

# JILLIAN EATON



THE  
SWAN  
SISTERS

A  
DUKE FOR

*Delilah*

A DUKE  
FOR DELILAH



{ Swan Sisters, Book Four }

JILLIAN EATON

Despite a terrible family scandal that saw them ostracized from the *ton*, the determined Swan Sisters have finally found their happily-ever-after. Lynette is married to a dashing viscount. Temperance is happily arguing away with a stubborn American. And Delilah, the youngest, is enjoying long morning walks with Mr. Humphrey...the family hound.

While it's hardly a match made in High Society heaven, Delilah vastly prefers the company of her four-legged pet to this year's crop of eligible bachelors. Mr. Humphrey may drool on occasion, but he never makes her blood boil or her eyes flash with annoyance...unlike *him*.

Breathtakingly arrogant and devastatingly handsome, the Duke of Claiborne is the last man Delilah would ever choose to spend her time with. But ever since a chance encounter leads to the duke becoming a victim of Mr. Humphrey's enthusiastic squirrel obsession, Delilah cannot seem to escape him.

Is this doggy meet-cute destined to end in love...or disaster?

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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The Summer Duke

The Autumn Duke

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# THE PLAYERS



Miss Delilah Swan

*Decidedly Unattached*

Mr. Humphrey

*Hound of Extraordinary Talents*

The Duke of Claiborne

*Arrogant Rogue/Very Annoying*

Lynette Swan

*Older sister, married to Nathaniel Blackbourne, The Viscount  
Townsend*

Temperance Swan

*Older sister, married to Mr. Hugh Jacobson (an American)*

Annabel Blackbourne

*Best friend, Nathaniel's sister, married to Mr. Lucas O'Brian*

Rebecca Blackbourne and Harold Blackbourne

*Countess and Earl of Brimshire, Nathaniel & Annabel's  
parents*

# CHAPTER ONE



MOST UNMARRIED WOMEN in the *ton* went to great lengths to attract the attention of a duke.

They danced at balls until their feet bled. They spent small fortunes on theater seats that would put them within earshot of a marquess who might one day inherit a dukedom. They circled around Hyde Park until the horses were dizzy and their chaperone's face had turned green. They wore corsets that squeezed their organs and hair padding that made their scalps itch. They hid themselves away in drawing rooms waiting for just the right opportunity to pounce. They attended so many house parties that they forgot what their own bed felt like.

And yet it was Miss Delilah Swan, on an early morning walk with her dog, of all things, that managed to catch the eye

of the most eligible duke in England...without so much as a scrap of hair padding to be had.

She didn't *mean* to gain his notice. Truth be told, she would have preferred it if he'd just kept going his way and she kept going hers. Solitude was precious in a city as big as London, and there were only certain times of the day that it could be found; the short window of time between sunrise and breakfast being one of them.

Unfortunately, the squirrel had other ideas.

Red and small and furry, it darted directly in front of Mr. Humphrey. And while Delilah had gone to great lengths in her efforts to teach the large hound not to jump on visitors, or mark his territory on Lady Brimshire's favorite Persian rug, or steal food off the table, a squirrel— particularly a squirrel that chattered mockingly as it dashed past—far exceeded the limits of Mr. Humphrey's obedience.

“MR. HUMPHREY, NO!” Delilah cried.

But it was already too late.

The hound bolted, the leash snapped, and the Duke of Claiborne never stood a chance.

Bounding after the squirrel with all the enthusiasm of a debutante set loose in a room filled with eligible bachelors, Mr. Humphrey rounded a bend in the walking trail and slammed straight into a tall, broad-shouldered gentleman with wavy black hair and frosty gray eyes that had time to widen for a fraction of an instant before he was slammed backwards into the ground.

Always thoughtful, Mr. Humphrey paused to swipe his tongue across the gentleman's face before he galloped off in eager pursuit of the squirrel, braying at the top of his lungs.

Torn between attending to her pet's latest victim, or chasing after said pet before he reached the Thames and swam away to parts unknown, Delilah stood frozen, gloved hands fluttering uselessly in the air.

She was, by her very nature, an indecisive person. When faced with the choice between a blueberry tart or one with raspberry filling, she could agonize for minutes before asking herself, why not both? But Mr. Humphrey wasn't a blueberry tart. And the man he'd bowled over didn't have a hint of raspberry in him.

Maybe black currant, she thought as she cautiously approached on the tiptoes of her brown leather ankle boots.

With some cardamom thrown in for good measure. Boasting a distinct peppermint taste, cardamom started off sharp and then sweetened on the tongue before concluding with a tiny hint of citrus.

It was her favorite spice.

“Hello,” she said tentatively, peering down at the gentleman.

