

Elizabeth Ellen Carter

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



WHAT THE FALSE HEART DOOTH KNOW

D
R
A
G
O
N
E
L
A
D
E

**WHAT THE FALSE HEART DO'
KNOW**

**Gems of London
Novella**

Elizabeth Ellen Carter



WHAT THE FALSE HEART DOTH KNOW

Gems of London
Novella

Elizabeth Ellen Carter



© Copyright 2023 by Elizabeth Ellen Carter

Text by Elizabeth Ellen Carter

Cover by Dar Albert

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

P.O. Box 23

Moreno Valley, CA 92556

ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com

Produced in the United States of America

First Edition November 2023

Kindle Edition

Reproduction of any kind except where it pertains to short quotes in relation to advertisement promotion is strictly prohibited.

All Rights Reserved.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

License Notes:

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook, once purchased, may not be sold. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it or borrow it, or it was not given to you and given as a gift for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. If a book was purchased on an unauthorized platform, then it is a pirated and/or unauthorized copy. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Do not purchase or accept pirated copies. Thank you for respecting the author's hard work. For subsidiary rights, contact Dragonblade Publishing, Inc.

© Copyright 2023 by Elizabeth Ellen Carter

Text by Elizabeth Ellen Carter

Cover by Dar Albert

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

P.O. Box 23

Moreno Valley, CA 92556

ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com

Produced in the United States of America

First Edition November 2023

Kindle Edition

Reproduction of any kind except where it pertains to short quotes in relation to advertising or promotion is strictly prohibited.

All Rights Reserved.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

License Notes:

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook, once purchased, may not be resold. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it or borrow it, or it was not purchased for you and given as a gift for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. If this book was purchased on an unauthorized platform, then it is a pirated and/or unauthorized copy and violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Do not purchase or accept pirated copies. Thank you for respecting the author's hard work. For subsidiary rights, contact Dragonblade Publishing, Inc.



ARE YOU SIGNED UP FOR DRAGONBLADE'S BLOG?

You'll get the latest news and information on exclusive giveaways, excerpts, coming releases, sales, free books, cover reveals and more!

Check out our complete list of authors, too!

No spam, no junk. That's a promise!

[Sign Up Here](#)



Dearest Reader;

Thank you for your support of a small press. At Dragonblade Publishing we strive to bring you the highest quality Historical Romance from some of the best authors in the business. Without your support, there is no 'us'. We sincerely hope you adore these stories and find some new favorites along the way.

Happy Reading!

CEO, Dragonblade Publishing



ARE YOU SIGNED UP FOR DRAGONBLADE'S BLOG?

You'll get the latest news and information on exclusive giveaways, exclusive excerpts, coming releases, sales, free books, cover reveals and more.

Check out our complete list of authors, too!

No spam, no junk. That's a promise!

[**Sign Up Here**](#)



Dearest Reader;

Thank you for your support of a small press. At Dragonblade Publishing, we strive to bring you the highest quality Historical Romance from some of the best authors in the business. Without your support, there is no 'us', so we sincerely hope you adore these stories and find some new favorite authors along the way.

Happy Reading!

CEO, Dragonblade Publishing

Additional Dragonblade books by Autho Elizabeth Ellen Carter

Gems of London Series

[Deceiving the Duke \(Book 1\)](#)

[A Curio for the Count \(Book 2\)](#)

[A Sweet Tale of Blessing \(Novella\)](#)

What the False Heart Doth Know (Novella)

Heart of the Corsairs Series

[Captive of the Corsairs \(Book 1\)](#)

[Revenge of the Corsairs \(Book 2\)](#)

[Shadow of the Corsairs \(Book 3\)](#)

[Tidings of Comfort \(Novella\)](#)

King's Rogues Series

[Live and Let Spy \(Book 1\)](#)

[Spyfall \(Book 2\)](#)

[Spy Another Day \(Book 3\)](#)

[Father's Day \(Novella\)](#)

The Lyon's Den Series

[The Lyon Sleeps Tonight](#)

Pirates of Britannia Series

[The de Wolfe of Wharf Street](#)

Also from Elizabeth Ellen Carter

[Dark Heart](#)

[Warming Winter's Heart](#)

[The Ghost Bride \(Novella\)](#)

r

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Publisher's Note

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Elizabeth Ellen Carter

Epigraph

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Epilogue

About the Author

“False face must hide what the false heart doth know”
– William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

“False face must hide what the false heart doth know”

– William Shakespeare, Macbeth



PROLOGUE

Tunbridge Wells
Spring 1819

THE MAN ON the gray horse was a gentleman. A man of quality. Of that could be no doubt.

Lady Sapphira Galbraith watched him approach, her heart beating with the sound of hooves coming ever louder. Finally, the man drew up and Sapphira let out a breath.

“I hope my unannounced presence hasn’t caused you too much inconvenience,” he announced.

She gave him a warm smile but didn’t trust herself to speak – not until her family started to gather outside at the sight of an unexpected visitor.

There was no reason why the presence of Anthony Redthorpe, Earl of Taunton, could be considered untimely by anyone. As the son and heir of the Duke of Denby, most families would give their eyeteeth to be inconvenienced.

And it was no conceit on Sapphira’s part to believe that he had come to see her especially.

Her father, Edward, stepped forward to greet the Earl and assure him that his lordship’s presence was most heartily welcome. After watching Sapphira’s relief, he wisely gathered up the rest of the family – mother and two young brothers – and ushered them inside.

Out of view, but not out of earshot, Anthony took Sapphira’s hand and kissed it. His lips on her exposed wrist sent delightful tingles down her arm. His expression told her full well that he knew the effect his touch had on her.

How desperately she wanted to kiss him, a long, lingering caress like the one they shared at Lady Hatton-Sykes’ ball just a few weeks ago.

“I’ve missed you,” he said softly.

“And I you,” she replied.

He offered his arm. Sapphira accepted it, and they entered the house. The drawing room was a hive of activity with brothers Robert and Anthony hastily marshaling their tin soldiers into order. A maid cleared away things that lingered from that morning while *Maman* waved her handkerchief back and forth.

Where her sister Margaret had got to, Sapphira didn't know.

Beside her, Anthony smiled, politely ignoring the to-do.

"My lord, our gardens have done exceedingly well this year, would you like to see the success Mother has made of the peonies?" she asked in an attempt to distract him for her mother Geraldine's sake, rather than his own.

"I'd be delighted, Lady Sapphira," Anthony answered, his eyes on her, telling her he knew the reason why his attention was being diverted.

Father gave her a nod of approval, so she led their guest out onto the terrace and into the garden.

Bless Anthony. Pretending not to notice the chaos that reigned much of the time at Galbraith home.

Was it any wonder she was in love with him? He had confessed his love and desire for her also, so she had allowed him liberties – a kiss or a look under the moonlight – that would have outraged her mother.

His heart was true; she knew it more than anything else in the world. A marriage proposal was in the offing, perhaps even today since there had been no time at Lady Hatton-Sykes' ball for him to have approached her father, not after Margaret caused them to leave early after she started feeling unwell.

Anthony led her to a bench under the shade of a chestnut tree. They sat on it. "The days since our first meeting have been the happiest of my life," he began.

Sapphira's heart started thumping madly.

"My regard for you has only grown over time, and I have come around and around to love and admire you. My dearest wish, with yours and your father's consent, is to be married."

Sapphira held her breath, waiting for the question that would seal their future together.

A shadow fell across Anthony's face. "However," he said. "It is not my little what my heart desires. My choice of bride has to meet with my father's approval before he will consent."

se. Sapphira caught the warning in his voice. She swallowed. “And th
d Peter will not approve of me?” she asked, pleased that she didn’t sou
vay teastrained.

erchief The shadow disappeared. Anthony’s face brightened and he took h
in his.

“He will adore you as I do, but until I can win his consent, I am n
to offer marriage to you.”

uld you
n order

ression

he back

! in the

his love
three in

d.
ere had
ned her
to feel

y sat.
ife,” he

urdently
father’s

al their

matters
father’s

Sapphira caught the warning in his voice. She swallowed. “And the Duke will not approve of me?” she asked, pleased that she didn’t sound too strained.

The shadow disappeared. Anthony’s face brightened and he took her hand in his.

“He will adore you as I do, but until I can win his consent, I am not free to offer marriage to you.”



CHAPTER ONE

*“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break.”*

*Norfolk
Winter 1819*

THE COACH SWAYED on its suspension, hit broadside by an easterly gust bitter by the chill of the roiling North Sea.

Sapphira watched her mother reach for the leather strap to steady her normally placid face betrayed by an anxious glance through the window.

“I really wish your father wouldn’t do things like this,” she murmured. “This weather is no good for his arthritis. Why on earth does he insist on riding outside?”

Sapphira shared a glance with her younger sister who hid a morose smile before she addressed their mother.

“You know how father is always going on about the benefits of fresh air and exercise,” Margaret said.

The explanation was greeted by a small frown.

Sapphira hastened to cover for her sister. “I think what *Maman* means, is that we’re nearly at Greybridge Castle, and father is keen to get there the best possible time before we lose the afternoon light. So, if he goes outside, the carriage might get there quicker.”

Sapphira knew Margaret had meant no such thing but didn’t want to tell *Maman* what they both suspected – that their usually even-tempered papa had been close to throttling his nine-year-old twin sons, Robert and Peter, when they decided to entertain themselves on the long journey by punching each other in the arm with increasing violence.

For one awful moment a few miles back, Sapphira wondered how her papa would make good his dire threat to have the boys walk outside.

behind the servant's carriage which followed them.

Now the lads were angelically asleep, having worn out the last of their energy about three miles back.

Three miles farther north. Three miles farther away from Tu Wills Wells...

Sapphira rubbed her hands together before removing her cashmere leather gloves to pick up her knitting. So far she had gone four hours without thinking of *him*.

Anthony.

But once the vision was conjured in her mind's eye, it was there and couldn't be forgotten.

She shifted in her seat and busied her hands with the knitting, using them to distract herself from falling into tears again.

In a few short weeks, Anthony would marry.

And it wouldn't be to her.

Still, she vowed to be of good cheer. She made that promise to her father, who had worried about her ever since they'd received word of Anthony's engagement. Her father had suggested another season in London to get her disappointment. But how could she justify her father's expectation that she joyfully attend balls and soirees knowing the man she loved – *would* love – would soon be married to someone else?

If it had been *her* heart alone that had been broken, she might have forgiven it, but it wasn't.

Anthony loved her too.

Oh yes, Sapphira knew how that sounded. She wasn't so much of a fool to not know there were men who vowed to be in love and played false.

How could she possibly explain any of this to her parents and not let them think worse of the man?

So, she said nothing of Anthony's private vows to her. Let them think that disappointment was hers alone. Sapphira shifted in her seat, stretched her neglected muscles, and willing the journey to be over. As she adjusted her scarf, a delicate chain tugged at her neck, a tangible token of his once regard...

Margaret caught her eye and offered a slight furrow of the brow in a question.

Sapphira replied with a smile and returned to her knitting.

Since she did not wish a second season, father had arranged for them to come north. North to Norfolk by the sea to spend a few weeks overwintering with their cousins, the Weycliffe family.

Sapphira set down her knitting and moved the thick curtain that covered the re-lined window. Outside was all gray – the sky and the sea before her, but without silhouetted black against the leaden sky, was their destination, Grey

Castle, out on the promontory overlooking the village of Tebbing-by-Sea.

The carriage slowed as it began the incline up the exposed headland and horses struggled against the weight of the carriage and the relentless gales threatened the poor beasts' footing.

The boys woke from their slumber but had the good sense to keep their enthusiasm under control as mother was beginning to look decidedly annoyed. Her grip on the leather strap tightened as the carriage was blasted again, first by wind but now by pelting rain.

"Sapphira, do close the curtain," she instructed. "You're letting the wind do my family's thorny sin."

Was she?

She hadn't noticed.

Everything had felt cold for months.

Outside, the coachman yelled over the top of the wind to urge the horses borne up the road. From the gap in the curtain, Sapphira noted the first large drop of rain on the window that heralded an impending storm.

She put her knitting away and braced herself not just against the wind but also the whirlwind of activity that would occur when they arrived at Greybridge.

not have

think the

etching

rested her

on her ardent

in silent

Sapphira replied with a smile and returned to her knitting.

Since she did not wish a second season, father had arranged for them to come north. North to Norfolk by the sea to spend a few weeks over winter with their cousins, the Weycliffe family.

Sapphira set down her knitting and moved the thick curtain that covered the window. Outside was all gray – the sky and the sea before her, but there, silhouetted black against the leaden sky, was their destination, Greybridge Castle, out on the promontory overlooking the village of Tebbing-by-Sea.

The carriage slowed as it began the incline up the exposed headland. The horses struggled against the weight of the carriage and the relentless gale that threatened the poor beasts' footing.

The boys woke from their slumber but had the good sense to keep their enthusiasm under control as mother was beginning to look decidedly ill. Her grip on the leather strap tightened as the carriage was blasted again, not just by wind but now by pelting rain.

"Sapphira, do close the curtain," she instructed. "You're letting the cold in."

Was she?

She hadn't noticed.

Everything had felt cold for months.

Outside, the coachman yelled over the top of the wind to urge the horses up the road. From the gap in the curtain, Sapphira noted the first large spots of rain on the window that heralded an impending storm.

She put her knitting away and braced herself not just against the squalls, but also the whirlwind of activity that would occur when they arrived at Greybridge.



CHAPTER TWO

“And nothing is, but what is not.”

IN HER HEAD, Sapphira counted off the family they would soon be going to. There was Lady Katherine, the dowager duchess, her mother’s second husband. Then there was her eldest son, Lord Lawrence Weycliffe, the current Duke of Greybridge, and his wife Lady Beatrice. They had two children, a daughter, Caroline, who was near to Margaret’s age, and George, who was the same age as her brothers.

Then there was Innes, Lawrence’s younger brother by ten years, who had just returned home after three years on the Continent.

A houseful of people.

Family.

What better place to bring in the New Year? They would help her forget her disappointment.



“THEY’RE HERE!”

The boyish yell made its way down the stairs to the entrance hall and was rapidly followed a few moments later by not one, but two sets of gasping footfalls. Young George Weycliffe, his blond hair shining like the sun, sovereign, bounded down the stairs, quickly followed by a slightly younger boy whom Sapphira didn’t know. He was introduced as Simon Rivers, a friend of George’s, who was staying for the winter.

At seeing their cousin and another boy their age, Peter and Robert stepped forward in ranks with the family, although Peter cast a glance back at his father for approval before doing so.

“Boys! Manners,” he said. His voice rumbled like the thunder of a cannon. The four boys stopped, remaining as still as statues while the rest

Weycliffe family descended the stairs.

The Duke was the first to approach them. Lawrence took her right hand while his pretty wife kissed father's cheek.

Sapphira stood back and let the younger children express enthusiastic welcome. She found a smile when the dowager duchess met her eye.

She swallowed apprehension, wondering what her mother might have written about her. The look of pity in the older woman's face told her everything she needed to know.

greeting.
cousin.
Duke of
, Lady
the same
who had

Lady Katherine extended her hands. Sapphira stepped forward toward them, bracing for those words, no doubt meant in comfort, but offering because they would cut deep into her soul. The dowager got no further speaking Sapphira's name before gleeful laughter echoed from the top of the stairs. The bounding footsteps that followed mirrored those of the two just moments before.

