots of poetry. He leaned over and placed a kiss to Ella’s temple.

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, as if she, too, felt the same relief and hope for the future.

Then she slipped away from Spenser’s side and approached Martin. She softly asked, “You really did all this just to bring us together?”

“It was the only way.” Martin scowled over her head at Spenser. “You nearly ruined it all by almost getting into a duel with your brother. That’s when I had no choice but to feign an attack of apoplexy.” He arched a bushy gray brow. “You almost gave me the real thing, I’ll have you know.”

“You did all this,” Ella repeated, shaking her head in disbelief, “but you don’t even know me.”

His old eyes softened on her. “I know that Spenser loves you, and I love Spenser. That’s all that matters.”

Ella placed a kiss to his cheek. “You wonderful man,” she told him, her voice quavering. “You’re the best fairy godmother a girl could ever hope for.”

Martin blushed from embarrassment yet shrugged away her compliment. He lifted his glass to toast the two of them. “And to you—may you have more happiness than you know what to do with.”

Spenser came up behind Ella and slipped his arm lovingly around her. She nestled against his side, exactly where she belonged.

There would be all kinds of days and years ahead of them, filled with laughter and love, and all kinds of nights in each other's arms, holding off the dawn as long as possible. But here and now, finally, he had everything he had ever wanted in life, and they all had each other. They could face anything now. *Together.*

She tilted her face up toward his, and happily, he leaned down to kiss her.

EPILOGUE

Mayfair, London

Three Months Later

Ella leaned against the stone balustrade edging the terrace and gazed out over the garden, dotted with lamps and luminaries of all shapes and sizes. The Duke of Durham's house was awash in light and music, and the crush of guests spilled out of its large rooms, across the rear garden, and into the park beyond, which had been thrown open wide for the evening's festivities. She smiled at the sight. After all, it was one thing to host such a grand society party as her parents had done for her at the beginning of the season—it was something altogether singular for them to do it a second time at the end of the same season, and to do it even more grandly than the first. The whole house simply sparkled.

“Exactly as it should be,” she whispered to herself.

She held up her left hand. The gold band gleamed even in the soft torchlight.

“No.” A joyous little smile tugged at her lips. “*This* is exactly as it should be.”

Heavens, she was married! She could still hardly believe it, although she'd wanted nothing more for the past three months. Today had been a fairy tale, complete with her prince pledging his life to her... Oh, but goodness, what a day! Her mother had been in an absolute state all morning, her father had done his best to hide himself in his study to stay out of the way, and Ella didn't think she'd ever be able to live down the embarrassment of Mama having *the talk* with her about her wedding night. It was all she could do not to giggle. She knew what happened between husbands and wives—after all, she

and Spencer loved each other too much to wait until tonight to make love.

When she'd emerged from her father's coach at the steps of St George's Church that morning, then walked on Papa's arm down the aisle, she was certain she'd been floating on air. Spenser turned to look at her and simply took her breath away. She'd never seen him so handsome as at that moment, nor loved him more.

She barely remembered a word of the wedding service, too caught up in the whirlwind of emotion. Mama cried. Ella was certain so did Papa. Martin had stood next to Spenser as his best man, dressed in a fine outfit especially made for the day, and Ella knew the old man had fussed about every ha'penny spent on it. But Martin had also beamed with pride, his chest puffed out with love for both of them. The pews were filled with friends and family, including her friends from France and Spenser's stepfather. She'd insisted Pensworth be invited because she wanted reconciliation between Spenser and the duke and because she wanted their future children to know all their family, even the ones by marriage. Pensworth surprised the daylights out of them by accepting. Yet he knew his place, granting them his blessing and wishing them well, and Ella took hope in that.

Of course, Simon was not in attendance. He had left for the Continent immediately after Martin struck his agreement with the Duke of Pensworth. His father had made the arrangement clear: Simon could either leave for Italy or be cut off completely, and since he wasn't a peer—*yet*—he could easily be tossed into debtor's prison to rot. Someday, Ella knew, he would return to England, and hopefully, it would be a day long, long into the future.

But for now, Ella and Spenser could forget about him and simply enjoy their new life together.