He remained flat on his back, knees slightly raised and a somewhat dazed, if irritable, expression carved into the hard planes of his countenance. He had a long, straight nose and a firm mouth that was, at the moment, pinched at the corners in a scowl reminiscent of her sister Temperance’s husband, the notoriously grumpy Mr. Jacobson. His jaw was clean shaven and honed like the edge of a scalpel. His hair dark as a raven’s wing with the same silky texture. But it was his eyes that captured her attention. So gray they were almost blue, with a vivid circle around the irises. It was a distinct feature that tugged at something in the back of her mind and made her uncomfortably aware that while she didn’t recall who the man was, she really should have. But then, she wasn’t really good with names, either.

“Are you all right?” she asked politely, offering her hand.

“Where is your chaperone?” he said instead, ignoring both her hand and her question. His voice was rough on the surface with a smooth undertone, reminding her of the brandy she’d been foolish enough to drink once.

The initial taste had made her gasp, but the slow burn that warmed her throat afterwards had left her purring and reaching for more. Had Lynette, her other sister, not slapped her hand away, she’d have likely downed the entire bottle...and paid the consequences for it the next morning.

“Well?” he demanded. “Where is she?”

“My chaperone?” she replied blankly. “Ah...”

“Surely you have a chaperone.” Rising to his feet, he gave his hat a hard *thwack* that sent a plume of dust spiraling into the air before tucking it under his arm.

“Well...” Biting her bottom lip, Delilah cast him a surreptitious glance from beneath her lashes while she racked her brain for a suitable reply.

At full height, the gentleman with the icy gaze towered above her, his rangy, muscular build dwarfing her petite frame. If not for the fine cut of his clothing and the condescending tilt of his head, she might have believed he was a common

blacksmith or a boxer. But a man who shod horses for a living couldn't have afforded a silk-lined tailcoat, and his face, while coldly menacing, was far too handsome to have suffered a broken nose or shattered cheekbone.

"I must have forgotten her at home," she lied, for the truth was that Temperance, as a fellow rule-breaker, permitted her to do as she wished so long as Lynette didn't find out about it.

There were three of them in all.

Lynette, the wife of Lord Townsend, a viscount.

Temperance, newly married to Mr. Jacobson, an American.

And Delilah, in a dedicated relationship with Mr. Humphrey, a hound of extraordinary taste...except when it came to the dark-haired gentleman who was staring at her as if she were a piece of mud that he'd just scraped off his boot heel and was waiting for his valet to dispose of.

Oh, why did her pet have to tackle *him*, of all people?

Whoever he was.

Lynette would have put immediately disarmed him with her grace and poise.

Temperance would have told him to sod off and not thought twice about it.



But Delilah, who found herself in her own little world more often than not (and preferred it that way), hadn't the faintest idea *what* to do.

They'd all come to London for her second Season, even though when it came to matters of the opposite sex she was utterly and irrevocably helpless.

Young ladies were meant to talk of the weather and fashion, but more often than Lynette would have liked, she found herself rambling on about random topics of personal interest that ranged from how flamingos achieved their brilliant pink color to how many stars there were in the sky.

Dancing was a dangerous affair if her partner wanted to keep all ten toes in working order. And if she had to choose between carrying a tune or dying, she could only hope that it would be a quick, painless death.

In short, she was everything she ought *not* to be...and she had as much chance of charming her way out of this situation as a duck did of strolling into a millinery and purchasing a hat.

“You haven't a chaperone,” the stranger began ominously, his gloved hands resting on his lean hips, “your dog is a menace—”

“Mr. Humphrey isn’t a menace!” Delilah denied hotly.

“—and...did you say Mr. Humphrey?” He blinked, momentarily startled. “You named that savage beast *Mr. Humphrey?*”

“What’s wrong with Mr. Humphrey?” Defensive, she unconsciously mimicked his posture, fingers digging into her waist as her mouth pinched in a frown. “It’s a fine name for a dog.”

“A spaniel, perhaps. Or a setter. But not a bloody rampaging elephant.” He looked pointedly over his shoulder to where Mr. Humphrey was standing on his hind legs against an oak, barking furiously into the leafy branches overhead where, presumably, the squirrel had wisely sought refuge. “Your dog should be reported to the local constable before he maims someone else.”

“Oh!” she gasped, appalled by the mere suggestion. “You wouldn’t dare.”

The gentleman snorted. “I’d be performing my civic duty.”

As a general rule, Delilah liked everyone.

Young and old.

Quiet and loud.

Common and noble.

Seeing the best in people was her specialty. But for the first time, she couldn't name a single redeeming quality about the man standing in front of her.

His arrogance was breathtaking.

His cruelty astounding.

His gray eyes irresistible.

Now it was Delilah who blinked.

Irresistible?

No, no, no.

He was *awful*.

He wanted to turn her beloved pet over to the *authorities*! That he also happened to be the most physically striking man she'd ever seen was just fate's idea of a terrible jest. An unfortunate pairing of two things that ought never to go together, like pickles and chocolate. Delicious individually, but no one in their right mind would ever eat both at once.