The man who descended was aged about thirty-two. Slender in build but good looking, hair golden like all the members of the Weycliffe family, he came to a stop at the bottom of the stairs.

r forget

"Innes, for heaven's sake, have a bit of decorum," said Lady Katherine with great exasperation.

Innes blew a kiss in his mother's direction and promptly turned his attention to the boys who had gathered around him.

"You promised, Uncle Innes," said George. "You promised we would open your gifts as soon as Robert and Peter got here."

nd was
ilopping

"And indeed, I did, my little sunshine, but you must first ask your mother and your papa if you might take your leave. That's what a gentleman does."

a new
younger
ndell, a

George did exactly as instructed and in such a flawless manner that Sapphira could see Lady Beatrice preening. The boy's father, on the other hand, shared a look with his brother that let him know perfectly well that he knew he was being manipulated.

t broke
her for

"When you have finished greeting our guests, then you may go." Lawrence instructed his son.

Sapphira found herself mobbed by two boys who were doing the best to do properly as instructed. Sapphira spoke just a few words with them, so as not to deprive them unduly of their play.

of the

Upon being released from their obligations, all four boys bounded

stairs and were met on the landing by a woman Sapphira presumed to be her mother's George's governess.

The poor thing would have her hands full minding four boisterous boys. "Cousin Sapphira," said Lady Caroline artlessly, "you must tell me how you caught London and your season."

Over the girl's shoulder, Sapphira saw her mother raise her eyes in alarm. Caroline carried on obliviously, "Papa says I may have my season this year. I shall have to wait for another two years and go with Margaret."

So, news of her disappointment had not been shared with *all* the members of the family, it would appear.

Sapphira was glad for it.

"I shall tell you all I can over supper," she promised.

"You must be exhausted from your long journey," said Lawrence, "but the boys' curiosity must wait to be sated. Do refresh yourselves. We are a very informal household, particularly at this time of year, so we will be as friendly as possible."

Finally, he

THE GALBRAITH FAMILY were shown to their rooms. The boys would be taken to the nursery where they could play together under supervision.

Caroline had invited Margaret to share her room, leaving Sapphira with her own room.

She found her maid, Alice, already there unpacking. Sapphira went to the window and pulled back the curtain. The room had the easterly aspect.

It looked out over the beach and the sea beyond. Directly below, along the seafront, wild waves crashed over the seawall and onto the cobblestones.

"It's bleak out there, my lady, I'm glad the walls of the castle are so thick," which led to the little township a few hundred yards further up the coast. "It's bleaker than the other side of the hill," her maid observed. "And it's such a nice room. I'm sure it will be much lovelier when this bad weather is gone." Alice chatted away about the

journey to Greybridge Castle, as she finished unpacking and hung up her things. "I'll go," for Sapphira to wear to dinner.

"I'm sure you'll want to rest, miss. Would you like me to help you get undressed?"

Sapphira shook her head.

"Leave that Alice, I can manage. You must be just as exhausted."

Finally, he

d to be welcome.” The girl showed her relief. “Thank you, my Lady, that’d be welcome.”

After the door closed behind the maid, Sapphira let her posture sag. It was the first time she’d been alone in three days, and the niggling headache might have a chance to ebb if she was simply left be.

Not that she could blame her family for *not* wanting to leave her alone, but on hearing news of Anthony’s engagement, she had fallen into a faint. Once she woke up, she wouldn’t eat for three days. And, in the weeks following the news, she could hardly bring herself to speak his name. To her shame, she’d even written to Anthony, begging him to tell her that the news wasn’t true.

There was no reply.

Her mother warned her against lowering her dignity by chasing after a man who had clearly made his choice with another. A week later, Alice, via Anthony’s footmen, had handed her a note in Anthony’s handwriting.

It said, simply, “I cannot express to you how sorrowed I am.”

Sapphira slipped off her travel dress and took one last look at herself before closing the curtains. She caught her reflection in the lamplight. A gleam from the fine gold necklace she wore caught her eye.

She touched the chain.

Oh, that beautiful summer’s day.

Anthony had given it to her only a week before news of his betrothal reached her. She closed her eyes tightly, feeling the bite of the links in the palm of her hand. She conjured up the day in her mind, that time when they—when she and Anthony had been so very, very happy.

There had been a treasure hunt at Aizlewood Hall, and a party of young men and four young women had elected to start their hunt in the woods. They’d stayed together as a group for as long as it took to reach the tree line before, pair by pair, they split up into their courting couples.

Anthony had taken her by the hand and led her towards the southern bank of the babbling brook. The dappled shade was cool against the sun and the blue sky above. After a moment or two of walking, the woods opened onto the bank of a stream. The stump of a long cut-down tree was large enough for two people to sit on.

Sapphira was mindful of the treasure hunt that brought them there. She was looking out for the bright red paper lantern onto which was written

the most next clue.

There was nothing here. Nor was there any clue in Anthony's expression. This He'd been reserved for most of the day. To anyone who didn't know of as well as she did, there was naught amiss. Only she noticed.

Now they were alone, she could ask.

one. "All is not well, is it?"

a dead He offered a half smile.

couple "I finally got an audience with my father."

He said Sapphira held her breath. Hope welled in her breast. He *would* ask to tell her to marry him!

But Anthony's expression didn't lighten; it grew darker still. He covered her cheek.

His eyes fell to her lips, and they parted, anticipating the kiss that would follow. She returned them measure for measure until she was breathless with them.

It was passionate and arousing.

the sea It was *wrong*.

light, the "I love you, Sapphira," he said after a long moment. "He pulled a box from his pocket. It contained a long delicate gold chain.

"Please, accept this as a token of my love for you. It belonged to my grandmother. It's one of the few pieces of jewelry I have which is minimal. Sheto give."

Not knowing what to say, Sapphira nodded which Anthony took as acceptance. He slipped the chain over her head. The end of it hung between her breasts.

"Your father has refused his permission, hasn't he?" she said.

Anthony rallied. "Yes. For now. But I won't let this be the end of the matter. There's more to this than my father is willing to concede. I intend to find out."

nd of a "What is it?"

Anthony shook his head and smiled. "It's nothing that should spoil a beautiful day as this and company which is even more lovely."

Before Sapphira could press for more, a couple from their party entered their glen.

"Percy and Cynthia have found the next clue! Come on!"

"Then lead the way!" said Anthony brightly. As he aided Sapphira

the tree stump, she squeezed his hand which caused him to look down
ession. “I love you, Anthony, for better or for worse.”
ow him “For richer or for poorer?” he asked.
She nodded.
He offered a wry smile before kissing her tenderly on the cheek.

κ her to

ressed

ses that
eathless

a small

l to my
e alone

κ as her
nestled

l of the
itend to

il a day

entered

a up off

the tree stump, she squeezed his hand which caused him to look down at her.

“I love you, Anthony, for better or for worse.”

“For richer or for poorer?” he asked.

She nodded.

He offered a wry smile before kissing her tenderly on the cheek.



CHAPTER THREE

*“O, full of scorpions is my mind!”
No. She wouldn’t cry, not any more...*

SAPPHIRA TURNED TO the bed and tucked herself beneath the covers.

The tears sprang regardless. She squeezed her eyes tightly and listened to the ceaseless roar of the pounding sea competing with the wintry squall that penetrated even this fortress of stone.

How like her heart it was, now locked up forever in a tower protected from the battering of the world outside – but not entirely.

To her surprise, her sleep was a deep and restful one until she was awoken by the sound of thunder.

Or at least she *thought* it was thunder.

When it continued, accompanied by the stomping of feet, she realized her room was below the nursery, and the boys, with their boundless energy, were playing.

A moment later, a clock in the hall chimed five, and her maid knocked on the door. Given entrance, Alice set the lamps. Another maid entered with a steaming ewer of hot water.

“You’re looking quite refreshed, Miss,” she said. “You seem better than when we arrived.”

“Thank you. I slept well.”

Alice was watchful. She knew, perhaps better than all of her family, that Anthony’s engagement affected her. And, if she didn’t pull herself together, the girl would feel obliged to speak to her mother about her. Another matter, no matter how well-meaning, was not what she wanted.

Sapphira got out of bed and stretched.

“The red dress for tonight I think,” she decided. “It’s close enough to Christmas to have some cheer.”

The decision was met with a swift look of surprise before being sul-

by a more deferential expression.

“Very good, Miss. Red’s a very becoming color on you.”

Sapphira began to wash while Alice considered the jewel accessories that would look best with her attire.

“Miss, given that we’re at Greybridge for three weeks, and there are social engagements, I was wondering whether you’d mind if I offer my services to Lady Margaret and Lady Caroline as well as yourself? I heard from Lady Beatrice’s maid that the Duchess is not quite ready to let go of her apron strings, but if I could work with the two misses, I think it would be quite a treat for them.”

Alice’s powers of observation were most acute indeed. Sapphira knew her sister too wanted a lady’s maid, or at least a companion of her own instead of a governess, and mother and father had yet to relent.

“I think that would be a wonderful idea, I know Margaret adores you. I think you would be good for Caroline as well. You have my permission. I will ensure that mother approves also.”

In truth, there was a reason other than altruism that caused Sapphira to agree so readily. If her maid was otherwise engaged, it would mean more time to spend alone and escape the well-meaning enquiries of family and sympathetic glances of servants.

Upstairs, a herd of elephants stomped across the floor – or at least it seemed so to Sapphira. Now washed, she allowed Alice to help her in with her gown.

“What on earth are the boys doing up there? Restaging the Battle of Waterloo?” she inquired with amused exasperation.

Alice laughed. “Boys like that need to be outside, not cooped up in here. It’s a pity the weather isn’t any better.”

“The housekeeper, Mrs. Hopkirk, swears we’re going to get snow for the New Year. She can feel it in her waters. Or so she says.”

Sapphira took a glance at the curtains. “Judging by the water outside the window, I think we’re going to get nothing more than sleet. We’ll just have to make the best of it, I suppose.”

“What are you planning to do, Miss?”

“Nothing. I’ll shall glory in doing nothing at all. Finish my knitting perhaps. And there’s nothing stopping me from going into the library to find a good book to read and read until the first buds of spring emerge.

Sapphira felt the final pull of the ribbons cinching her into her gown, the tug of bows being tied.

“You can leave me now; I can see to myself. Go see to the other maids.” Alice set down the brush, bobbed a curtsy, and left.

Sapphira took the slender gold chain that she had set aside and viewed her reflection as she put it around her neck once more. Brown eyes learned back at her. She touched a hand to her dark brown hair to set a pin in place. *What was Anthony doing now?*

She swallowed back emotion. If her heart was ever to mend, she would not think of Anthony less. As she turned on her stool, the gold chain glinted in the lamplight, she raised a hand to touch it.

Would she ever get over him if she kept wearing his totem as a remembrance? She ought to take it off...

The thought of doing so made her chest heave with still raw emotion. Removing the chain for good would be like ripping off a healing. It would make the scarring worse. Her hand fell from her neck.

The clock struck six, Sapphira started and took one last look in her reflection. She pinched her cheeks to add color before she left the room.

On her way to the staircase, she glanced in an open doorway and saw Innes’ reflection in the long glass. There seemed to be quite the performance going on as his valet fussed over the folds of his master’s cravat.

Sapphira smiled. Now, the door opposite opened, and Alice emerged with a satisfied look on her face. Behind her two girls—no—two young girls emerged.

Margaret’s chestnut brown hair was styled half-up as was Caroline’s blond hair. Each wore a simple piece of jewelry to complete their ensembles—Margaret a cameo choker, and Caroline a brooch. It was grown-for-the-appropriate.

Sapphira gave her maid a nod of appreciation. Alice had done her side very well indeed.

Lady Caroline took Sapphira’s hands.

“Thank you so much for letting your maid help us, dear cousin. It was my first time in real adult company – with people who aren’t my parents. Nothing, is it?”

“What about Innes?”

“Uncle Innes only returned from abroad a few weeks ago. Grandm

wn andgoing on and on about his unwed state, as if it were a crime to be a ba
Not everyone has to marry.”

isses.” Sapphira recognized the artlessness in the girl’s remarks. She
nothing by them and indeed would not have realized at all that th
vatchedwounded.

s stared *I want to marry.*

lace. Sapphira quashed her self-pity, borrowed some of her sister and
cousin’s *joie de vivre*, and followed them down the stairs to join the o
neededthe drawing room.

ittering The fire in the hearth was inviting, but Sapphira noticed somethin;
the moment she entered, although she couldn’t quite put her finger on
ken ofaccepted a glass of ratafia from a footman and sipped the thick, sweet
She studied her mother’s expression and knew.

on. She was being talked about her behind her back.

scab. It Sapphira glanced to the duke. Lawrence was in conversation w
father, but Lady Beatrice gave her a smile that seemed over-full *an*
at herwelcoming.

n. *Mother!*

caught As she was pondering what to say, Innes swept into the room
rmancethem. He was dressed to perfection in the latest fashion – perhaps ever
overdressed, considering it was just the family at home.

ed with “Hello, my lovelies,” he announced. “So glad to be in here. It’s no
*women*man nor beast outside.”

He picked up a glass of sherry and halted before Margaret and C
roline’sWith a flourish, he pulled out a quizzing glass.

embles “Why, who’s this? Not one, but *two* young ladies? When did this h
up, yetBeatrice you should have warned me that your lovely daughter was all
up.”

ie well Both Caroline and Margaret dropped curtsies.

The dowager duchess was having none of it.

“Do come over here, Innes, and stop playing the fool,” she said,
This isher hand in his direction. “If you flattered other ladies half as well as
its, thatyour own family, you might even settle down and marry at last.”

Innes let out an exaggerated put-upon sigh and did as he was l
kissed his mother on the cheek.

other is “Oh Mummy, you know how hard it is for me. I have yet to

achelor! woman who is as perfect as *you* are.”

meant
ey had

l young
thers in

g amiss
it. She
liquid.

with her
d over-

behind
a little

t fit for

aroline.

happen?
l grown

waving
you do

bid. He

meet a

woman who is as perfect as *you* are.”



CHAPTER FOUR

“Sometimes when we are labelled, when we are branded, our bra becomes our calling.”

SAPPHIRA REFUSED TO suppress a grin at Innes’ theatrics. There was something about it which helped thaw a little of the ice she felt inside.

And, to her surprise, she found herself caught up in the convivial atmosphere. For the first time since the news of Anthony’s engagement took part in conversation without prompting – in no short measure than Innes, who had a knack for holding court.

How different Innes was from his older brother, the duke.

That was not to say Lawrence was dull or without wit. Far from it. Sapphira recalled that even as a boy, he was a lot more studious and than Innes, who, by contrast, was very much a puckish character.

To Lawrence’s credit, he let his younger brother play the raconteur so he regaled the table with tales of his time in Vienna, skillfully moving from discussions of architecture and fashion to business and politics.

There was so much laughter and discussion at the table that it came as a surprise to Sapphira when the final course had been served, and it was time for the ladies to retire to the drawing room.

There, Margaret and Caroline played the spinet while Sapphira joined a game of whist with her mother along with the dowager duchess and Beatrice.