Then, the wedding ceremony was over. She and Spenser were man and wife, and they drove off together in an open-topped barouche, tossing coins and candy to the children gathered on the church steps and flowers to the unmarried girls.

Ella had no idea any person could be as happy as she was at that moment. They took the long way around the park to reach her parents' house, where the wedding breakfast eventually gave way to tonight's grand ball. Ella wanted that ride to never end.

“She walks in beauty like the night,” Spenser's deep voice twined through her as he came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist to draw her back against him.

A long sigh fell from her. “No, she doesn't.”

“No,” he agreed, nuzzling her nape with his lips. “She's simply beautiful all on her own, without any comparison at all.”

“*That* compliment I will gladly take.” She turned around, wrapped her arms around his neck, and leaned up to kiss him with all the love and desire she possessed.

He groaned against her kiss and tore his mouth away. “Keep that up,” he warned huskily in her ear, “and I'll carry you away before the party ends.”

“Promise?”

With a playful growl, he snatched her up into his arms and swung her around in a circle, then kissed her languidly as he slowly lowered her to the ground. Her knees nearly buckled beneath her. *Goodness.*

She knew now exactly what his love was capable of doing to her, how he could devastate her with only a touch and a well-placed kiss, and a warm ache began to form between her legs. She prayed she never lost this yearning for him, or the way he looked at her as if she were the most precious, most wonderful woman in the world...just as he was looking at her now.

He caressed her cheek beneath his knuckles. “Are you happy, my love?”

She turned her head to place a kiss to his palm and admitted, “More than I ever thought possible.”

Behind them in the park, fireworks arced high into the sky, then fell to the earth in showers of brilliant reds and blues. Guests poured out of the house through the row of open French doors, and although the musicians in the ballroom played on, they were ignored beneath choruses of *ooohhs* and *ahhhs* with each popping burst overhead. Additional fireworks were lit on the ground, with spinning wheels throwing off streams of sparks and towers going up in bursts of dancing flames.

Ella grabbed her skirt and turned to hurry toward the steps leading down into the garden. She'd been looking forward to the fireworks all evening and didn't want to miss—

“Oh no, you don't!” Spenser took her elbow from behind and stopped her.

She turned to face him, bewildered.

“I'll never make that mistake again.”

She parted her lips, confused. “What mistake?”

“I'll never let you leave me twice upon a midnight.”

He kissed her to seal that promise, and her heart swelled. He wrapped her arm around his, and together, they walked down to the garden and into their future.

Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

SPECIAL SNEAK PEEK!

I hope you enjoyed Ella and Spenser's fairytale story. If so, I encourage you to check out another novella that also takes place at Lord and Lady Whitwell's ball – [One Enchanted Evening](#). Enjoy this special sneak peek!

ONE ENCHANTED EVENING...

ONE VERY SPECIAL MEETING

Mason Granger is a victim of proximity. Although the wealthy businessman spurns all society events, his townhouse sits next to Lord and Lady Whitwell's, which means he's caught up in their ball against his will—and with their guests when a little girl sneaks into his rear garden to watch the fireworks...and when her alluring mother Nora chases after.

Emmeline hasn't spoken a word since the carriage accident that killed her father. Nora would do anything to help her daughter, but all the experts in England haven't been able to regain her voice. But with the help of his shaggy hound Brutus, Mason does the seemingly impossible of getting Emmeline to speak again—that is, to the dog. Stubbornly, she refuses to speak to anyone else, but Mason is determined to help both her and Nora. As Mason and Nora help Emmeline find the courage to overcome the past's tragedies, can they also find the courage to embrace their own future's happiness?

CHAPTER ONE

Damnation! Mason Granger blew out an aggravated breath and rubbed at his nape.

He tried to concentrate on the papers resting on his desk, and especially on the long list of warehouse repairs his manager in Birmingham had forwarded that demanded his immediate attention. But focusing proved impossible against the noise and activity coming from the town house next door.

Lord and Lady Whitwell were entertaining. *Again*. And this time, not just one of those musicales or dinners they threw with such frequency that they were held seemingly for no other reason than to celebrate a day that ended in *Y*.