*Except for you*, a little voice interceded.

Delilah gritted her teeth. All right, yes, on rare occasions she had stretched the limits of her palate by dipping a small

bite of pickle into a cup of melted chocolate. And fine, it was the most mouthwateringly divine thing she'd ever put between her lips. But *that* had nothing to do with *this*. And it definitely had nothing to do with *him*.

“Who are you?” she asked. It was a terribly rude question, but the moment he'd threatened Mr. Humphrey, they'd moved beyond pleasantries. “What is your name? Maybe I'll turn *you* over to the authorities. Have you considered that?”

“And what, pray tell, is my crime?” he drawled, an insolent smirk dancing across his lips.

“Being a terrible person,” she said without hesitation.

“Me? *You* are the one unable to control your own pet.” His eyes narrowed. “Forget the hound. It's only doing what hounds do. Maybe a night in Newgate will make *you* reconsider the recklessness of *your* actions. What if I'd been an old lady, or a governess pushing a pram?”

A pang of guilt brought a pink flush to Delilah's cheeks. He had a point, as loathe as she was to admit it. Mr. Humphrey was her responsibility and as such, any damage he caused to person or property was her responsibility as well. What if he *had* knocked over an elderly dowager instead of the most

conceited man that God had ever seen fit to create? How terrible she'd feel!

“You're right, it could have been far worse,” she acknowledged stiffly. “I apologize for any suffering you've endured. I shall make sure to work on Mr. Humphrey's manners, and find a stronger leash. Now if you'll excuse me, I should fetch him before he gets it in his mind to go chasing after another squirrel.”

But the gentleman didn't step aside, as he should have. Instead he remained squarely in her path, his legs spread apart so that if she wanted to go around him, she'd be forced to walk on grass still wet from morning dew.

That in itself wasn't an issue. She enjoyed the outdoors, both tidy, manicured paths and sprawling expanses of wilderness. But if she returned to the house with damp skirts, Lynette would ask where she'd been. As she was a terrible liar, she'd have to tell the truth...that she'd snuck out by herself while everyone else was still abed. Such an admission would inevitably lead to a gentle to moderate scolding, and her odds of continuing with her early walks without anyone being the wiser would be greatly diminished.

“Excuse me,” she repeated, but he still didn’t move, leading her to chew on her bottom lip in exasperation and a small amount of worry. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that Mr. Humphrey had gotten down from the tree and was now circling it. While his focus remained trained on his arch nemesis, the hound’s attention span was notoriously short-lived. “I really *must* be going.”

“But I haven’t accepted your apology.”

Her gaze jerked to his face in incredulous surprise. “Is it not enough that I gave it?”

“Anyone can *give* an apology.” He skimmed his fingertips across his cleanly shaven jaw in a careless gesture of disregard. “But it’s meaningless until it is accepted as genuine.”

She bristled at the veiled accusation. “I don’t know about yours, but my apologies are always genuine.”

“I don’t make them.”

“You don’t apologize?” A breeze caused a loose garnet curl to tumble across her forehead. She shoved it behind her ear. “*Ever?*”

“Ever,” he confirmed. “Apologies are an indication that you’ve done something wrong.”

“Surely you’re not claiming to be so perfect as to be free of sin,” she scoffed.

“On the contrary,” he said in a voice that was suddenly two notes deeper and all the huskier because of it. A piece of gravel crunched beneath the heel of his boot as he prowled closer until the only thing separating them was a scant few inches of space and Delilah’s indignation. “I commit sins all the time. I just never apologize for them.”

He was so....*big*, she noted. Big and powerful, in the way that certain men just were. Men born into privilege. Men accustomed to getting their own way. Men who never heard the word ‘no’. Men whom she made a habit of staying away from.

For reasons that completely baffled Delilah, a lot of women her age were actually *attracted* to insufferable bullies. Like bees to honey, they flocked to the dark, dangerous, debonair scoundrels who had a trail of broken hearts in their wake. The worse these men behaved, the more of a prize they became. Naturally, that only served to fuel their bad habits and breathless arrogance.

“I don’t like you,” she said seriously. “I’m sure no one else has ever told you this before, but you’re rude.”

He smiled thinly. A shark showing its teeth before it chomped down on its next meal. “I can assure you that the feeling is mutual.”

“Excellent. Now that we’ve established that we don’t care for each other’s company, could you please step aside so that I can collect Mr. Humphrey?”

“No.”

“*No?*”

“That’s what I said.”

“You’re *very* rude,” she decided.

“Should you like a reward for establishing the obvious? Here.” Before she had time to react, he lowered his head and brushed his mouth across her cheek.

It was a quick, casual kiss.

Hardly more than a peck.

But the fire it ignited in her belly roared into a blistering flame.



The stranger straightened and rocked back onto his heels. For an instant, his gaze went to her lips. A muscle leapt in his jaw. “You should go fetch your beast now.”

Yes.