“It’s so nice to see the girls getting along,” said Lady Geraldine, setting down her discards and picking new cards. “Caroline will be ready to come out soon, won’t she, Bea?”

“Too soon,” lamented Lady Beatrice. “Perhaps the season after next she might feel ready for her to be presented in London.”

“Very wise to let her enjoy society here in Norfolk as a way of easing her entry,” Lady Geraldine agreed.

The duchess turned to her. "And what of your season just Sapphira?"

Opposite, her mother froze. Mentions of the season might bring me of Anthony which in turn might release the melancholia.

nd Sapphira drew a breath and examined her cards. "I was so overw by my first two events that I cannot remember anything other th desperate desire not to step on anyone's toes."

She shuffled her cards, then lifted her head and smiled.

nothing "But after the first ball, I managed to find my feet, so to speak. In t I would say I enjoyed it."

"Enough for a second season?" the duchess asked gently.

family "Ah... I don't know. London is such a large city. While there was ent, she to see and do, I don't much like the crowds."

anks to *Or the risk of seeing Anthony again.*

"Oh, but you will accompany Caroline when she makes her debut you? I shouldn't let her go unless I knew someone sensible was company."

it, but Mother raised her eyebrows, played her card, and picked up anothe serious

"What am I, Bea? Too old to manage bringing out two young ladie

The duchess wrinkled her nose playfully at her and set down a card

ur, and "You know I mean nothing of the kind, Geraldine. Besides, you w veering your hands full with Margaret. You will go, Sapphira, promise me?"

"Yes. Of course, I will."

ne as a It was an easy promise to give, mainly because she was sure E as time would forget all about it when the time came.

red in a Outside, the sound of the wind rattled the window loudly in the lul conversation.

d Lady "That's a good thing," announced the dowager duchess, glancing the windows. "This wind will blow the rain away. I hope for fine v , laying after so many days inside."

for her Still, by the end of the evening, Sapphira was not confident that sh drift off to sleep and sought a book from the library.

next I She considered poetry and dismissed it. Unfortunately, there w novels on the shelves. Most of what she found were almanacks and hi sing her There was one she considered about the reign of Charles the Second.

Perhaps by reading about those who lived in the past, she coul

st past, sense of the present.

“Ah, so I’m not the only night owl.”

memories She turned to Innes, who had entered the room silently. He stepped across a shelf full of titles, and selected one, a history of the Greeks.

helmed “You must find Norfolk exceedingly dull after spending so many years on the Continent,” she offered.

He shrugged. “It was time for me to come home. Mother isn’t getting younger, and I know she would like me to settle down.”

he end, Sapphira pondered a moment. “Will you? You don’t strike me as a settling down type.”

“Mother says all I need is to find the right woman,” he said evenly.

is plenty Sapphira smiled sadly. “Sometimes it takes more than finding the right person. Love isn’t always enough.”

“That sounds like experience talking.”

isn’t won’t Her hand fell on a slim volume of Saxon mythology. She kept her eyes fixed on the cover.

“I’m sure you’ve been told everything,” she said, squarely.

er. “I haven’t heard it from *you*.”

is?” She swallowed and lowered herself onto a leather chair, placing the book in her lap. In truth, she’d never spoken to anyone about her feelings.

ill have known how much she and Anthony had been in love. All they knew was

Earl was a marriage prospect who had switched his allegiance to another.

The slim gold chain around her neck seemed to itch against her skin, making its presence felt.

“Did you love him deeply?” Innes asked.

l of the Sapphira squeezed her eyes shut tightly to control her emotions. She didn’t want to speak to Innes or to anyone about the deep wound in her heart.

over to He didn’t press for an answer. He went over to a desk, rummaged through a weatherkey in a drawer, then opened up a cabinet and poured two small glasses of deep brown liquor.

he could He returned, pressing the glass into her hand. He sat in the chair opposite her, saluted her, then drank from his glass without waiting for her to drink.

ere few She woodenly raised the glass – sweet sherry her nose told her. The stories confirmed with a sip.

Innes still watched her, waiting for an answer.

d make “I did...” she confessed, “I still do.”

“He doesn’t deserve you if he plans to wed someone else.”

“He doesn’t want to. He is obliged.”

“How so?”

“It’s his father. Anthony has no independent wealth of his own—
years cannot enough to support a wife.”

“So—his father demands he weds an heiress.”

His words made Anthony sound weak and callow.

Sapphira swallowed against a lump and covered it by bringing the
as the to her lips once more.

“Now don’t look like that, puss,” said Innes, gently. “I’m not
judge. I know full well that not everyone gets what they want. The fact
is right they don’t get what they *deserve* is sometimes a kindness.”

He cast her a meaningful look. She glanced down to the volume in
once more.

“You never intend to wed?” she said.

“I’m more than happy to stay a bachelor, but I’d consider it to make
mother happy.”

“Even if you don’t love your bride?”

“Never mistake love for being *in* love.”

“Are they not one and the same thing?”

Innes slowly shook his head.

Sapphira sighed. “I don’t think I could marry someone I wasn’t
er skin, with.”

“It happens all the time in our class,” he returned, “you know that.”

She did know that. And yet, having been in love with a man
ns. She answered her affections in full, she could not back down now and
r heart. simply transactional marriage.

“Have you ever been in love?” Sapphira asked.

Innes looked suddenly introspective. Surprisingly serious, in fact.

“I thought I was once,” he said. He finished his glass of sherry
opposite, long sip. “Then I realized that the mistake was mine.”

“What happened?”

“I discovered I wasn’t the first among equals.”

He set the glass down. Sapphira intuited that she would gain
more by prying.

She laughed unsteadily. “What a fine pair we make. Our parents

wish us wed, and the ones we want the most are lost to us.”

After setting down her own glass on the side table, she rose to help Innes stand with her. The look on his face was kind and sympathetic, at least without the hint of impishness.

“Let’s make a pact,” he said, after a moment. “If you have not married by the time Caroline has had her debut, then we will marry.”

Sapphira frowned. “You jest.”

Innes grinned, stepped over to pick up her glass, and poured sherry. “It’s a practical arrangement,” he shrugged. “One that would please your mother and your parents. I am considered quite eligible, you know.”

Innes handed her the refilled glass.

“You wound me to the quick, puss. Of course, I love you. You are my second cousin, twice removed, or whatever it is. I’ve known you since you were a girl. You are beautiful, charming, intelligent, and witty. Any man would be lucky to have you for a wife.”

“But I don’t love *you*.”

Innes smiled and spread his arms wide. “See? I am not at all worried. Don’t you see how that could have its advantages too? We would be famous, and our hearts would never be in danger.”

The whole thing was ridiculous, quite preposterous. Sapphira remained in love with him closely, looking for the tell-tale quirk of the lip that revealed he was joking even though his words were serious.

She found it.

At that moment, she felt her own expression change. It revealed itself on her face clearly because Innes’ smile broadened into a grin.

Ooh! No wonder he got away with so much mischief.

Perhaps she should teach him a lesson. Sapphira saluted him with her glass.

“Then I accept your kind offer. If I have not wed by the end of Caroline’s season, then the confirmed spinster and the determined bachelor will marry.”

Innes swiftly kissed her on the cheek, an act as comfortably familiar as a favorite maiden aunt.

“There’s the face I like to see,” he said. “You weren’t made for serious. Put this man out of your mind. He’s not worth a moment’s more of your time.”

time.”

er feet. Sapphira set the glass of sherry down untouched and turned the book but not in her hand.

“I cannot promise to not think of him occasionally,” she said.

ried by “Then let it be only occasionally,” he said.

She nodded.

As she stepped past him to leave the library, he took her hand.

another He looked as though he was about to say something more. His expression became more thoughtful than Sapphira had ever recalled it being. She

.” for him to speak, but he did not. An instant later the grave expression gone, replaced by the affected haughtiness that was his usual mien.

“Sleep well, puss,” he said and released her hand.

e a dear
ice you
y man

ounded.
get on

egarded
he was

tself on

with her

roline’s
should

ilial as

adness,
of your

time.”

Sapphira set the glass of sherry down untouched and turned the book over in her hand.

“I cannot promise to not think of him occasionally,” she said.

“Then let it be only occasionally,” he said.

She nodded.

As she stepped past him to leave the library, he took her hand.

He looked as though he was about to say something more. His expression became more thoughtful than Sapphira had ever recalled it being. She waited for him to speak, but he did not. An instant later the grave expression was gone, replaced by the affected haughtiness that was his usual mien.

“Sleep well, puss,” he said and released her hand.



CHAPTER FIVE

*“The love that follows us sometime is our trouble, which still we
thank as love.”*

SHE DREAMED OF Anthony that night, of that early spring day in Hyc when dormant trees were beginning to bud and heads of daffod snowdrops were about to burst forth.

It was when Sapphira knew she was in love with him.

It had been a small thing really – not a grand gesture or extra gifts – but rather a testament to his character. They had been riding fine, if cold, afternoon. Everyone was out to glean as much sunshine short-lived day would allow.

She and Anthony had been speaking of little of consequence, just talk really, when there was a cry from somewhere ahead of them.

They spotted a little boy, not older than five, alone in the park searching about for someone. His parents, or more likely his nanny, given how well he was dressed. People rugged up against the cold passed by, paying the little lad no heed.

Anthony immediately dismounted and approached the youngest groom rode forward and took the reins. Sapphira signaled to her own groom and her horse as she dismounted too.

She instructed her groom to look about for someone who would not be frantically searching for the boy before she joined Anthony and the

“This poor little chap is lost and has hurt his knee as well,” Anthony said to her.

“Do you know where your mama is?” she asked.

The boy shook his head and fresh tears welled in his eyes.

“He’s well dressed,” Anthony observed. “Someone must know where he is.”

“I’ve sent my groom to look about to see if there is anyone looking for him.”

lost child,” she said.

Anthony shot her winning smile.

“Will you tell us your name?” Sapphira encouraged.

“Geoffrey,” the boy whispered, his attention now distracted by An chestnut horse.

“Do you like my horse?” he said, addressing the little boy once mo

The child nodded.

“Would you like to ride?”

Geoffrey started to nod before he slowly shook his head.

“Ah, is it because we’ve not been properly introduced?”

The boy nodded.

“Ah, you’re a well-brought up gentleman,” Anthony said apprec

“My name is Lord Anthony Redthorpe, Earl of Taunton, and this friend, Lady Sapphira Galbraith.”

Sapphira hid a smile as the boy performed a little bow. Clearly, well-educated in social etiquette.

“Now we’ve been introduced, may I invite you to join me on my

You’ll be sitting so much higher, and it will be easier to spot your nan

Sapphira watched the boy consider the proposition then nod. A aided her up onto her horse before getting on his own horse. His groo lifted the boy onto the saddle ahead of him.

They took the horses at a gentle walk through the park and excha glance of shared amusement when those who recognized them did a take at the bachelor Earl of Taunton with a child.

Sapphira spotted her footman hurrying towards them, leading his At his side was a distraught young woman.

Geoffrey sat up straight and waved, tears and scraped kne forgotten.

“Nancy! Nancy!” he called. “Look at me!”

Nancy, a maid not older than sixteen, Sapphira judged, wiped th from her eyes.

“Oh, sir! Oh, Madam! Thank you, thank you! I only turned arou moment, and he’d run off after a dog, and I tried hard to keep up.”

Anthony set the child down. Geoffrey ran immediately into his woman’s arms and hugged her tightly.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you cry,” he said.

“You’re safe, and that’s all that matters, my little poppet,” she
kissing the top of his head. Then Nancy looked up at them.

“My lord, my lady, I can’t ever thank you enough.”

Anthony’s “Think nothing of it,” said Anthony.

Sapphira observed Anthony watch the two head back down
re. entrance of the park. When he turned to her, his face held the trace of a

He was not conceited or vainglorious as were some of the other
aristocrats who showed off more for public adoration than out of
kindness.

That was the moment she knew she loved this man heart and so
kindness and consideration towards others truly marked him out.

ovingly.

is my



he was “YOU CAN’T FIND me!”

Sapphira held her breath, too far away to do more than watch he
horse? as the seventeenth century vase rocked precariously on its plinth as
ry.” scampered under the small table on which it sat.

Anthony Lady Katherine, the dowager duchess, shook her head and tsked.
msmanboys are going to destroy the house,” she observed.

“Boys aren’t made to sit cooped up inside,” Sapphira’s mother
anged acontinuing with her embroidery.

double “It’s a pity the weather hasn’t broken. They could be outside pl
said Lady Beatrice.

s horse. “And getting muddy,” said Lady Caroline.

Lady Margaret sat down heavily onto a chair. “If this rain continu
e long on earth are we going to spend our time?”

“There is no shortage of things to do,” said her mother. “Your emb
for a start.”

ie tears Margaret wrinkled her nose, letting her mother know how she fel
that idea.

id for a Innes stretched his arms and legs. “I would tell you more ab
fashions on the Continent, my dears, but you’ve already ferreted ou
youngscintilla of detail I can give you.”

He sighed and announced dramatically, “Tomorrow, tomorrow, to

he said, creeps on this petty pace...”

Sapphira cocked her head. “That’s Shakespeare... *Macbeth*. I read that play in years. I found the witches terrifying.”

Peter emerged from his hiding place. “Witches?”

to the “Plays are boring,” announced George.

a smile. “Ah, not this one, my little buttercup,” said Innes. “This play is young sword fights, intrigue, and... *murder*.”

genuine “Is there a lot of bloodshed, Cousin Innes?” Robert asked.

“We can make it so, if you like.”

oul. His Caroline clapped her hands excitedly. “A play! We’ll put performance. What a marvelous idea. We can use the school room upstairs.”

Young George seemed less enthused. “I’ll only be in it if I can sword and kill someone,” he said.

His mother looked with alarm. “If you’re going to behave like ruffian, you stay upstairs! Go on, all of you.”

lplessly Lady Beatrice rang for the housekeeper.

Simon “The children have elected to put on a play. Could you see the everything they need, including a cast, if you’d like to give your “Those servants to assist.”

“Oh yes,” said Lady Caroline, “we’ll need sets and costumes. Even added, must help!”

Margaret approached and patted Sapphira’s hand. “You too. We’re saying,” you for sewing, and you know the lines as well as anyone. You *will* help, won’t you?”

Sapphira frowned. The only other option was sitting quietly by herself, how with little to occupy her other than her own thoughts and a conversation between her mother, Lady Beatrice, and the duchess that would involve her return to London and the season...

“Of course, she will,” Innes announced before she could. “I will volunteer my services also. I find myself rather partial to the Scottish play.”

The younger members of the family trooped up to the third-floor room.

it every “We’re going to need a stage,” Lady Margaret observed.

“I can arrange the carpenters to put something together, Miss,” said the butler.

“Yes, please,” said Margaret. “It needn’t be high off the ground.”

enough to elevate the performers.”

haven’t Lady Caroline gasped. “Scripts! Oh, we’ll need scripts. We’ve only one copy of the works of Shakespeare. We shall have to copy the entire thing. It will take ages.”

“Not if I make a start on copying the pages,” said Sapphira. “Then once a few have been completed, we can all take turns copying out the lines from the document. Besides, it will be good for Peter and Robert to practice their writing. Their schoolmaster will be most impressed to see an improvement in their writing.”