No, tonight's party was a grand affair that aimed to be the event of the season. A masquerade ball to which hundreds of people had been invited and who now crowded the grand house's reception rooms and gardens. So many guests that they'd spilled out the front door into the courtyard and drive. So many that they'd begun to overflow into the adjoining park and most likely onto his own doorstep.

He grimaced. So many that the combination of music, laughter, and shouts pounded inside his head like a hammer and made working on business nearly impossible.

Glass shattered—

No, *several* glasses shattered as a footman's tray of refreshments most likely tumbled to the marble floor.

At Mason's feet, his dog Brutus whined with distress.

"Well, you know that they say," he reassured the large shaggy hound by reaching down to scratch behind his floppy ears. "It isn't a party until something gets broken."

A loud smash—

Blowing out a hard sigh, he muttered as he dipped his quill into the ink pot, "And judging by the sound of that, there went the flower urn in the Whitwell's front drive."

He bit back a curse. Even on a good night, when half its population wasn't attempting to crowd itself into the house

next door, Mason disliked London. Too big and crowded, too noisy, too polluted.

“Too many damn people poking their noses into my business,” he grumbled as he marked a quick note in the margin.

Yet oddly enough, also too lonely even amid all the people.

He didn't have a large number of friends he could trust with his personal thoughts and concerns. The boys he'd met in school had remained in their home villages, taking apprenticeships or inheriting their fathers' businesses or positions. The large fortune he'd accumulated in the past decade had put an even greater distance between them and him than simple miles. It was the same with those men he now did business with in London, men who were born into the aristocracy and into upper class fortunes. Avoided as *nouveau riche* by one group of men and derided as an upstart by the other, he'd never found his place. Certainly not in London. At least in the country he had his tenants, land managers, and merchants in the village to talk to. Here he had no one.

Which was why he'd never committed to buying a leasehold here. Instead, he rented only for as long as business required him to be in the city. Curse his luck that this season's business was keeping him longer than anticipated when he would have gladly said to hell with London and returned to his estate long before now.

Double curse him that the house his secretary found for him this season was located next to a social epicenter that could have rivaled Vauxhall.

He'd been invited to tonight's ball—just as he'd been for every other one of the Whitwells' soirees. And just as before he'd not gone. He'd rather take a stick in the eye than suffer through that madness next door. Politics, parties, and the peerage could all be damned as far as he was concerned, especially if—

BOOM!!!

His hand jerked, scratching a black streak across the page. With a loud cry, Brutus dove beneath the sofa for cover, but the dog was too big. Only his head was covered while the rest of his large body stuck out in plain sight.

Mason clenched his jaw as more whistles sliced through the night sky, followed by explosions and then crackles as the sparks died away.

Fireworks. They'd set off blasted *fireworks*.

With a curse, he pushed himself away from the desk and strode toward the door. There would be no more work done tonight.

"Brutus," he ordered, "come."

But the dog only whined and attempted to dig even further beneath the sofa.

So Mason left the mongrel where he was and walked through the dark house and outside into the rear garden.

The space was large, thick with shadows, and dense with bushes and trees that had been allowed to grow wild and with flowerbeds that hadn't been properly tended in years. As far as Mason was concerned, it was the perfect escape. His little bit of wilderness in the midst of a crowded city. Tonight, it certainly wasn't quiet and he doubted that the air in London could ever be called fresh, but at least he could take in the cool air and clear his head.

The overgrown bushes along the side wall rustled, and strongly enough that it wasn't an animal, especially not one foolish enough to venture into the garden while Brutus lived here. The hound loved to chase anything that moved, although Mason doubted the mutt would know what to do with a critter if he ever caught one.

He folded his arms over his chest and gritted his teeth in irritation. No, this had to be guests from the party who'd strayed through the little wooden gate in the stone wall that separated his property from Lord Whitwell's, and most likely a couple looking for a private spot for a secret tryst. But Mason was in no mood to allow randy encounters in his rear garden,

especially when he himself hadn't shared the company of a woman in far too long to remember. Just as with the men in his life, the women didn't know what to make of him either, a man who shunned society and had no patience for its idiocies and idleness.