Yes, she probably should have.

Instead, she remained rooted to the spot. Frozen in the same place that she’d wanted to leave a mere second ago.

The stranger was frozen as well. His body stiff and unyielding save for the heat emanating off it, like sunlight reflecting off cobblestone in the middle of August.

Or a devil burning in heaven.

“Who are you?” she whispered, unconsciously tracing the tips of her fingers across her cheek where his mouth had just been.

“The rude man that your dog ran over in the park.” A hint of a smile, no more than a flash, really, before he turned on his heel and walked away.

## CHAPTER TWO



“I JUST HAD A MOST UNUSUAL encounter with a most unpleasant man,” Delilah announced the moment she entered the foyer of the Grosvenor Square manor that she shared with Lynette, Lynette’s husband, Nathaniel, their daughter, Regina, and Lynette’s father-and-mother-in-law, Lord and Lady Brimshire.

Temperance and her husband, Mr. Jacobson, had just arrived the night before, and by the end of the week Nathaniel’s sister (and Delilah’s very best friend) Annabel, accompanied by *her* husband, Lucas O’Brian, would also join them.

It was to be the first time they would all be gathered under the same roof since last Season when Delilah made her largely touted—and vastly unsuccessful—debut into High Society.

Countless gowns, endless waltzing, bottomless cups of tea, and barely a calling card to show for it, let alone a proposal.

Not that she'd minded.

The truth of the matter was that her debut had been as much for Lynette as it had been for her. Lynette, whose one and only Season had been cut short by scandal, had desperately wanted for her little sister what she'd never had for herself. And Delilah, never one to rock the proverbial boat, had begrudgingly gone along for the ride...even though she'd found herself tempted to jump over the side more than once.

When it was finally over and done with, she had been filled with an immense sense of relief.

Until she remembered that she'd have to do it all over again next year.

Wardrobe fittings and luncheons and dinner parties.

Social calls and carriage rides and balls.

So *very* many balls.

Big ones. Small ones. Ones that made her perspire, and others that left an icky taste in the back of her throat. Balls that finished in the blink of an eye, and some that lasted all night.

Suffice it to say, she wasn't exactly looking forward to her second Season. But she couldn't *wait* to see Annabel again. During Lynette and Nathaniel's tumultuous courtship, Delilah and Annabel had quickly become thick as thieves. As the youngest daughters in both of their respective families, they were accustomed to being overlooked, even occasionally ignored, and had sought solace in each other's company.

Except now Annabel wasn't a debutante, but a wife...and over the past few months their correspondence had been limited to letters after Annabel and Mr. O'Brian had moved to a lovely (but inconveniently far) home in the village of Canterbury.

Secretly, Delilah was worried that their friendship wouldn't be as it once was. While she remained the same (unwed with no discernable prospects on the near or distant horizon), Annabel had taken on an entirely different role. Would they still share common interests? Would Annabel still want to stay up late giggling over Lord Ramsay's ridiculous wig and Lady Eugenia's pet parrot that shrieked curses to make a sailor blush? Or would she prefer to spend most of her time with her husband, as Lynette and Temperance did?

Temperance had been married for almost a year, and Delilah could count on one hand the number of times they'd spoken! Granted, their sisterly interactions prior to Mr. Jacobson entering the picture had been mostly comprised of spits and spats, but that didn't change the fact that she missed her sister.

She also missed Lynette, and they were even living in the same house! But ever since *her* marriage to Nathaniel, and the birth of their adorable daughter, Regina, Lynette had been understandably preoccupied. Now that she was a wife, a viscountess, *and* a mother, her days were filled with activities from sunrise to sunset, and it was a rare minute that she had to spend with Delilah.

That left Lady Blackbourne, Nathaniel's mother. She was a very nice woman...if a tad obtrusive when it came to Delilah's prospects. Having attended not one, not two, but three weddings in a two-year span, she was eager to add a fourth to her list. Almost as eager as Delilah was to *avoid* any rose petal strewn aisles with somber-looking men standing at the end of them.

As much as her sisters teased her for having her head stuck up in the clouds, she wasn't completely oblivious. She knew

that without a husband by her side, she stuck out like a sore thumb. Honestly, who would have ever dreamed that *Temperance* would fall in love before her? Let alone Annabel, who had not-so-long-ago recoiled at the mere mention of matrimony. Now they were all happily wedded, and Delilah couldn't help but feel a little left out...even though she had no immediate plans to join them. Not until she found a gentleman who made her heart pitter-patter, at any rate. And her toes curl. And her pulse race.

The stranger in the park had made her pulse race, she recalled, clamping her bottom lip firmly between her teeth. But that particular bodily reaction had not been brought on by any girlish romantic fantasy, but rather a rush of sheer outrage at his blatant obnoxiousness.

The *nerve* of him!