“But I want to make swords,” Peter protested.

“There’ll still be plenty of time for that,” said Innes. “I suggest you all make a plan. While we accept Sapphira’s kind offer to begin copying the scripts, we will work out what else we need.”

Sapphira was pleased her suggestion had been taken up. She was a little quiet and ready to rejoin society, even if it was only the society of her farm. Volunteering as copyist, she could spend much needed time alone and part of this mad, fun scheme. It might be the tonic she needed to finally shake herself out of her slough of despond.

She fetched the copy of *Macbeth* and sat at one of the school desks to begin work. She smiled listening to the sound of Lady Caroline and her maid bossing about the other band of players, drafting in both family and servants alike.

’ll need
help us,



IN THE DAYS that followed, Lady Geraldine and Lady Beatrice, along with Beatrice’s lady’s maid and the housekeeper, trooped up to the attic to search for old clothing which might be turned into costuming.

Lawrence and Sapphira’s father had begged off having anything to do with the play, but she wasn’t sure how long the resolution would last. Now, Lady Caroline accepted their excuses, given the worsening weather. Floods looked more and more likely, and both men were kept busy with urgent estate business and meeting with the townsfolk to discuss how sandbags would be required to protect the homes and shops of the village. Soon the road north would be impassable, if not from the mud from the strong likelihood of snow on the main road to York and, just

temperature dropped.

nly got The weather might be horrible outside, but it didn't touch them
re play.inside Greybridge Castle. In fact, the mood was very merry, indeed.

Sapphira was persuaded to put down her pen for dinner, and her
when Ifingers were glad of it. There was one complete script, and she would
om myanother tomorrow and persuade the boys to sit down for an hour at
e theirpractice their penmanship.

ment.” By the time she readied herself for bed, Sapphira realized that she
a whole day without a thought of Anthony.

that we
ing our

was not
aily. By
still be
lly pull

lesks to
er sister
ervants

ing with
looking

g to do
ast. For
ier.

ousy on
whether
seaside
ud, but
if the

temperature dropped.

The weather might be horrible outside, but it didn't touch them at all inside Greybridge Castle. In fact, the mood was very merry, indeed.

Sapphira was persuaded to put down her pen for dinner, and her aching fingers were glad of it. There was one complete script, and she would write another tomorrow and persuade the boys to sit down for an hour at least to practice their penmanship.

By the time she readied herself for bed, Sapphira realized that she'd gone a whole day without a thought of Anthony.



CHAPTER SIX

“Something wicked this way comes.”

THREE DAYS LATER, Sapphira awoke to the sound of hurried footsteps in the hall outside her room. She frowned. It was morning, but early. A maid, hadn't yet come to attend her.

Sapphira got out of bed and headed to the door. Out in the hall, servants were bustling in and out of the north wing, which, to the best of her knowledge, had been closed up for the winter.

Curious, she dressed hurriedly. Perhaps someone downstairs would know what was going on.

She entered the dining room in search of Lawrence and found him standing in front of the fireplace with his back to her. He was dressed in a dark coat and his brown hair was damp, his sleeves, and indeed his entire lower half wet from riding through the savage weather.

Who was he? A local tenant, perhaps, invited to ride with him before seeing the Duke? But why the commotion in the north wing?

As the man turned, Sapphira's heart chilled. The surprise on his face matched her own.

Anthony.

All she could do was stare. Was he a ghost, a figment of her imagination?

He blinked rapidly at her and was opening his pale lips to speak. Lawrence and her father rushed past her.

“Good God, man! What a hellish ride! You're lucky you didn't lose your neck.”

Anthony tore his eyes away from Sapphira and addressed the duke.

“I apologize for the imposition, my lord, but yours was the most suitable residence.”

At that, a series of shudders went through him. Instinctively Sapphira stepped forward, then Lawrence turned to her.

“Sapphira, tell a footman to bring dry clothing for Lord Anthony instructed. “And ask my wife to let the housekeeper know that we’re four extra staying with us along with their servants.”

Still stunned at Anthony’s most unexpected arrival, Sapphira nodded and headed out of the room, but not before overhearing his words to Lawrence.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “Lady Frances will require rest.”

Lady Frances Sheppard was the mother of Elizabeth Sheppard, Anthony’s fiancée. They must have been travelling north to the Sheppard’s grand estate in Yorkshire.

Preparing for the wedding.

Sapphira faithfully delivered the message, but her appetite for her life at Greybridge was gone. How could she possibly survive being on the same roof with the man she still loved, while he was here with his family and servants? What would be by marriage?

Tears sprung to her eyes despite her best efforts to thwart them. She turned her way toward the library unseeing until she ran straight into Innes.

“My little gem! What ails you on such an auspicious day?”

She took in a shuddering breath, embarrassed that the words were hers, and equally embarrassed to notice Innes’s valet had been behind her. “My little gem!”

Nonetheless, she let Innes steer her by the shoulder into the library and ease her into a chair. She dabbed a handkerchief to her eyes before looking up at him.

“Anthony is here,” she managed to whisper.

Innes’ normally open countenance closed. He turned to his valet who followed them into the room and asked him what was going on.

“It seems the coach of the Earl and Countess Sheppard broke on the York road,” the man said. “The earl and countess were slightly delayed and a gentleman of the party, Lord Anthony, rode directly here to seek them out.”

Innes nodded, and the valet left discreetly.

Sapphira took in a deep breath and attempted a shaky laugh. “I’m going to tell me that I shouldn’t let myself get upset.”

“No.” he said, tapping her lightly on the wrist. “I would never tell you such a thing, puss. It will have been a shock to see him. But never forget

ny,” he had broke your heart. Of course, you may grieve for him, but never
'll have see you do it in public. Let him think you've forgotten all about him
him as the stranger he ought to be!”

simply “Then what should I do about Lady Elizabeth?”

his next “You do nothing at all. You just behave like the lady you are.
yourself into the world of make believe. Pretend you are a duchess
queen, if you like and treat her as it pleases Your Majesty to do so.”

thony's



state in

SAPPHIRA DIDN'T FEEL particularly majestic, so she spent the morning
schoolroom where she could hide from the rest of the house and pret
nainingfull attention was on the production at hand. She painted a piece of s
der the then joined a party of chambermaids sewing some backdrops.

nily-to- Thank goodness that Margaret and Lady Caroline were so distra
putting on the play that knowledge of the new arrivals had not yet c
ie made their notice.

Sapphira was safe in the “Greybridge Castle Playhouse”, wh
players readied to fret their hour upon the stage. But the world of
ouldn't believe couldn't last for long.

trailing “Where's *Maman*?” asked Margaret after a time. “She said she'c
here to help.”

ary and Sapphira raised her head from her sewing.

looking “There was an accident out on the road to York. The Earl She
carriage broke an axle. His party will be staying here until the v
clears.”

who had “Oh, good! An audience,” said Lady Caroline.

Sapphira watched Margaret take in the news. The girl blinked
axle on then her brow furrowed.

injured “How many are there in the party?” she asked.

aid.” “Four,” Sapphira announced, pleased at the way her voice did not
her. “The earl and countess, of course, their daughter, and Lord Antho

'You're Margaret looked as though she might say something, but, to Sap
relief, did not.

ell you Innes was right – she should put on a performance. If she was con
get, this

let him enough to others, then surely it couldn't be long before she actually would. Treat fine.

She returned to her sewing. It didn't require her to do much other than attend to the task while considering how she would face the days to come. She glanced out of the window into the miserable gray and hoped the weather would break soon. A line from the play popped into her thoughts... *By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes...* Sapphira shuddered and drew her shawl around her.

PREPARING FOR LUNCH, Sapphira had been left by Alice to finish dressing herself while her maid went to attend to Caroline and Margaret. She was dressed in a green gown which she thought was her becoming. Whether that had been a deliberate choice by her maid or coincidence, Sapphira couldn't be certain, but there was one thing she was sure of, and that was the gold chain Anthony gave her could not come with this dress.

For the first time in four months, she removed it and placed it on the dressing table. Perhaps she should leave it off for good. Was it a chain that made her heart? If so, it had to be broken, otherwise she would never be free.

She snatched it up and thrust it in her jewelry chest. She drew up a cameo, one of her grandmother's, and slipped it on to a ribbon.

There. She could be regal.

She encountered Innes in the hall, his valet trailing behind him again, fussing with the shoulders of his jacket.

Innes regarded her with an exaggerated look of approval before frowning. "You're missing an accessory or two, puss," he said.

Sapphira laughed. "I think I should dismiss my maid and hire you instead. What is it I'm lacking, sir?"

"You've recovered one with that radiant smile."

"And the second?"

"Me, of course! Give me your arm, and we'll go down together and give my mother a thrill."

Sapphira did as instructed but leaned into him to whisper.

"You don't have to do this you know."

"Nonsense!" he dismissed waspishly. "I have no idea what you're

ould be about. We're going downstairs for luncheon and exceptional conversation with old friends and new."

er than They followed the sound of talking into the drawing room.

me. The Earl and Countess Sheppard, it was announced, would not be that the them; they sent their regrets, pleading exhaustion from their ordeal. Thoughts. been injured, but not badly, Lady Elizabeth hastened to report.

Sapphira was formally introduced to Anthony's fiancée. She recalled Lady Elizabeth was considered a beauty and thought her so when seen in passing at a number of events during the last season in London. But there was a set to her jaw that lent a harshness Sapphira didn't recall.

They greeted each other with indifferent cordiality.

er most Next to her, Anthony might as well have been made of marble for or just expression and posture showed. She greeted him formally, betraying e could of their being anything more than simply acquaintances.

ie worn This performance was for her parents, whom she knew were watching her keenly. Sapphira knew the family would take their cue from her. A on the greetings, Innes deftly steered her away.

around Was there a rising tension in the air? Or had she imagined it?

If there was, no one else noticed. Guided by Innes, she joined him. v out a flitted to each of their party in turn, engaging them in small talk until for luncheon was made.

Thank goodness for her garrulous second cousin by her side. He n once enough for the both of them, and all she had to do was show amusement accept the conversational gambits he passed her way – all the ownning, conscious of Anthony's eyes on her.

instead.

and give

talking

about. We're going downstairs for luncheon and exceptional conversation with old friends and new."

They followed the sound of talking into the drawing room.

The Earl and Countess Sheppard, it was announced, would not be joining them; they sent their regrets, pleading exhaustion from their ordeal. They had been injured, but not badly, Lady Elizabeth hastened to report.

Sapphira was formally introduced to Anthony's fiancée. She recalled that Lady Elizabeth was considered a beauty and thought her so when seeing her in passing at a number of events during the last season in London. But now there was a set to her jaw that lent a harshness Sapphira didn't recall.

They greeted each other with indifferent cordiality.

Next to her, Anthony might as well have been made of marble for all his expression and posture showed. She greeted him formally, betraying no hint of their being anything more than simply acquaintances.

This performance was for her parents, whom she knew were watching her keenly. Sapphira knew the family would take their cue from her. After the greetings, Innes deftly steered her away.

Was there a rising tension in the air? Or had she imagined it?

If there was, no one else noticed. Guided by Innes, she joined him as he flitted to each of their party in turn, engaging them in small talk until the call for luncheon was made.

Thank goodness for her garrulous second cousin by her side. He spoke enough for the both of them, and all she had to do was show amusement and accept the conversational gambits he passed her way – all the while conscious of Anthony's eyes on her.



CHAPTER SEVEN

“Present fears are less than horrible imaginings.”

AT THE LUNCH table, Sapphira observed that Lady Elizabeth Sheppard was exactly as she imagined her to be – a self-confident young woman, her beauty and her status. And yet, Anthony did not look besotted bride-to-be. There was a gravity in his expression which he took no pains to hide.

Innes, who had seated himself next to Sapphira, leaned in.

“Keep that smile up, puss,” he whispered. “If it helps, just think of it as itching all night with the bedbugs.”

She giggled at the absurd and unkind thought.

“What amuses you, Sapphira?” the dowager duchess asked.

Not knowing what to say, she cast a panicked glance toward Innes, who came to her rescue once more.

“Just a private joke, *Maman*. Nothing that would interest anyone here.”

Anthony’s brow furrowed, although he said nothing, Sapphira ventured to smile discreetly as he instead allowed himself to be drawn into a conversation with the dowager, Lawrence and her father.

The meal drew to a close. Before long the men joined the ladies in the drawing room.

Innes made his way towards her. Sapphira offered a slight shake of her head. She couldn’t lean on him all the time. Instead, she went to join the ladies seated by the fireplace.

“I was just telling Lady Elizabeth about our impending performance of the Scottish play,” said Lady Caroline.

“Yes indeed, what a charming amusement.” There was something in Elizabeth’s smile which didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m sure it will be a creditable performance. Will you be taking part, Lady Sapphira?”

“Only backstage.”

“Sapphira has copied our scripts and is assisting with costumes,” Margaret said helpfully.

“Perhaps you should ask Lord Anthony to take part in your play Lady Elizabeth. “I’ve very recently learned he is good at acting.”

Her remark was loud enough for Anthony to turn from conversation with the men and give his fiancée a level stare.

Sapphira saw Innes raise an eyebrow. So, she was not the only one to observe discord between the couple.

She stood. “Excuse me. I want to check on the boys,” she said softly.

Innes snagged her elbow as she passed and whispered, “They’ve been engaged for a few months, and they’re already acting like a married couple.”

The acerbic comment was more than she could take in one day. She cast him a glare and left the room.

Upstairs in the schoolroom, the boys were playing Nine Men’s Morris.

“What are you doing up here?” she asked.

“We’ve been banished until tomorrow morning,” said George, matter-of-factly. “Do you think nanny will send up some biscuits and afternoon tea for us?”

“Who are the new people?” asked Peter. “We’ve been told we have to be quiet.”

“Well, yes, playing quietly would help the Earl and Countess Shrewsbury. Their carriage broke. They were hurt and had to huddle in the storeroom with your papa and mine went out with some men.”

Four sets of wide eyes looked at her.

“Are they badly hurt?” asked Simon.

“No, not badly hurt from what I’ve been told, but they are older and need time and rest before they feel up to company. Until then, we have no guests to stay until the weather clears.”

With their curiosity sated, Sapphira found her suggestion of spending the next hour copying out scripts for the cast well received when it included a promise to send up some cream cakes and hot cocoa. It was tempting to spend the rest of the afternoon here with the excuse of sewing costumes, but she knew that she couldn’t hide.

On her way back to the drawing room, Sapphira spoke to one of the maids about attending to the boys’ treats in a little while. Instantly,

tumes,” continuing down the stairs, she turned towards her room to pick up a shawl against the wintry chill.

,” said When she emerged, Anthony stood alone in the hall.

He had not seen her yet, so she turned away before he noticed her presence. She only got a few paces before he called her name.

Sapphira squeezed her eyes shut a moment. Even after so long, his calling her name had the power to affect her – to recall his touch, his kisses.

She turned. Anthony was as handsome as when she’d last seen him months ago. But he had also changed somehow.

Her gaze fell. It was too painful to look at him. To disguise her discomfort, she bobbed a curtsy and murmured, “My lord.”

“Is that where we are with one another, Sapphira?” There was an angry voice that verged on anger.