"Get out of the bushes," he ordered. *And get the hell off my property.*

The rustling stilled. Caught. Then slowly, with reluctance to show herself, a small figure in white slid out from the shadows to stand in front of the bushes. She was only a slip of a little girl who couldn't have been more than five or six based on her size and the braids in her hair. Her head was bowed in embarrassment at being caught or—guilt raced through Mason at the possibility—in fear.

"I'm—I'm sorry," he stammered out the apology. "I-I didn't realize—"

Her tiny hands twisted in her cotton night rail, and big, round eyes stared at the ground just in front of where her bare toes poked out from beneath her hem.

"I thought you were guests coming over here to...ah... umm..." He explained dryly, "Experience fireworks."

She darted a glance at him, then went right back to staring at the ground and not saying a word.

With a smile, he lowered onto his heels to bring himself down to her level. Perhaps he could soothe away some of her unease at being discovered and—he winced—yelled at.

"You surprised me," he admitted in a quiet voice that was a stark contrast to the loud noises still coming from the party, which now increased even more to be heard over the fireworks. "I didn't expect a little girl. I expected—" He bit off.

I expected two foxed and randy masqueraders looking to tup a spouse who wasn't theirs against my garden wall.

"Someone from the party," he finished. He cocked a brow. "But your fine white gown indicates that you had other plans for a night out in London...A visit to the opera, perhaps?"

Waltzing at Almack's? Ah, I know—you were on your way to feed the lions at the Tower Menagerie.”

Her eyes rose to meet his, and she stared at him for a moment, still as a statue. He didn't dare to move a muscle or even breathe for fear of further frightening her.

But then her pink lips curled into a small smile at his teasing, and she took a single, hesitant step toward him.

“Introductions are in order.” Despite being half undressed in his shirt sleeves and without a neckcloth, he stood, snapped his boot heels together, and gave her a low and formal bow that would have made the dandies next door jealous. A soft giggle rose to her lips. “I am Mr. Mason Granger, lately of Stratton Hall in Kent, most recently residing here in St James's. And you are Miss...?”

The girl said nothing, her attention rising to the flashes of color and light exploding overhead. Clearly, his brilliant conversation was no match for fireworks.

“Emmeline!” A soft, light voice called out from the bushes behind her, which began to rustle and shake a second time. “Emmeline, come back here this—”

When the woman pushed through the bushes into the garden and saw Mason, she stumbled to a stop. The surprised stare she gave him was identical to the little girl's. Mother and daughter. But unlike the child, she was dressed for the party, wearing a pale blue satin and lace gown whose pastel color highlighted her blonde hair even in the gardens' shadows and flattered her full figure. From her hand, a mask dangled on its ribbon.

But then her attention landed on the little girl. Heedless of both dirtying her gown and being rude to Mason, she dropped to her knees in front of her daughter and grabbed her into her arms. The look of pure relief on the woman's face tugged at Mason's heart.

“Shame on you for sneaking out of the nursery! You nearly gave Nanny and me a heart attack when I went up to check on you and found you missing. Do you realize how

worried I was? How panicked?” She pulled back only far enough to cup the girl’s small face between her gloved hands. “I searched the entire house for you.”

The girl guiltily lowered her eyes.

“And then I saw that the garden gate had been left open. Just the thing you would do, to sneak over here where you wouldn’t be seen disobeying.” She rested her hands on the girl’s shoulders. “And bothering the neighbors.”

The girl cast curious glances at Mason, only half-listening to the loving chastisement her mother was delivering.

The woman rose to her feet and turned apologetically toward Mason. She held the girl in front of her by the shoulders as if not trusting the imp not to disappear into the shadows again. Based on the way the little one’s attention kept moving back to the fireworks, her fear was valid.

“I’m terribly sorry,” the woman rushed out in a breathless apology. “This is my daughter Emmeline. I told her to stay in the nursery with Nanny, that the party was for grownups and not little girls.”

He stifled a smile at the half of that explanation which was meant to chastise her daughter. That half went right over the little girl’s head with the fireworks.

Concern tightened her lips. “Apparently, when her nanny fell asleep, she sneaked out of the house to see the fireworks anyway.”