To threaten not only her, but poor, innocent Mr. Humphrey...and then to *kiss* her, of all things! Just her cheek, but still. A kiss was a kiss. Her first kiss, as it so happened. And now it belonged to a terribly arrogant rogue who possessed all the good manners of a rutting boar.

If their paths never crossed again, it would be too soon.

“What’s wrong with your face?” A tawny brow rising up towards her tousled collection of short honey brown curls—she’d chopped her hair to chin-length shortly after her wedding—Temperance sauntered into the foyer and propped an elbow on the bannister. “It’s all...puckered. You look as if you’ve just bitten into a pitted prune.”

“Mr. Humphrey ran into a pitted prune,” Delilah mumbled under her breath.

“What was that, dear?” This from Lynette, who entered via the parlor with a cooing Regina on her hip and a distracted smile on her lips.

“This morning, in the park, Mr. Humphrey went after a squirrel and accidentally, ah, knocked someone over. But it wasn’t his fault,” she said hurriedly.

“Whose fault was it?” Temperance asked. “The squirrel?”

“Mr. Humphrey was only doing as nature intended. If he were on a farm chasing after a rat, his behavior would be rewarded.”

“But we’re not at a farm,” said Lynette, switching Regina to her other hip with a little bounce when the baby began to fuss.

“We’re in London, where large dogs cannot be allowed to run wild.”

“Exactly,” Temperance smirked.

“Mr. Humphrey wasn’t running *wild*,” Delilah argued. “He was actually being very well behaved. The man wasn’t even hurt. His ego, maybe, but—”

“And where were you during this unfortunate encounter?” Lynette asked, her cool gaze landing squarely on Temperance, whose smirk immediately faded. “If Delilah was in the park, then you should have been there with her.”

“I was sleeping, as any sane person would be at the crack of dawn.” Temperance crossed her arms. “Besides, she took Mr. Humphrey with her.”

Lynette, a stickler for rules, particularly when it came to her sisters, clucked her tongue disapprovingly. “If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a dozen times. A dog is *not* a proper chaperone.”

“Tell that to her,” Temperance said, gesturing at Delilah with a flourishing wave of her arm. “She’s the one who insists on taking that mutt with her everywhere that she goes.”



Delilah gasped. “Mr. Humphrey is *not* a mutt! And I know that I shouldn’t have left the house without a chaperone, but I went early on purpose so that no one else would be around. I didn’t plan for Mr. Humphrey to knock anyone over.”

“No, dear, you never do.” The stern set of her brow softening with affection, Lynette reached out and squeezed Delilah’s hand. “At Dunhill it wouldn’t be a matter of concern,” she went on, referring to their country estate. “But here, with people all around and the Season upon us, we must curb our more...ill-behaved tendencies.” After pressing a kiss to Regina’s temple, she set her daughter down on the rug so that she could roam freely around the foyer. “Who should I direct our apologies to this time?”

“He did not tell me his name.” Automatically crouching down, Delilah wiggled her fingers at her niece to draw her attention and beamed when Regina reversed course and began to crawl towards her as fast her chubby arms and legs would go. “But it doesn’t matter. I can assure you that whoever he is, he’s not deserving of *any* apology.”

Above her, Lynette and Temperance exchanged a startled glance. While it wasn’t out of the ordinary for Delilah to sneak

off with Mr. Humphrey, hearing her speak ill of anyone was very unusual.

“Did something untoward happen?” Lynette frowned.

“Give us his description and I’ll send Hugh after him,” Temperance said matter-of-factly.

The Swans sisters may have bickered amidst themselves, but when faced with a common enemy, they immediately shored in their ranks. It was a family characteristic that had seen them through many a hardship, and a much-needed reminder for Delilah that despite recent changes, they remained a tightly-knit unit when it counted most.

“It’s all right,” she said, absently brushing a softly wound curl behind the miniature shell of Regina’s ear. It was a constant wonder to her how *small* her niece was. Small, and sweet, and perfect. Except when she woke the household in the middle of the night with her squalling cries. Or spit up on her grandfather, Lord Brimshire. Or wedged herself under a table and refused to come out. Now that Delilah thought about, Regina and Mr. Humphrey weren’t entirely dissimilar. “I suppose, in hindsight, the gentleman was understandably upset when he found himself on the ground. Although he suffered no injuries, aside from his pride, he did not strike me as the sort

of man who could take a jest. Which is probably why he threatened me.”

“He *threatened* you?” Lynette cried.

“I’ll tell Hugh to bring his pistol,” Temperance said grimly.

Scooping Regina into her arms, Delilah rose somewhat unsteadily to her feet (her niece may have been small, but she was shockingly heavy), and shook her head. “There’s no need. I’m sure I’ve seen the last of him. I’m certain he never wants to see *me* again.” Her nose wrinkled, as much from the sudden smell emanating from Regina as the unaccustomed loathing she felt for a complete stranger. “It’s all best forgotten.”

“If you’re sure...” said Lynette, not sounding convinced.