“It has to be this way,” she said, playing with the fringes of her shawl to ease the agitation that thrummed through her.

Anthony tipped his head with a moue of disgust. “If that’s the case, I’d rather have my title. I’m now the Duke of Denby.”

She raised her gaze to meet his. *Duke? That would mean his father*

Her heart softened immediately. “Oh Anthony, I’m sorry to hear that your father has passed.”

A rueful half-smile cut across his features. “Don’t grieve for me much. As you’re well aware, there was no love lost between my father and me until he died.”

She took a couple of paces toward him to avoid their voices carrying and drawing attention.

“When did it happen?”

Anthony let out a breath and stood at ease. His posture relaxed and his beloved’s face softened.

“A week ago. We were on our way to York when the messenger caught up with our party. I was going to continue as far as the next crossing, then return to London from there, but I can’t now while the weather is so bad. Only Elizabeth, the Earl and Countess know.”

At the sound of his fiancée’s name on his lips, Sapphira withdrew a step. Anthony reached out and took her hand.

“When I saw you this morning, I thought the clouds had broken and the sun had pierced my heart with warmth for the first time in months.”

“Don’t...” she said. “You can’t say these things to me, not when...”

a shawl The sound of voices came up the stairs. “Oh, those boys have p
coerced her into playing one of their games,” said Lady Beatrice. “
rescue her.”

ed her Sapphira withdrew her hand. Anthony released it with reluctan
walked away.

is voice Margaret and Lady Beatrice entered the hall as he disappeared d
isses. adjoining hallway. Sapphira made a show of settling her heavy o
him sixcolored shawl on her shoulders as soon as the women appeared.

“There you are!” said Lady Beatrice. “I thought you might have
ise hersome relief from the boys.”

“Oh no, no – they’ve been lambs, truly, although I did have to brit
edge towith tea cakes and hot cocoa, I’m afraid.”

Lady Beatrice laughed. “I’ve found bribery works well with them t
hawl to The duchess went up the stairs, while Margaret put her arm in Sap

“You will come to join us downstairs, won’t you? I think you have
; you’dand father convinced that you are quite unaffected in seeing Lord A
again, but you can’t quite fool me.”

... Sapphira gave her sister an embrace. “I’ll be all right,” she said.
ar yourjust a bit of a shock seeing him unexpectedly.”

Margaret squeezed her arm.

me too “That’s the spirit. Cousin Innes is telling us the most amusing
and I.” Now I’m pretty sure, judging by papa and cousin Lawrence’s faces
ing andalso speaks some innuendos, but I cannot figure out for the life of m
they’re supposed to mean. Perhaps you’ll be able to work them out
me.”

and her When they entered the drawing room, Innes was leading a gro
game of charades.

‘ finally “Ooh, I know! *Othello!*” said Sapphira’s mother.

oaching “How on earth do you get Othello from that carry on?” her
ier’s soannounced. “Clearly it’s *The Merchant of Venice.*”

Innes shook his head slowly.

v half a “Come on, do it again, from the beginning!” she entreated.

“The first word... the,” everyone spoke in unison.

en and “Second word... two.”

“Two words!”

” “Two syllables!”

robably “No! The number two.”
“I’ll go “*Henry V Part II*,” called Lawrence.
“Nooo!”
ice and “Third word... Lawrence! John! Men!”
Innes tapped a finger to his nose.
own an “Lords!”
x-blood- “Gentlemen!”
“*Two Gentlemen of Verona!*”
need of Innes threw his hands in the air indicating that that answer was
and everyone cheered and applauded Lady Caroline’s guess.
oe them Lady Elizabeth rose from her place. “I shall go attend to *Mam*
Papa, if I might take my leave of you,” she said.
oo.” Sapphira knew that part of the young woman’s mission would be
phira’s, her missing fiancé. Anthony had not come back downstairs.
mother The clock struck four, and the dowager duchess announced her ir
nthonyto rest before dinner. Sapphira decided likewise.
Entering her room, she allowed Alice to loosen the ties of her dre
“It was frowned.
A neatly folded note sat on her dressing table.

stories.
, Innes
ie what
and tell

up in a

: father

“No! The number two.”

“*Henry V Part II*,” called Lawrence.

“Nooo!”

“Third word... Lawrence! John! Men!”

Innes tapped a finger to his nose.

“Lords!”

“Gentlemen!”

“*Two Gentlemen of Verona!*”

Innes threw his hands in the air indicating that that answer was correct, and everyone cheered and applauded Lady Caroline’s guess.

Lady Elizabeth rose from her place. “I shall go attend to *Maman* and Papa, if I might take my leave of you,” she said.

Sapphira knew that part of the young woman’s mission would be to find her missing fiancé. Anthony had not come back downstairs.

The clock struck four, and the dowager duchess announced her intention to rest before dinner. Sapphira decided likewise.

Entering her room, she allowed Alice to loosen the ties of her dress. She frowned.

A neatly folded note sat on her dressing table.



CHAPTER EIGHT

“Let every man be master of his time.”

SAPPHIRA PICKED UP the note. “Who is this from?”

Alice set out a dress for dinner. “I don’t know, my lady. I found it under your door.”

Sapphira unfolded it and recognized the handwriting immediate had a small chest full of notes and letters from this hand, tied together blue velvet ribbon.

“What does he say?”

Sapphira turned to Alice. “You mean you haven’t read it?”

The maid returned a look of disdain.

“I wouldn’t do anything like *that*. Besides, there was no need to, I would be from him. Here, let me pretend to be one of those wit *Macbeth* and tell the future...”

Alice closed her eyes and put three fingers to her forehead. “Mmr wants to meet you tonight to pledge his undying love.”

Sapphira pulled a face and returned to the note. Her eyes fell words. The paper shook in her hands.

“You may go,” she said. “Attend to the girls.”

The maid sobered. “I’m so sorry, miss, I was joking. I didn’t n cause offense.”

Sapphira shook her head. “None taken. Just leave me be.”

Alone, she unfolded the note.

My dearest Sapphira,

Seeing you today has only reinforced what, in my heart, I alre knew. I still love you. I’ve never stopped loving you.

So much has occurred since our parting, and I beg a momen your time, alone, to learn if your heart has so much changed from

months ago.

*If it has, then so be it. My life will have been the richer for o
having your love and so much the poorer for having lost it. But b
liberty to burn this note, and I shall say nothing more to cause
discomfort.*

But dare I hope for Love and its precious twin, Trust?

*Should there be reason to hope, I beg you to give me some sr
sign.*

slipped
The death of my father has changed my course and fate has led
to your door. I stand at a crossroads and only you can give
direction.

ly. She
r with a
My love and my heart always,
Anthony.

The note shook in her hand. She lowered it to the dressing tal
stared back at her reflection, pale and wide-eyed. All the scars on h
which had begun to heal were ripped open once more.

knew it
ches in
Of course, she loved him. But hope once extinguished was not so
rekindled.

She took in a steady breath and read his words once more.

n... He
on the
The surprise of his arrival at Greybridge Castle was no less shock
her as it was for him. Still, he was a man engaged to another, althoug
brief time she had seen him and Lady Elizabeth together there had b
obvious signs of affection between them.

What to do? What to do...

nean to
The cheery cracking fire beckoned. It would be so easy to toss the
the fire and pretend its contents never existed. Their party would b
within a week or two, and she would be back where she was befor
enough.

*But what if...*The little voice from her heart whispered.

ady
t of
! six
Becoming the duke did change things. But to what degree? S
contract once put in place could not be easily broken. And why had
resisted his father's dictates? She would have married him if he was pe
and disinherited. He knew that...

Did he?

The thought roused her to action. She took out another gown, the c

mulberries, and donned it. She retrieved the delicate gold chain that had been Anthony's gift and wrapped it twice around her neck so it sat as a visible ornament over the neckline of the dress.

That would be her answer. If he recognized it, then he'd know her answer was yes – there was hope.

DOWNSTAIRS EVERYONE HAD gathered. She searched the drawing room and found Anthony in conversation with Innes and her father. Innes was the first to spot her.

"Darling Sapphira, dare I tell you that you look positively radiant this evening?"

"Your flattery will go directly to my head, cousin," she said.

"Does that color not become her admirably, beloved Maman?"

The duchess looked up. "Very admirable, indeed. I wish you would devote as much devotion to the fashion of other young ladies as you do to Sapphira's. It's time you stopped gallivanting around the Continent and settling in here."

Lady Elizabeth here looks particularly fetching as well. Do you not agree, mummy dear? "I do agree, mummy dear, but you should know that Sapphira and I have a special understanding."

"An understanding?" she asked.

Lady Caroline gasped. "You're engaged?"

"Who's engaged?" Margaret frowned.

Caroline's expression quickly matched her cousin's. "Innes said... you were joking, weren't you, Innes?"

To Sapphira's infuriation, the man offered only an enigmatic smile in return.

"Sister Sapphira and Cousin Innes are getting married?"

Peter raced from the room to be the first to tell his brother.

Sapphira had to say something before this got out of control.

"It's *not* an engagement," she said.

"But it *was* a promise," Innes countered.

"One made in jest!"

Sapphira turned to her mother, the dowager duchess, and Lady Beatrice to explain.

"Innes made an offer of marriage should I not find anyone to my liking?"

ad been by the end of Margaret and Caroline's season."

choker, "And do you mean it, dear boy?" said Lady Katherine, turning back to her son. "You will finally settle down?"

answer "Indeed, I do mean it, Maman. I've found no woman like dear Sapphira. She will suit me quite well."

"It should be noted," Sapphira protested, "that I have not given Innes any answer, let alone any encouragement!"

the first Lady Elizabeth's honeyed tones entered the fray. "An engagement is lovely..."

ant this Sapphira turned. Elizabeth's arm was entwined possessively with Anthony's. His face was expressionless. How she wished she could read his mood right now. And what reason could Elizabeth have to be jealous of her? After all, Anthony was engaged to her.

d show Innes gave an exaggerated flourish with one arm. "I can only hope we will be as happy as you are, my dear!"

id wed. If Sapphira hadn't been watching Elizabeth so closely, she would have missed the brief downturn of her mouth and the tightening of her jaw.

l I have Innes whispered in her ear. "Trouble in paradise, do you think possible?" Before she could retort, the gong sounded for dinner.

Innes escorted her in. It wasn't a formal affair, so save for Lady Katherine seated at the head of the table, the guests sat where they pleased. Innes sat her right next to Anthony and seated himself beside Elizabeth opposite Sapphira.

oh, but Innes gave Sapphira an indulgent smile then engaged Elizabeth in conversation.

mile in Across the way, Margaret spoke to Sapphira.

"That gold chain you wear tonight. Is it new? I'm sure I haven't seen it before."

"Are you in the habit of going through Sapphira's jewelry box?" asked Robert.

Sapphira shot a quick glance in her parents' direction and hoped she could dodge the truth without attracting their attention.

atrice to "No," she said breezily. "This is something I've had for a while. I had it doubled it around. I've not worn it like this before which is why it looks different."

7 liking "It becomes you well," said Anthony. The low tone of his voice suggested a remembrance of intimacies past. When she turned and looked into his eyes,

she could see that he recalled the day he put it around her neck, perhaps to her the way the length of the chain dipped between her breasts.

The memory of it bloomed unbidden. Her cheeks flushed. An cousin's countenance lightened, and his lips curled upwards in a knowing smile

“Dearest A!”

Innes and Elizabeth The expression on Elizabeth's face was not a happy one. It seemed she had been trying to attract her fiancé's attention for some seconds.

How? “Yes?” said Anthony, his smile fading.

“Do you remember that most amusing tale Lord Blanchfort told you at the house party in Windsor? Lord Innes just told a story that reminded me to tell him much of it.”

None. Obligated to hold court for the whole table, Anthony told the story, and as it unfolded and he relaxed into the telling of it, he became once again the type that Sapphira remembered – bright, engaging, and carefree.

But once the tale was told and talk had moved on, he drew back into his old haughty serious and reserved mien that she had noticed earlier in the day.

Sapphira turned her attention to Elizabeth. She knew the woman well. “giving half an ear to Innes's prattle.”

Yes, she had been regarded a beauty of the *Ton* last season, and, like her aunt, she was a pretty girl. But the newly hard edge to her expression that Sapphira had seen in her earlier prevented her from being truly pretty. She also looked as tightly drawn as a bowstring.

Elizabeth inquired, “Was she always like that? Is that why Anthony had become like that?”
Did she know about their past romance?

seen it

' teased

ed she

've just

it looks

sparked

is eyes,

she could see that he recalled the day he put it around her neck, perhaps even the way the length of the chain dipped between her breasts.

The memory of it bloomed unbidden. Her cheeks flushed. Anthony's countenance lightened, and his lips curled upwards in a knowing smile.

"Dearest A!"

The expression on Elizabeth's face was not a happy one. It seemed she had been trying to attract her fiancé's attention for some seconds.

"Yes?" said Anthony, his smile fading.

"Do you remember that most amusing tale Lord Blanchfort told at the house party in Windsor? Lord Innes just told a story that reminded me very much of it."

Obliged to hold court for the whole table, Anthony told the story, and, as it unfolded and he relaxed into the telling of it, he became once again the man Sapphira remembered – bright, engaging, and carefree.

But once the tale was told and talk had moved on, he drew back into that serious and reserved mien that she had noticed earlier in the day.

Sapphira turned her attention to Elizabeth. She knew the woman was only giving half an ear to Innes's prattle.

Yes, she had been regarded a beauty of the *Ton* last season, and, in truth she *was* a pretty girl. But the newly hard edge to her expression that Sapphira had seen in her earlier prevented her from being truly pretty. She also seemed as tightly drawn as a bowstring.

Was she always like that? Is that why Anthony had become like that?

Did she know about their past romance?



CHAPTER NINE

*“...Who could refrain,
That had a heart to love, and in that heart
Courage to make love known?”*

SAPPHIRA WAS AWARE that Elizabeth regarded her carefully as the entered the drawing room after dinner.

Lady Geraldine and Lady Beatrice excused themselves to help tions into bed. The dowager duchess made her way to her favorite chair fire.

Margaret found her spot on the settee. Caroline joined her at the ot of it while Sapphira decided she would claim a seat at the spinet. El glided about the room – like a crow, Sapphira thought unkindly – settling for a highbacked chair.

“I had no idea you were friends with Lord A,” she said, continu use of the affected term for Anthony. “How fortunate for us that you residence in Greybridge. I should have had no idea that anyone of any would be here instead of enjoying the delights of London.” She let affected sigh. “How I wish we were there right now.”

“You prefer more lively company?” enquired Lady Katherine.

Realizing her *faux pas*, Elizabeth hastened to clarify her meaning. all. Of course, the country has its charms too. With luck, the weather v tomorrow.”

“Will you and Lord Anthony retire to the country after you’re ma asked Lady Caroline.

The young woman’s lips pursed a moment.

“That is still under discussion.”

Sapphira idly picked out a tune on the spinet, only half-listening conversation.

Did Elizabeth know about the parlous state of Anthony’s ducal fo

Moreover, did her parents? Or was the title alone enough compensation?

If what she suspected was true, Anthony had his work cut out to match the family's riches. And Elizabeth was a woman with expensive taste. Her dress was *au courant*, and she wore expensive jewelry – a tasteful and fashionable, but expensive, nonetheless.