“She was no trouble.” He smiled, wanting to ease away the woman’s worry when he shouldn’t have cared...except that her daughter remained silent. “I enjoyed having a visitor.”

Oddly enough he meant that. They were the first guests he’d had at the house all season who weren’t related to his business.

She returned his smile and stirred an answering warmth in his chest. “You’re too kind.”

“Not at all.”

She turned her daughter back toward the gate in the wall. “We’ll leave you to enjoy the rest of your evening in peace and quiet.”

“Stay.” The quiet invitation emerged before he could stop it and surprised even him. Then he downright bewildered himself by offering, “Please—stay and watch the fireworks with me.” He looked at Emmeline and nodded toward the rear of the garden. “You’ll be able to see them better from back there.” When the little girl hesitated, he added, “There’s a cement bench next to the rose arbor. If you stand on it, you should be able to see over the wall and right into the park where they’re being set off.”

An expression of desperate longing brightened her face. She shot a glance over her shoulder at her mother in a silent plea for permission.

“All right,” the woman sighed, surrendering the battle. “But only for a few minutes. We don’t want to intrude on this man’s kindness.”

Emmeline cast a grateful look at Mason, then ran away toward the far end of the garden, where she disappeared into the shadows like a ghost into the darkness.

“Thank you,” her mother said. “But really you didn’t have to do that. I’m sure you don’t want us here bothering you.”

“It’s no bother.”

A skeptical look flashed over her face, yet she was polite enough not to argue. “We’re staying with Lord and Lady Whitwell for the season,” she explained, self-consciously hurrying through the informal introduction. “I’m their cousin, Nora, Lady Davenport.”

“A lady,” he repeated, unable to prevent a pang of disappointment that she was part of the London society he despised. “Not a gardener, then?”

“A baroness in the bushes, I’m afraid,” she admitted a bit sheepishly. “And you are?”

“Not a baroness,” he answered, deadpan. “Or in the bushes.”

She laughed at his teasing, and he drank in the sound which lingered, light and lovely, on the soft night air. It wasn't often that he was able to make a woman laugh, especially one so elegant and beautiful. “Not a gardener then either?”

“Nothing as exciting as that, I'm afraid.” He introduced himself. “I'm Mason Granger.”

She waved a hand in the general direction of the masquerade melee next door. “I remember seeing your name on the guest list. Why aren't you at the party, Mr. Granger?”

“I'm not much for large crowds.” Hated them, in fact.

“Me either,” she admitted a bit secretively. “I'd much rather spend a quiet evening in front of the fire. But since I'm staying there, Lady Whitwell insisted I join the party.”

“A guest of honor?”

She grimaced. “A victim of proximity.”

As if on cue, another firework whistled into the sky overhead and burst into a red flare, followed by loud cheering and shouts from the guests who had all come outside to watch the display.

He muttered in exasperation, “Me too.”

Another laugh fell from her lips, and this one danced through him like a warm summer breeze.

Dear Lord, she was enchanting. Completely guileless. And wholly unexpected. If he wasn't careful, she might just captivate him, and he'd end up tripping over his tongue as he had as a boy. He was a grown man for God's sake. He'd built a grand life for himself of wealth, power, and respect, and enough that even as an untitled man of business he'd been invited to half the soirees in London this season.

But those old childhood fears and insecurities still remained, exacerbated by the presence of this alluring woman. She might be a baroness, but she was nothing at all like other peeresses he'd met. Those women were either condescending

because he'd come from a working-class family or simply gave him the cut-direct, although that outright snubbing happened less and less as his wealth grew more and more. He was worth too much now to be ignored. But that only brought out another kind of condescension—bored wives and widows who wanted to bed him, titillated by the thought of intimacies with a man who could never be their true social equal.

But not this woman. Lady Davenport's angelic presence enveloped him until she filled his senses and made his skin tingle. Other society women had always put him on edge because he was never certain that he was seeing the real women they were beneath the satin, jewels, and furs. But this one, who'd fallen to her knees to embrace her child was soft, warm...*genuine*.

So he dared to destroy all polite boundaries of conversation by asking, "What's wrong with your daughter?"

To continue reading Nora and Mason's story,
visit [*One Enchanted Evening*](#).

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