“Positive. Here you are, Aunt Tempy,” she chirped brightly, passing Regina over to her sister. “Your niece wants to spend some time with you, and I need to change before breakfast.”

“Is that right,” Temperance cooed, the thin veneer of sarcasm she wore like an invisible cloak vanishing in the blink of an eye as she took Regina into her arms. “Look at you, sweet darling. How have you gotten bigger since last night? What do you—oh. Oh, *Regina*. What have you been *eating*?”

“Peaches,” Lynette replied, clasping her hands beneath her chin as she gazed adoringly at her daughter. “Soaked in a light porridge gruel. She loved them. Her favorite fruit so far, I think.”

“Were the peaches rotted?” Her countenance taking on a distinct greenish tinge, Temperance glared at Delilah over the top of Regina’s white bonnet. “Get back here this instant!”

“I’m sorry,” Delilah said contritely, edging towards the stairs. “I really *do* have to change.”

“Yes, you need to change this dirty linen!”

“What?” She cupped her ear. “I’m so far away. What are you...I can’t quite...”

“I *know* you can hear me!”

On a snort of laughter, Delilah grabbed onto the curved bannister and ran up the stairs two at a time.

“CANCEL MY ELEVEN O’CLOCK MEETING,” Silas Byron, 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Claiborne, told his valet brusquely as he stepped into the foyer of his Grosvenor Square manor, Harpswell House, handed off his gloves and hat to a footman, and promptly saw himself to his study.

“*Cancel it, Your Grace?*” Visibly taken aback (the Duke of Claiborne was never one to alter his rigidly set plans, especially when they had to do with business), Evansworth, a trusted servant for nearly a decade, followed his employer into a dimly-lit room decorated with sleek mahogany paneling, oversized furniture, and floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with thick leather bound tomes.

It was unequivocally a masculine domain, but then the Duke of Claiborne was unequivocally masculine. While the current fashion trends courtesy of Paris had veered towards silk tights and pointed shoes and colorful cravats adorned with lace and ruffles, Silas maintained a somber, serious wardrobe comprised of gray trousers, black Hessians polished to a high sheen, and fitted tail coats in forest green, dark blue, and deep burgundy. His cravat, which he wore without fail no matter the occasion, was outfitted simply with a single gold pin, one end inlaid with his family’s crest; a wolf whose open jaws were caught in a perpetual snarl. And while other men of similar rank and title were borrowing their mistress’s curling tongs to tease their hair into ever-higher mountains of stylistic art, Silas wore his mahogany mane slicked back from his temple and set in place with a dash of pomade so that it wouldn’t distract him as he went about his daily tasks.

The duke did not care for distractions.

A flyaway tendril, an unannounced visitor, a brown-eyed fairy with the softest skin his lips had ever touched.

They were all sources of annoyance.

One more so than the rest.

“Did I stutter or otherwise make myself unclear, Evansworth?” he asked, lowering his six foot frame into the chair behind his desk. As with everything else in his life, the antique davenport was impeccably organized. Writing utensils to the left, fresh parchment to the right, his sealing stamp above, and the morning’s correspondence in the middle. There wasn’t so much as a quill out of place; just the way he liked it.

“No, Your Grace, you did not,” the valet replied, a dull flush creeping up beneath the collar of his jacket.

To serve the Duke of Claiborne was to understand that he suffered neither fools nor stupid questions. A hard–albeit fair–employer, Silas gave the best to his staff by way of wages and expected nothing less but the best in return. But unlike other employers who developed personal, even caring relationships with those they shared a home with, he kept himself removed from such inconvenient attachments. Everyone in his

household was there to serve a specific purpose, and as such, were easily replaceable should they fail to meet his high expectations.

Those who had been sacked for poor performance grumbled under their breath that the duke was cold, aloof, and unfeeling. If anyone were to dare say such things to his face, he'd readily agree with them.

Yes, he *was* cold. Both to foes and friends alike. And yes, he preferred aloofness over frivolous familiarity. As for being unfeeling...it was an emotion he'd learned honestly at his mother's knee, for never let it be said that the late Duchess of Claiborne had ever showed her only child an ounce of maternal affection.

"I apologize, Your Grace," said Evansworth, clicking his heels together as he drew himself to his full height and stared straight ahead at a painting on the wall of a foxhunt in full bore, the hounds wild-eyed and frothing at the mouth as they ran their prey to ground. "I shall ensure that Mr. Blake is notified at once. Would you like to schedule another day and time to meet with him?"

"Tomorrow," Silas replied absently, lifting a quill and dabbing the sharp end into an inkwell. "He may choose a time

at his leisure, so long as it falls between nine and half past ten.”

Evansworth inclined his chin. “It shall be done. Is there anything else, Your Grace?”

“No. Wait.” Silas’s eyes narrowed as he tapped the quill against the edge of his desk, inadvertently splattering dots of shiny black ink across a blank piece of parchment. “Yes. I want you to track someone down. A female someone.”