Sapphira suspected Anthony would be likely unable to keep her manner she was accustomed to expect.

“...and when I arrived today, I was confronted by two young boys brandishing wooden swords!”

At that, Sapphira jumped in, determined to defend the young boys.

“You’ll forgive them, of course,” she said. “They’re rehearsing the production of *Macbeth* that my sister and Lady Caroline are staging for the ladies’ entertainment. The whole household is involved, from the family through the carpenters who are building sets.”

Lady Elizabeth sniffed. “I’d have thought your carpenters would be busy served repairing our coach.”

There was a moment’s awkward silence.

“The men can do both,” said the dowager duchess.

After a moment’s more silence to emphasize the point, the older woman turned to her.

“Play something for us, Sapphira.”

She obliged, a lively little air to dispel the souring of the atmosphere. Elizabeth counted down the minutes until the men joined them.

AN HOUR PASSED before the men returned to the drawing room. Innes came first with a mischievous look in his eye, while Anthony looked reserved. “Not at all more. Lawrence and her father followed behind.

Aware of the growing tension, Caroline and Margaret gave an account of the progress of their play. They were not convinced that everyone had their lines perfectly memorized, but they declared they were satisfied if the main cast could deliver their soliloquies without the use of a script.

“Who is to be Macbeth?” Anthony asked.

“I am,” said Caroline. “I’m the one who knows the play best. My plays lots of other characters. In fact, everyone will have to play their parts.”

n? roles which will be confusing—”

restore “And all the more fun for it,” Margaret added.

es. Her Lady Elizabeth jumped in. “Ah, the *Scottish* play... I know it v
ount, tofact, I had the leading role as Lady Macbeth at Mrs. Fortum’s
Preparatory.” She rose from her seat and threw out her arms. “C
: in the *damned spot, out I say...*”

Her dramatic rendering received a round of applause. The young
oliganspreened.

“Perhaps if you need another member of your troupe, I could be pr
upon to oblige.”

g for a Caroline looked awkward. “Well, you see, we never expected g
for ourjoin us. This was to be for the household only, so we already have ou
ough toMacbeth, and it was going to be a surprise. I hope I’ve given no offens

Elizabeth’s gaze fell away from Caroline and fell back to Sa
e betterElizabeth plainly thought *she* should be cast as Lady Macbeth when
was to be was a mystery even to her.

Sapphira raised her chin. The woman was determined to identify l
rival in everything.

woman Lawrence spoke before Elizabeth could, “Well now that’s settled j
we should have some entertainment. Perhaps the young ladies would
dance—” Caroline and Margaret nodded eagerly – “Sapphira, sor
ere, andlively, if you please.”

She obliged, playing lively country tunes that could be danced in
given the uneven numbers of males to females. After a couple of
enteredLady Caroline fanned herself and announced she’d had enough.

ed once “Sapphira, you play so beautifully,” she announced.

“Did you know she sings well also,” said Margaret.

ounting Innes, standing with his hip resting against a table, regarded ev
: wouldwith faint amusement. “Then we should entreat Sapphira to sing
uld beYou’ll do that, won’t you, puss?”

ise of a “Oh, my Lord A sings wonderful well too,” said Elizabeth. “You
hear him at some at the at-homes we’ve had. You *will* sing, wo
darling?”

larget multiple “A duet!” announced Innes. “I *insist* on hearing a duet.”

Sapphira turned to Innes with alarm, and then to Anthony.

“Oh, no. I think it would be asking too much of Lord Anthony. W

nothing rehearsed and..."

For the first time since his arrival, a familiar, feline smile spread well; in his features. It was a smile that never failed to set her heart racing.

Ladies "Nonsense," he countered. "I'd be delighted."

But, out He turned to Lady Beatrice, "My lady, do you have some sheet music Lady Sapphira and I can peruse?"

woman "Why yes, in the library."

Anthony bowed and held out his hand to Sapphira.

revealed "Come, my lady. Let's go look for a suitable piece."

Sapphira rose without taking his hand.

rests to "You know where they are, don't you?" Lady Beatrice called. "The right-hand cabinet."

e." Sapphira took a lamp from the drawing room and made her way down the hall to the library, feeling Anthony's presence as though he'd touched her rather than following a respectable distance behind.

She held her breath as she walked and only let it out when they entered the room. If he wanted to talk, then he would have to begin. She would

She went directly to the cabinet where the music sheets were hidden. She perhaps pulled out a folio, set it on the desk, and began perusing, unable to do anything like to him.

nothing "Sapphira," he said.

"Speak your piece," she said breathlessly. "We do not have much time before someone will come to look for us."

dances, "I beg your forgiveness for the hurt I caused you..."

"You said as much in your note."

Anthony let out a sigh. "Will you not at least look at me?"

Reluctantly, she raised her eyes to his. His expression was dark.

everyone "You think me a coward for not standing firm against my father's wishes? I do not. I do not come to the matters of my own heart."

Sapphira swallowed.

should Yes, she *had* thought that, and Innes had even said as much.

Don't you Anthony continued, his voice low and urgent. "My life has been over since the day I left you. I returned home to find my father signed a marriage contract with the Earl. Moreover, he forced me to marry. He made specific threats about ruining your father."

We have The sheet of music slid from Sapphira's fingers.

“What? How?”

Anthony took her hand and gently squeezed it, earnestly entreating her to look at him.

“As I learned, my father might have been without funds, but he was not without influence, particularly with members of the syndicate you uses to insure his ships. Without insurance, no one would book passenger cargo. I didn’t believe it at first, but he showed me the letter he had written. He said a copy also was retained by my family’s solicitor.”

At the sound of footsteps, Sapphira caught a glancing view through an open doorway of a footman passing down the hall. Startled, she leapt into Anthony’s hand and rifled hurriedly through a selection of music until she found a simple country tune.

“Sapphira, speak to me please! Do you believe me?”

“Of course, I believe you,” she said. “You’ve always been a man of honor, that has never been in doubt. But it cannot change the way things have reached between us now.”

She picked up the sheet music, walked out of the library, and back into the drawing room, Anthony following behind.

“Ah, there you are,” said Innes, his expression speculative. “I thought you might have to send a search party for you two.”

“Tosh,” Sapphira answered without missing a beat. “We weren’t gone more than a minute or two.”

“Stop teasing your cousin, Innes,” said the dowager duchess. “You’re only making Lady Elizabeth most uncomfortable, and for no need.”

Sapphira didn’t dare venture a look in Elizabeth’s direction.

“Not at all, your Grace,” said the woman in question. “No one knows your dear Lord A’s constancy better than *I* do.”

Sapphira returned to the spinet and opened the music. She glanced over her shoulder. Anthony scanned the page, familiarizing himself with the melody. He gave a nod, and Sapphira played the first notes.

Hesitantly at first, then with growing confidence, she sang the tale of a young maiden who pined for her absent lover, wondering whether he loved her had of her too. In answer he confessed his undying devotion and, while miles apart, he entreated her to look up at the sky at night and know that he was looking at the same constellation, using it to guide his way back to her.

Their voices harmonized beautifully. Even without rehearsal, his

complemented hers, and, when they came to the end of the chorus, he
g her to over and turned the page.

The warmth of his skin and the familiar aroma of his cologne str
was not anew. And in that moment, she knew that her love for him hadn't dimi

r father It was still as bright as ever.

sage or
drafted.

ugh the
t go of
ntil she

man of
ngs are

ick into

ight we

't gone

'You're

ows my

ed over
ie song.

ale of a
thought
les kept
he was

.
is pitch

complemented hers, and, when they came to the end of the chorus, he leaned over and turned the page.

The warmth of his skin and the familiar aroma of his cologne struck her anew. And in that moment, she knew that her love for him hadn't dimmed.

It was still as bright as ever.



CHAPTER TEN

“Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desire

AT THE END of the song, the room burst as one into genuine approval except for one pair of hands, those of Lady Elizabeth.

She did not appear as much angry or jealous as, rather, thought wary.

Sapphira glanced away. No matter Anthony’s feelings for her, not for him, he was still engaged to another woman in this room.

Nevertheless, the evening went on pleasantly.

At eleven o’clock when the butler silenced the clock chimes for the older members of the household excused themselves and went leaving only Sapphira, Innes, Elizabeth, Anthony, Caroline, and Margaret around a table.

After a while, Innes withdrew a set of large playing cards from his pocket.

“I’ve never seen cards like those,” said Elizabeth.

“They’re tarot cards from Italy,” said Innes.

“They’re different to our playing cards,” Sapphira observed. “How do you get them?”

“I won them, of course,” he said, running his hands across the cards and over the illustrated pictures. “It was in a rather intriguing game with a very fascinating Frenchman.”

He offered them an impish grin. “Shall I teach you how to play tarot?”

“Are you going to do a card reading?”

“Divination? No. I thought you might want to learn the cards instead.”

Margaret nodded slightly. “I’ve heard of it; it’s sort of like whist, isn’t it?”

“There are a lot of cards,” Lady Caroline observed.

“Seventy-eight,” said Innes.

At that, Caroline shook her head. “It’s getting late, the servants turn the longcase clock bell ages ago. I’m not sure I’m up for learning a game.”

Innes leaned forward.

“Then perhaps I should read fortunes instead.”

s.”

Margaret’s eyes widened. “You know how to do *that*?”

“Of course, I do. I learned it on the Continent.”

ause –

“From the Frenchman?” asked Caroline.

Innes put a finger to his nose. “A gentleman never tells.”

ful and

Margaret was nearly bouncing in her seat.

or hers

“Oh! Do me! Do me! I’ve never had my fortune told before. I went to the *fête* once, and I wanted to see the gypsy, but *Maman* wouldn’t let me remember, Sapphira?”

e night,

to bed,

Margaret

“I do remember, but you soon found another distraction among tumbler.”

All the while, Innes was shuffling the palm-sized cards.

“Then you shall be first, *ma petite*.”

Innes passed the cards over to her.

om his

“Think about the question you would most like an answer to while shuffling the deck.”

Margaret did so.

ow did

“Draw three cards face down. Take them from anywhere in the pack you wish, then place them on the table side by side and turn them over so I can see.”

lorfully

a most

Margaret did as she was bid.

“What do they mean?”

ot?”

l game

st, isn’t

“They represent your past, your present, and your future, but nothing of themselves right now because you’ve not finished yet. Take nine cards at random from the deck, shuffle them, then place three of each down in a column beneath these cards.”

Margaret followed the instructions and took her time as well, taking the whole thing far more seriously than she ought, thought Sapphira, but she said nothing.

“How do you feel about the cards?” Innes asked gravely. “Do they feel like they are *your* cards?”

Margaret nodded.

Innes turned the first column of new cards over and scrutinized a new one. “This tells of a happy childhood, and an adoration for a close family member. A sister?”

Margaret glanced her way and smiled. Sapphira reached out and touched her sister’s hand briefly.

Innes revealed the second column. “The cards in the center depict a present express uncertainty,” he continued. “You desire love and success. You are hopeful, but nervous.”

Margaret nodded enthusiastically “But the future – ooh, please do not ruin my future.”

Innes turned over the remaining cards and was silent for a few moments. Sapphira shook her head indulgently at his theatrics. Poor Margaret was on tenterhooks.

“This card,” he said, tapping the top one, “represents growth, but do not see in the others love as well and future great happiness.”

Margaret clapped her hands and laughed joyously before Elizabeth and Caroline who was seated next to her.

“Oh, do my turn next, Uncle Innes, please!” the girl begged.

Innes looked past the giggling younger girls and focused on Elizabeth.

“What about *you*, my lady? Are you not interested in knowing about that future?”

The woman raised her chin.

“My past I already know. My present is right before me; and as for the future –” she laid a hand on Anthony’s arm – “I know everything I can know.”

“Then what about you, Sapphira?”

She narrowed her eyes at her cousin. What mischief was he up to?

“No, let Caroline have her turn.”

Innes relented and led the girl through the same rigmarole. As she expected, Caroline’s fortune was everything a young girl dreams of.

By this time, Sapphira’s lids had grown heavy, and she began to nod herself off to bed, but Innes insisted she stay.

“Pick three cards,” Innes instructed. Sapphira did so with no interest. Innes tapped them from left to right, speaking as he did so

present, future...”

l them. He turned the cards over.

ember. The Lovers was her present. The death card was her future. Flushi
cast a hasty glance to Anthony, excused herself, and fled to her room.

ook her

ALONE UPSTAIRS, SAPPHIRA touched cold hands to heated cheeks. This v
ting the *far* too much. Innes must have done something to the cards.

ecurity. What must Anthony think?

Good Lord – what must Lady Elizabeth think?

tell me Did she suspect her husband-to-be’s affection was placed in her?

She quickly undressed for bed, not even calling for her maid.

several What was she to make of Anthony’s astonishing claim that

l Margaret blackmailed into his engagement with a threat against her father

wouldn’t believe Anthony could make up such a claim, and she didn’t

t I also the duke... the late duke... well enough to know if he would stoop

Did her own father know anything about this –

ugging And what now that Anthony was himself the duke?

Outside on the landing, she heard voices and paid little heed to them

as they approached her door she could hear them, male and female, in

1 Lady fuming words spoken in hisses, but no less angry for the lack of volume

It was far too late to be the servants. Then who?

ig your Sapphira drew her dressing gown around her, padded to the door
listened.

“You should have told me!” hissed the female voice. Sapphira
for my recognize it immediately.

need to “I had no idea until I arrived. My concern was for you and your partner
find suitable accommodation.”

That was Anthony.

“But *here* of all places! How could you?”

“I’m hardly to blame for the vagaries of the weather.”

apphira “Well, the weather is breaking now. I want to be away from here
soonest opportunity.”

excuse “*Elizabeth!*”

“No! I don’t want to hear any more. Leave me alone.”

o great Feet padded away on the carpet runner, then silence for a second
, “Past,

before a door slammed somewhere down the hall.

Sapphira opened the door a crack and peered through. Just a flicking, she saw, Anthony stood with his back to her, no doubt staring after his fiancée.

She leaned against the door and it opened another inch, causing the hinges to squeak, drawing his attention. He spun round. The harshness of his expression softened at seeing her.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop," she whispered, opening the door a few inches on purpose, this time.

Anthony's expression turned to anguish. The look speared her through. She stepped out and, before she could say another word, he pulled her into his arms and backed her into her room, closing the door behind her.

"I'm not sure I can take much more of this," he said. "I've been walking on a razor's edge for months, and now I..." He huffed in frustration, running his hand through his dark brown hair. "Hell! My life is a mess, Sapphira. The last thing I want to do is to drag you into the midst of it."

"You and Lady Elizabeth were arguing about me?"

"I'd not told her about you, but she knew that I had an attachment to someone before her. Your cousin Innes and his stupid parlor trick with the cards tonight put everything into place for her. She accused me of being unfaithful with you."

"But you haven't."

"Not physically at any rate," he said ruefully. "But I dream about you constantly. I remember what it was like to hold you in my arms and I didn't want to let you go."

"As do I," she said breathlessly.

Anthony clasped her to him, and Sapphira wrapped her arms around him, clinging to him as though he were her only refuge. He stroked her hair.

"I didn't think anything could be worse than not seeing you again," he said. "It was wrong. It's torture to be under the same roof as you, seeing you every day, and not being able to touch you like this."

Tears pricked in her eyes; every word resonated through her. As he took her face in his hands, his eyes searched hers. She wanted so much to tell him that she loved him still, but the tightness of her throat, constraining her voice, betrayed her.

His lips did not. They descended swiftly on hers in a possessive kiss which she returned with equal fervor.

How easy it would be to surrender to his arms, to his passion, and let it carry her away on the tide until they found themselves on different shores. But she broke the kiss and drew a lungful of air, ending the fever.

Anthony's face had taken on that grim expression that she'd witnessed only in the past two days.

"God, Sapphira – tell me before I lose my mind that you're not with him."

Sapphira blinked rapidly, confused.

"In love with *who*?"

Anthony looked frustrated. "Innes!"

She stared at him blankly.

"If he is your intended, tell me now."

"Innes isn't in love with me," she said.

"That's not the question I asked."

"He has offered to marry me."

Anthony let out a huff of air. "So, a marriage of convenience only."

"I love him as a family member, and he holds me in the same affection." Sapphira pulled together a small measure of pride. "Is there a reason I not marry him?"

"Dammit, Sapphira! A loveless marriage? That's not for you."

"And it is for *you*?"

He turned away briefly. "That's different. You know why I had to marry Innes?"

He shook his head. "It's a hell of a mess."

Sapphira nodded slowly. Yes, she could agree with that. "Does my father know about the intentions of the late duke?"

Anthony shook his head once again.

"There's something else you should know. In addition to his financial woes, my father left the estate in poor condition. Very poor. Worse than I suspected when I mentioned it to you. It's going to take two to three years to tell before it is profitable again. He knew this and expected me to use Elizabeth's dowry to mend it."

"Is there no other way? Is there no hope for us?"

"Before I saw you again, I didn't believe there was. Now I know my feelings for me are unchanged – as are mine for you – I want to believe in you."

l to heris hope.”

lves on Sapphira wiped away tears that danced at the ends of her eye
ough to “What are we going to do?”

“I wish I knew.”

tnessed Anthony cocked his ear. Sapphira also heard the sound of fo
coming down the hall. They passed by.

in love “You can’t stay,” she whispered.

Anthony took her hands and kissed them one at a time. “I ca
anything if you believe in me.”

“I do, but...”

He pressed a finger to her lips.

“Say no more; let that be enough. I love you, Sapphira. I always ha
always will. I cannot go on like this any longer. I intend to bre
engagement.”

”

ection.”
should

agree.”

y father

nancial
e than I
e years
abeth’s

w your
re there

is hope.”

Sapphira wiped away tears that danced at the ends of her eyelashes.

“What are we going to do?”

“I wish I knew.”

Anthony cocked his ear. Sapphira also heard the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. They passed by.

“You can’t stay,” she whispered.

Anthony took her hands and kissed them one at a time. “I can bear anything if you believe in me.”

“I do, but...”

He pressed a finger to her lips.

“Say no more; let that be enough. I love you, Sapphira. I always have and always will. I cannot go on like this any longer. I intend to break my engagement.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

“What’s done cannot be undone.”

“**N**OW REMEMBER PETER – you’re MacDuff, and you come in from the left. No, no, no – not your left, *my* left.”

“How am I supposed to know that?”

Caroline sighed in frustration. Sapphira hid a smile and completed her adjustments on Robert’s costume.

“Very well. You enter from your right. Begin!”

Simon was playing Ross.

*“They did so, to the amazement of mine eyes. That look’d upon’
comes the good MacDuff.”*

Peter entered on cue and looked down at his script.

“How goes the world, sir now?” said Simon.

Peter frowned and gestured outwards. *“Why, see you not?”*

Simon approached. *“Is’t known who did this more than bloody deed?”*

Peter brandished his sword. *“Those that Macbeth hath slain.”*

Simon faltered on his next line, distracted by the arrival of two servants accompanied by Lawrence.

“And, as you can see, my family is planning entertainment for us tonight. I’ve said to the couple.

While they made the rounds of the room to be introduced, Sapphira waited her turn although she knew who they were on first sight – the Countess Sheppard, Elizabeth’s parents.

Elizabeth favored her mother in looks, although there was something about the aristocratic bearing of the father that his daughter also carried. *Ah, the lady in question appears...*

Sapphira returned to her sewing in an attempt to make herself inconspicuous as possible to avoid Elizabeth.

Why? Guilty conscience?

She swallowed and picked up another garment.

Yes, in part. Anthony was engaged to another, no matter how much he loved one another. Until that situation changed, until he did as he would, there could be no future for them.

She glanced up. Elizabeth appeared to be looking for someone.

Anthony, of course.

He wasn't here. In fact, Sapphira hadn't see him at breakfast either last time she saw him was when he left her room last night, and she hardly going to confess to *that*.

She watched Elizabeth leave.

"I hear you have some particularly fine bloodstock, Weycliffe, that rival even some of mine," Earl Sheppard said. "Now the weather is bright, would you consider letting me examine the horseflesh to see for myself I can leave the women and children to play."

"Play?"

All eyes turned to Innes who now stood in the doorway.

"Why, the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the Caroline flipped through her script.

"I don't see that in here, Uncle Innes."

"It's *not* my dear. The line's from *Hamlet*. I say it only to let you know that playacting should not be disparaged as *play*."

Sapphira saw Lawrence grit his teeth against his unruly brother and the Earl's face flushed with anger. Innes, however, ignored them and swept into the room.

"Now, Caro, my little buttercup – where would you like me to stand?"

"Enter from over there if you please. We're just rehearsing the end of

Two, Scene Four."

"Very well, let me get in my costume."

Caroline clapped her hands and brought her little company to order.

Sapphira set down her needle and thread and rummaged through the clothes pile to find Innes' costume.

"Well, what a fine morning it is, puss."

He wore a half-smile that put her on her mettle immediately.

"Oh, how so?"

"It's stopped raining for one, and, secondly, Prince Charming drove off for a ride today, which suggests that he will be some time away."

Innes continued to regard her speculatively. Sapphira felt a flash of annoyance. It might amuse him, but her future happiness was at stake. She refused to bite and returned to her sewing.

If it wasn't raining, why *shouldn't* Anthony go for a ride? It was the business of Innes or her what he did.

Innes stood immobile, watching her.

er. The *Good, let him watch.*

he was A few moments later, Margaret ordered him to the stage. He hid behind the dressing screen, quickly donned his costume, and approached the stage.

it might *Damn him!*

reaking, Why did Innes *do* these things? Did he simply enjoy creating drama for himself? Weststage as well as on? He wasn't a cruel man, so why couldn't he see what she was doing to her?

A new thought sprang to mind. Was Innes doing this so she'd be taken seriously with Anthony and take his marriage proposal more seriously?

King.” Her eyes slid across to where the dowager duchess sat asleep in her chair. Surely his mother could see through him.

Still, there was the question of where Anthony had gone. When would he return? He had to. Perhaps it was nothing, just something to do with the Sheppards' carriage.

; while *Yes, that was it.*

all and It had absolutely nothing at all to do with the kisses they shared last night. It couldn't be. How could it?

d?” She stabbed the needle through the fabric – and into her thumb. A hiss escaped. A drop of blood welled. She stuck her thumb in her mouth to stop it.

1. A FEW HOURS later, Caroline and Margaret announced they wished to continue the rehearsals past midday, so a repast was brought up to them, and the room became a seemingly endless stream of patiently forbearing performers rehearsing their parts before getting back to their duties.

Sapphira found herself sitting next to the dowager duchess, who asked her to pour tea.

ssed to “Tell me more about this arrangement you have with my younger

lash of the older woman said abruptly.

ke. She The question took Sapphira by surprise. She tightened her grip
teapot to steady herself.

was no “I don’t know what to say,” she said. “He jokingly proposed mar
some future point, and I agreed, hypothetically, that should I be unwe
same time I would consider marrying him.”

The dowager took her cup and sipped from it, taking her time to dr
slipped the while regarding Sapphira thoughtfully.

hed the “So, not a love match.”

Although it was phrased as a statement rather than a question,
caught Sapphira off-guard. She giggled.

ma off- “No. *Not* a love match.”

hat this The dowager shook her head. “That son will be the death of me y
said with equal amounts affection and exasperation. “Well, at least
hrough where things stand. He’s a good boy, and he loves his mother, but he
so vexing!”

r chair.

WHEREVER ANTHONY HAD gone that day, he had returned in time for din
ould he was distracted. Sapphira tried to catch his eye a couple of times,
with the seemed to look right through her.

For a moment, the dark cloud that had enveloped her for
threatened to descend once more, and she fought the urge to feign illn
st night. excuse herself from the gathering. Whatever was to happen, she ne
remain aware, to steel herself for whatever the future might bring.

ib. She She needed to be strong, like the seawall that had held agai
soothe the tempest.

She watched Lady Elizabeth opposite. Nothing appeared amiss.

everyone at the table was acting normally. Innes looked at Anthon
ontinue back to her with a raised eyebrow. She quickly shook her head.

school No, she didn’t know what was going on.

amateur And no, she didn’t want him to draw attention to it.

When the meal had come to a close. Anthony had not looked h
ho had once.

As the ladies retired to the drawing room, Sapphira used it as an ex
st son,” go to her room to fetch a shawl. On her return, she found the door

study ajar.

on the Instead of lingering at the dining table with their brandies, all the
with the exception of Innes – were huddled at one end of the tal
riage appeared to be examining documents of some kind. Anthony was sp
d at thebut his voice was low, and Sapphira was too far away to hear.

A tap on the shoulder made her jump. She turned, and Innes regar
o so, allwith wry amusement.

“You frightened me!” she hissed.

“Eavesdroppers never hear anything good of themselves, puss.”

it still “I wasn’t eavesdropping. I just happened to be passing by.”

Innes nodded his head in an exaggerated fashion. Sapphira wrink
nose at him.

et,” she “Do you know what they’re talking about?”

I know “No. Your Anthony said he wanted to speak with your father, my l
can beand the earl. I took that as my excuse to have Preston do something at
cravat.”

“He must be speaking to father about—”

ner. He Innes put a hand on her shoulder, leading her away from the do
but he towards the drawing room.

months “Don’t fash yourself, my pet. There’s nothing to be gain
speculation.”

ess and “But—”

eded to Innes paused at a mirror in the hall and started fiddling with his
once more.

nst the “Did you notice over dinner that this didn’t sit right?”

Sapphira glanced back to the study. Innes’ hand was on her should

In fact, more.

y, then “Don’t. Remember Lot’s wife.”

ier way

xcuse to

r to the

study ajar.

Instead of lingering at the dining table with their brandies, all the men – with the exception of Innes – were huddled at one end of the table and appeared to be examining documents of some kind. Anthony was speaking, but his voice was low, and Sapphira was too far away to hear.

A tap on the shoulder made her jump. She turned, and Innes regarded her with wry amusement.

“You frightened me!” she hissed.

“Eavesdroppers never hear anything good of themselves, puss.”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping. I just happened to be passing by.”

Innes nodded his head in an exaggerated fashion. Sapphira wrinkled her nose at him.

“Do you know what they’re talking about?”

“No. Your Anthony said he wanted to speak with your father, my brother, and the earl. I took that as my excuse to have Preston do something about my cravat.”

“He must be speaking to father about—”

Innes put a hand on her shoulder, leading her away from the door and towards the drawing room.

“Don’t fash yourself, my pet. There’s nothing to be gained by speculation.”

“But—”

Innes paused at a mirror in the hall and started fiddling with his cravat once more.

“Did you notice over dinner that this didn’t sit right?”

Sapphira glanced back to the study. Innes’ hand was on her shoulder once more.

“Don’t. Remember Lot’s wife.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

*“Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under it.”*

Alice and two upper housemaids huddled together in the middle stage.

*“When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in fire,
When shall we three meet again, in hot or in cold, in summer or in winter,
asked Alice, dressed as the first of the three witches.*

The second maid started her line, greatly relishing her role, *“Whirlwind
hurly-burly’s done, when the battle’s lost and won.”*

“That will be ’ere the set of sun,” added the third.

Today was the first full-dress rehearsal, and Sapphira was glad for the distraction of it. Last night the men joined the ladies two hours after the ladies and the party broke up not long after that. The earl was fligid; the confident man she’d seen yesterday now reminded her of a simmering pot ready to boil over. Her father looked as though he’d been slapped; he stood beside *Maman* and said little. Lawrence looked grim.

Sapphira’s stomach plunged with sudden realization.

Anthony had told them everything.

Not that a word of their conversation was spoken about, although there was no doubt that behind closed doors tonight a lot *would* be said.

Anthony looked positively exhausted. She desperately wished she could go to him openly and give him a touch of comfort.

Fortunately, Margaret and Caroline were completely oblivious to the atmosphere, and Innes, to his credit, worked to keep the atmosphere light.

Sapphira idly played solitaire as she half-watched the rehearsal. She laid down a card and looked to Elizabeth who had joined Innes and the girls in a light-hearted conversation. If she was aware of Anthony’s state of mind, she gave no indication.

Sapphira excused herself and hastily wrote a note to Anthony, asking

to meet her in the drawing room at midnight. She slipped it under her door and returned to the rehearsal in the schoolroom.

Innes's valet appeared on the stage, and Sapphira quickly flipped to the correct page in her script to follow as prompt.

"Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear things that do seem fair? I' the name of truth, are ye fantastical, or that indeed which our eyes show?"

The young man knew his lines perfectly. The scene continued without interruption. Sapphira hid a yawn behind her hand.

Lady Beatrice noticed and approached. "I shall take your place while," she said. "Your mother wishes to speak with you downstairs."

Sapphira found her mother in the drawing room, a haven of tranquility compared to the chaos that reigned in the schoolroom.

"Are you aware of the conversation Lord Anthony had with you and the Earl of Sheppard last night?" her mother asked.

"Not directly, but I can guess at the substance of it," Sapphira admitted.

"So, you have spent time alone with Lord Anthony." The disappointment in her voice was palpable.

Sapphira nodded, not trusting herself to speak, knowing she would use all of her remaining fortitude to bear the inevitable rebuke. It was nothing she hadn't already told herself. Regardless of his profession of love, Anthony was contracted to another and a reprimand must ensue.

She could see her mother's expression change, weighing the words she wanted to say. She held out her hands. Sapphira took them and allowed herself to be led to a settee.

"You love Anthony very much, don't you?"

Sapphira nodded as she fought back tears. She swallowed and spoke in the steadiest voice she could manage, "He said he loves me and I love him..."

"But blackmail!" her mother said. "And from no one less than a peer can't bring myself to believe that a peer would stoop to such low behavior."

In Sapphira's anxiety, her mother's word seemed suddenly absurd. Giggles bubbled over. On reflection, a much better alternative to the play. "Mother, you *do* realize we're staging a production of *Macbeth* where the titular character murders his king, don't you?"

Mother waved her hand dismissively.

his door “Oh, that’s just the Scots. It’s not something an Englishman would
Sapphira raised an eyebrow in disbelief. Her mother gave her a sel
l to the grin in return.

Sapphira sobered. “I believe Anthony.”

ound so Her mother nodded. “So does your father. It seems Lord A
twardly furnished correspondence with the late Duke which outlined the plan.”