“A—*a female* someone, Your Grace?” Evansworth choked.

Canceling a meeting was one thing.

Expressing interest in a woman was quite another.

To the best of Evansworth’s recollection, the Duke of Claiborne had never inquired into the whereabouts of any of his mistresses before. Not due to any kind of misplaced trust, but rather because he simply didn’t care what his lovers did once they left his line of sight. Thus, a specific request to “track down” a member of the opposite sex was *highly* unusual.

The duke didn’t need to find women.

They found him.



“Our paths crossed in the park this morning. She didn’t give me her name.” *But her hair shone like copper dancing in the sun and her skin smelled of roses.* Silas’s mouth curled in self-directed disdain.

Bloody hell.

When he was pushed to the ground, he must have hit his head harder than he thought to have it spewing out such idiotic poetry.

“But it was apparent by her clothing and cadence of speech that she was a lady of means. She had a hound with her. Black and white. Humphrey.”

“The woman’s name was Humphry?”

“The *dog*, Evansworth. The dog’s name was Humphrey.” For the first time since he’d entered his study, Silas bothered to glance at his valet. What he saw made him frown. “You appear pale. Ill, even. Are you sick?”

“Not to my knowledge, Your Grace.”

“Good.” He gave a decisive nod. “Then you can begin your search straight away. Hire a Bow Street Runner if you must, but I want this chit found. Today, if possible.”

“Why?” Evansworth blurted before he froze, his countenance adopting the same horrified expression as the poor fox in the painting. “I am truly sorry for such a personal inquiry. You’re correct. I...I must not be feeling well. My sincerest apologies. I’ll see to it that Mr. Blake is alerted to the alteration in your schedule, and that this woman and her dog are found with all due haste, Your Grace.”

“Strange man,” Silas murmured under his breath as his valet uttered a high-pitched sound that could best be described as a squeak of distress, and then promptly fled the room. Lifting his quill, he tapped the feathered end against his chin, his gaze pensive.

Growing up in the looming shadow cast by his indomitable father, he’d become accustomed to people—particularly servants—being intimidated by him at a young age. Some were even outright terrified. And while it was never his intention to scare anyone, he did prefer the natural distance that such wary apprehension maintained.

If someone liked you, they tended to want to talk to you. If they talked to you, they would invent some common interest. If they invented some common interest, it wouldn’t be long before they fancied themselves a close acquaintance. But Silas

did not keep close acquaintances. Peers, servants, or otherwise. That being said, he didn't want Evansworth to be so frightened of him that the valet was incapable of coherent speech. Maybe a compliment was due. Or a raise.

*Higher wages*, he decided.

Praise might give Evansworth the wrong idea; God forbid he come under the impression that Silas had developed a vague sense of brotherly fondness during the valet's nearly decade long tenure. Not when Silas refused to acknowledge it himself.

*"Your household staff is only as efficient as you make them,"* his father had told him when he was but a quiet, studious lad of eight. Busy with lectures and tutors while his future classmates at Eton snuck frogs in their governesses' armoires and stayed up late making lanterns with glowworms. *"Like a solidly built chair or table, they are here to perform a task. They work for money and the prestige of serving one of England's noblest families. That is all they care about, and that is why you should not care about them. Do you understand?"*

Silas hadn't. Not really. Not then, at any rate.

But his father made sure that his words took root when he noticed his son forming a bond with the nanny, a kind, softly-spoken woman who was more of a mother to Silas than his own had ever bothered to be. The day after Silas presented her with a picture of a unicorn (her favorite animal, and the lead character in the stories that she told him every night), she left to work in another household far away. He never saw her again, and in his bewildered heartbreak, he learned a valuable lesson. To love someone was to lose them, and he'd rather be alone than subject himself to that kind of pain again.

When his parents died within a year of each other, his mother on his seventeenth birthday, he didn't mourn them. He didn't feel sadness. Or grief. Or agony. Truthfully, he didn't feel anything. Which was fitting, as they hadn't felt anything for him.

That wasn't to say Silas maintained *complete* isolation. He was courteous to his staff, if occasionally abrupt. He had a long list of acquaintances and was a regular at White's, the finest gentleman's establishment in St James. He attended all the social gatherings that his title demanded of him, and every once in a while, he even enjoyed himself.

Granted, he hadn't kept a mistress for the past eight months, but celibacy was preferable to the tearful angst that inevitably occurred no matter how firmly he laid down the rules at the beginning of such arrangements. Worse than the tears, was the financial commitment. Once a woman claimed to be in love with you, she was damned expensive to be rid of.

Every female had a price, of course.

But heightened emotions had a way of adding up to exorbitant sums of money...even for a duke of considerable means and obscene wealth.

As a result, he'd not bothered to seek out another mistress after the last had left, pouting and draped in jewels. While Silas liked his pleasure, he found that more often than not, the turmoil wasn't worth the reward. A rousing tup was all well and good, but not when it was accompanied by wailing admissions of love.