“Did father say how the Earl reacted?”

without “Not well, he said, although he found the man difficult to re
whether or not the late Duke misrepresented his fortune to the Earl,
e for anot alter the fact that, as of this moment, the marriage contract is still v

“I know. It would be a dreadful scandal if Anthony broke it off.”

anquility “And you are mindful of the fact that it might be no less disastrou
family should a scandal attach to you as a result?”

r father Sapphira acknowledged the question with a rapid nod.

Her mother’s smile softened, then turned melancholy.

itted. “Then I’m going to give you advice that no mother wishes
intmentdaughter,” Mother took her hand. “Walk away. This cannot end well.

wishing and all the love in the world cannot make a difference.”

ld need “I know that!” Sapphira protested. “I have already borne sc
ing thatheartache. I was ready to move on despite my disappointed hopes, but

Anthonyhim here at Greybridge and knowing that his feelings for r
unchanged... If Anthony is willing to fight for us, then I can do no le
rds she stand by him.”

allowed Mother said nothing during her impassioned speech and waited
long moments after she had finished before speaking. “Then what will
if Anthony cannot honorably detach himself from Lady Elizabeth?”

egan in “I cannot allow myself to think about it.”

believe She patted her daughter on the knee.

“Perhaps it is something one *ought* to think about.”

duke. I

viour.” SAPPHIRA REFUSED TO think about it, and she had the excuse of the
nusing·justify her. She watched Lady Caroline, dressed as Macbeth, pace the :
) tears·agitation before Alice, who had taken on a second role as Lady Ma
ere the doctor.

“Ay, my good lord; your royal preparation makes us hear some

do.” said Alice.

f-aware “Bring it after me,” Caroline as Macbeth announced. “I will not be of death and bane, Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane.”

The “doctor” glanced at “Macbeth”, approached the edge of the antony and addressed the audience in an aside: “Were I from Dunsinane away clear, profit again should hardly draw me here.”

Thus ended the scene and the small audience, comprising Lady Elizabeth and the dowager duchess, Mother, and Lady Beatrice applauded.

it does “Oh, your father will be so impressed Caroline. You and Margaret did a wonderful job, so far as I have seen. I’m looking forward to see a full production.”

s to our “The day after tomorrow will be our premiere – and our final curtain.”

“Which is why we’re making an occasion of it,” said Elizabeth significantly.

“How so?”

for her “Get changed from your costume. Your father has something he would like to show you.”

Caroline and Margaret both changed and followed their mothers much downstairs.

Seeing Sapphira smiled. It had been difficult to keep a secret from her sisters and her cousin, but Lawrence, her father, and the manservants had transformed the house into a playhouse for the occasion.

Furthermore, now that the inclement weather had cleared, an inn had been sent out to the villagers of Tebbing-by-Sea to enjoy respite from their work needed to help restore the seafront after the storm and to be entertained by the play.

With the secret of the barn out, Sapphira lingered with the manservants sorting the costumes to take downstairs and out to the new playhouse. She pondered the events of the last few days and what might happen in the future ahead.

With the roads becoming passable again, Anthony and the Shepherds’ departure was planned for two days hence. The tension between the Macbeths had been palpable today. What had been worse was not being able to do anything about it.

Sapphira was grateful that Anthony had been scrupulous enough to say nothing, anything that hinted of an attachment between them. Her head kn

reasons and agreed with them, but her heart... Oh, how it ached and c
e afraid about the unfairness of it all!

Folding costumes, she hadn't realized Elizabeth lingered also
e stage, schoolroom. Now the young woman approached with a serious expres
ay and her face.

This was the moment Sapphira had been dreading. The last th
Elizabeth, wanted was a confrontation.

"I always knew Lord A and I were not a love match, and I wa
et have accepting of it," Lady Elizabeth began. "My parents' marriage wasn't
eing the I'm not like you. I'm not a woman given much to sentiment. I know m
and I do it."

in." Sapphira wasn't sure if she was expressing a criticism or merely a
Mother, "You must understand," Elizabeth continued, "that Lord A ha
nothing but chivalry itself, but I do not know him any better today tha
at our first meeting. However, there is one thing I *do* know. He is in lo
ishes to you."

Sapphira was shocked. "What an extraordinary thing to say."
mother "Why not? It's the truth. Not that he's said any such thing to me,
became a different man when he arrived here. I see how he looks at y
ster and I see a man who is a complete stranger to me."

l a barn "You must be mistaken..."
Elizabeth shook her head. "And I see the way *you* look at him."
vitation What could Sapphira say to that? She lowered her gaze.

rom the Elizabeth cleared her throat. "Don't think this changes anything
ome be father is determined to have our family connected to the peerage, and
myself, a marriage with title and wealth will suit me quite admirably."

raids in "What of love?"
se. She "What of it? It doesn't keep the cold out when the windows are bro
n those "You might find it keeps the hearth warm when there is nothing

Sapphira offered. "And if you're marrying for wealth, I'm afraid yo
ppards' greatly disappointed."

e group Elizabeth frowned.
e to do "What do you mean by that?"

o avoid
ew the

ried out

in the
sion on

ing she

as fully
t either.
y duty,

fact.
is been
an I did
ve with

, but he
ou, and

ng. My
l, as for

oken.”
g else,”
ou’ll be



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more, is non

WITH THE FAMILY occupied, Sapphira ventured out of the castle, picking her way through the puddles of water in the yard until she reached one of the gates. From there she could see the North Sea glinting silver in the sunlight.

The day was still and sunny. The storm that had battered the stone walls had exhausted itself, taking away the wind that howled and howled. The air was peaceful, and Sapphira could hear herself think in what seemed like the first time in nearly three weeks.

She looked south to the village of Tebbing-by-Sea where a morning glint of sunlight signaled the opening of a window. The flapping banner that next appeared suggested a woman shaking out a tablecloth.

Life went on, returning to the timeless ebb and flow that existed before the tempest as though nothing had changed. Yet everything had changed.

Hadn't it?

Sapphira had waited in the drawing room for an hour after the appointed time. Anthony did not appear.

She raised her face to the sun and let its faint warmth touch her face. It was a day of new beginnings; all that was required of her was to make a choice.

She closed her eyes and considered the first path, on which Anthony had been forced to marry Lady Elizabeth out of duty and honor.

What then? She imagined herself accompanying her sister and cousin to their debuts. She could throw herself into the amusement of the ball, perhaps find a heart that would make hers pound as Anthony's had. Would that day be much like this? Where the storm's fury had left scars on the landscape that would become its character? Could she be happy? Yes. Perhaps. In time.

The road also had another branch, one she knew led to bitter loneliness. Did she love Anthony enough to let him go? Did she have faith in *herself* to let him go?

A shiver went through her. *Aye, there's the rub.*

She sensed rather than heard the presence of someone nearby. She
her eyes.

e.” Anthony made his way towards her with purpose. Everything
urged her to run into his arms, but she did not. What if his arms did n
to her?

ing her She waited until he reached her side.

the side “I’ve been looking for you,” he said. “You can’t know how
winter wanted to come to you when I got your note, but I couldn’t. After I r
everything my father had done, Earl Sheppard had things he wa
e walls discuss further.”

Now it “There is nothing you need to apologize for,” she said dully.

like the Anthony frowned. “Is anything amiss?”

nentary Sapphira righted her expression and shook her head. “No. I
amiss.”

white Anthony traced a finger down her arm to her hand, then gently too

before “Are you sure? Are you having second doubts about us?”

ed. Emotion swelled in her breast, threatening to break the banks
control she had shored up for so long.

pointed “Help me to see a way out!” she begged. “I have tried but cann
can’t know how much I’ve missed you, Anthony. It’s been agony to b
same room with you and not have others know how I feel.”

re. This He pulled her into a swift embrace and held her tightly, saying
ake her until the surge ebbed away, and Sapphira was able to breathe again
sobbing.

my was He kissed the top of her head and murmured against her ear.

young “You have my vow, Sapphira – you own my heart and no one el
nts and Earl and I have begun negotiations to break off my father’s arranger
d done. will not be easy, and it will not be quick. If you have any doubts at
cars on then let me know now, but it will not change my plans; I will not wed
under false pretenses.”

r there? “Elizabeth still believes you are engaged?”

“She has not yet been told. Her parents will speak to her after they

ess andAnd I return to London. I have my father's affairs to manage." An
enoughexpression hardened a moment. "Now that I have his title, I'll ge
accounting of the estate, and, believe me, changes *will* be made."

Sapphira closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax into his arms
opened "Do you trust me to do what I need to in order to come to you a
and unencumbered man in both body and soul?"

within She squeezed him tight in silent answer, but it was clear it v
ot openenough. Anthony released her from the embrace and asked her to look
She did so and saw love shining in his eyes.

"I trust you," she said. "I love you, and I will wait for you."
much I Anthony swept her into his arms once more and rained kisses on h
evealedand her hair, sweeping her into a maelstrom of another kind – of op
nted tolove, and of the rainbow's promise of sun on the morrow.



NothingKING DUNCAN LEFT the stage. Sapphira the prompt turned the page. A
Scene Five, the first appearance of Lady Macbeth. She held her bre
k it. waited.

Dressed in skirts and a wig of golden curls that most likely belo
of thethe dowager duchess, Innes Weycliffe stepped to the center of the sta
paused, letting the audience recognize who stood beneath the guise.

ot. You He unfurled a scroll and read out Macbeth's letter. Young
e in thewearing a grey knitted cowl that resembled chainmail, entered with s
hand as the messenger and delivered his lines.

nothing Sapphira set down her script and watched her cousin perform.

without "*The raven himself is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of l
under my battlements,*" he said softly before thrusting out his arms.

*you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me fi
se. Thecrown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty!"*

ment. It What did the audience make of his performance? After all, l
out us,Shakespeare's time, men and boys played all the parts. Sapphira cast h
*anyone*about. Everyone was riveted as Innes delivered a performance worthy
great stages of Europe. Lady Caroline entered the stage once more dre
Macbeth, but the final word of the scene belonged to Innes who deli
y leave.

thony's masterfully:

t a full "Only look up clear; to alter favor ever is to fear: Leave all the me."

. As one, the audience stood and applauded, a few of the villagers with their approval as Innes and Caroline left the stage.

The rest of the performance was as enthusiastically received, and the company of players received a rousing ovation at the end of the play. At the end of the play, the audience went outside to enjoy refreshments provided by the duke.

The fine weather continued as did the celebration under winter's pale blue skies with the promise of conditions continuing fine. After Sheppard's departure the following day.

timism, Sapphira half-expected Elizabeth to approach her again, but she did not and seemed far more circumspect on her leaving than she had been on her arrival.

Had she already been told about the discussion Anthony had with his father? Elizabeth had Sapphira's heart-felt sympathy. How difficult it is to have all one's expectations turned upside down.

ath and She observed Elizabeth in conversation with Innes. It seemed they were getting on very well, so much so that Innes presented her with his card – well-received, judging by the full smile Elizabeth offered in return.

age and Sapphira waited for Anthony to appear. They had managed a farewell early this morning, but still, she needed to see him atop his black Robert, white horse – one last image to keep in her mind while she waited for him to keep his promise.

And she would wait, this time with joy and optimism, with hope renewed.

Duncan

"Come,

from the

back in

her eyes

of the

passed as

vered it

masterfully:

“Only look up clear; to alter favor ever is to fear: Leave all the rest to me.”

As one, the audience stood and applauded, a few of the villagers whistled their approval as Innes and Caroline left the stage.

The rest of the performance was as enthusiastically received, and the company of players received a rousing ovation at the end of the play before the audience went outside to enjoy refreshments provided by the duke.

The fine weather continued as did the celebration under winter sun and pale blue skies with the promise of conditions continuing fine for the Sheppard's departure the following day.

Sapphira half-expected Elizabeth to approach her again, but she did not, and seemed far more circumspect on her leaving than she had been on her arrival.

Had she already been told about the discussion Anthony had with her father? Elizabeth had Sapphira's heart-felt sympathy. How difficult it was to have all one's expectations turned upside down.

She observed Elizabeth in conversation with Innes. It seemed they were getting on very well, so much so that Innes presented her with his calling card – well-received, judging by the full smile Elizabeth offered in return.

Sapphira waited for Anthony to appear. They had managed a private farewell early this morning, but still, she needed to see him atop his beautiful white horse – one last image to keep in her mind while she waited for him to keep his promise.

And she would wait, this time with joy and optimism, with hope and love renewed.



EPILOGUE

All's well that ends well

*Tunbridge Wells
Summer 1820*

THE MAN ON the gray horse was a gentleman. A man of quality. Of that quality could be no doubt.

Lady Sapphira watched him approach, her heart beating in time with the sound of the hooves of his horse coming ever louder. Finally, the man was near, and she let out a breath.

“I hope my unannounced presence hasn’t caused you too much inconvenience,” he said with a twinkle in his eye that let her know he remembered their conversation some fifteen months prior.

She gave him a warm smile but didn’t trust herself to speak – not with her family gathered outside at the sight of an unexpected visitor.

There was no reason why the presence of Anthony Redthorpe, Earl of Denby, could be considered untimely by anyone. Most families would have shown their eyeteeth to be so inconvenienced.

And it was no conceit on Sapphira’s part to believe that he had come to see her especially.

Her father stepped forward to greet the duke and assured him that the duke’s grace’s presence was most heartily welcome. After which, to Sapphira’s relief, he wisely gathered up the rest of the family – mother, sister, and two young brothers – and ushered them inside.

Out of view, but not out of earshot, Anthony took Sapphira’s hand and kissed it. His lips on her exposed wrist sent delightful tingles down her arm. His expression told her he knew full well the effect he was having on her.

How desperately she wanted to kiss him, a long, lingering caress like the one they shared all those months ago at Greybridge Castle.

“I’ve missed you,” he said softly.

“And I you,” she replied.

He offered his arm. Sapphira accepted it. They entered the house and followed the rest of the family into the drawing room.

“Sir,” said Anthony, addressing Sapphira’s father. “I would like a word, if I may, on a matter of great importance to me and your daughter.”

The End

at there

with the
in drew

much
recalled

at when

Duke of
ould give

come to

that his
Sapphira’s
and two

and and
er body.
er.
like the

“I’ve missed you,” he said softly.

“And I you,” she replied.

He offered his arm. Sapphira accepted it. They entered the house and followed the rest of the family into the drawing room.

“Sir,” said Anthony, addressing Sapphira’s father. “I would like a private word, if I may, on a matter of great importance to me and your daughter...”

The End

About the Author

Elizabeth Ellen Carter is an award-winning historical romance writer who pens richly detailed historical romantic adventures. A former newspaper journalist, Carter ran an award-winning PR agency for 12 years. She lives in Australia with her husband and two cats.

[Web](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Pinterest](#)

[Instagram](#)

[YouTube Trailers](#)

[Newsletter](#)

About the Author

Elizabeth Ellen Carter is an award-winning historical romance writer who pens richly detailed historical romantic adventures. A former newspaper journalist, Carter ran an award-winning PR agency for 12 years. The author lives in Australia with her husband and two cats.

[Web](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Pinterest](#)

[Instagram](#)

[YouTube Trailers](#)

[Newsletter](#)