Cold, aloof, and unfeeling. By this point, it might as well have been a personal aphorism. And while he refrained from treating women as shiny toys to be used and discarded, neither did he ruminate on the time they spent together...even his mistresses. Out of sight genuinely meant out of mind. The

moment they walked from the room, he moved onto other, more important matters.

Why, then, did he find himself fixated by the fairy in the park? With her big doe-eyes surrounded by thick, lush lashes and the delightful spattering of freckles across her nose like cinnamon sprinkled onto a warm biscuit, and the sloped curve of her breasts pressing—

Rising abruptly to his feet, Silas stalked around the corner of his desk to glare broodingly out the window at the rose garden he rarely frequented, blunt nails digging into the lean edge of his hipbones as he reflected upon the request he'd made of his valet.

*“I want you to track someone down...hire a Bow Street Runner if you must, but I want this chit found. Today, if possible.”*

What the devil was wrong with him? Maybe *he* was the person who had fallen ill. Who cared if he ever saw the girl again? She was nothing to him. No one. Certainly not a potential mistress; the chit had Virgin all but stamped onto her pretty little forehead. He didn't need a wife—not for another five years, at least, and not one like *her*.

When he did marry (another requirement of his title), it would be to a lady of sophistication who understood her duties as a bride and duchess extended to birthing a male heir, overseeing the management of their social schedule, and nothing else.

An impertinent, stubborn, naïve innocent *wasn't* on his list of potential future candidates.

She wasn't even worthy of a miniscule footnote.

So if she wasn't to be a mistress, or a wife, or an acquaintance (he knew better than to stir the pots of gossip by entertaining a benign friendship with a female of marriageable age), then why bother learning her name and whereabouts? Better to call off Evansworth now before the valet had all of Bow Street roaming the streets of London.

Except when he rang the bell pull, he was informed that his valet had already left.

And Silas's fate (although he wouldn't know it then) was already sealed.

## CHAPTER THREE



TEMPERANCE HAD FORGOTTEN about the dirty linen by dinner, and the entire family, sans Annabel and Lucas, enjoyed a feast of glazed ham, stuffed tomatoes, veal cutlets topped with sprigs of parsley, and peas soaked in fresh cream.

Delilah ate every bite put down in front of her, and a few forkfuls from Lynette's plate besides. She may have put up with dress fittings and hair stylings, but she wasn't going to curb her appetite to make herself appear more ladylike. Starving oneself to promote an image of slender beauty was not something that she'd ever been interested in. Along with cats (despite being an avid animal lover, she remained suspicious that whiskered felines were secretly plotting a new world order of some sort), quail eggs (let the poor things keep



their unhatched young), and arrogant rogues (this needed no further explanation).

Was the gentleman from Hyde Park the sort who preferred the ladies in his company to take dainty, half-sized bites of a lettuce leaf before nudging their plate aside and bemoaning how full they were?

She wouldn't doubt it for a second.

Eyeing what remained of her raspberry chocolate tart, she raised her spoon and was just about to polish it off when she heard a loud, excited gasp, and everyone's attention, including her own, was immediately diverted to the doorway.

"You're here early!" Clapping her hands to follow her breathy exclamation, Lady Brimshire rose from her chair with such haste that it would have tipped over and clattered to the floor had her husband not caught it. Rushing across the room, she embraced her youngest child and only daughter in a hug that squeezed a coughing laugh from Annabel.

"Careful," the blonde newlywed said. She shared a small, secretive smile with her husband, a tall, dark-haired Irishman with sharp gray eyes that softened into pools of warm tea when his wife gently splayed her hand across her belly. "You

wouldn't want to squish your second grandchild before they're even born."

A single moment of silence, and then everyone started talking at once. Everyone except Lady Brimshire, that is, who promptly burst into tears and howled for Lord Brimshire to bring her a chair and smelling salts.

"Oh, how wonderful," Lynette exclaimed. "Regina will have a cousin!"

Nathanial gave Lucas a hearty slap on the shoulder. "Congratulations to the both of you," he said, not quite meeting the gaze of his brother-in-law, for although it was never openly admitted, it *was* quite awkward for a man to celebrate another man getting his sister with child.

"I'm going to be the best auntie," Temperance declared, brown eyes dancing with mischief. "Sugar sticks for breakfast and lemon custard for dinner. I cannot wait for another niece or nephew to spoil."

"I consider it a privilege to be a grandfather twice over," said Lord Brimshire, his solemn gaze growing a tad misty.

Only Delilah stayed quiet. Not because she wasn't happy for Annabel and Lucas. She *was*. Truly. But because...because

now she really was the only one left out. The only one left behind.

The past three years had seen all of her sisters and her closest friend married. Now two of them had children, or were soon to. And she...she was right where she'd always been.

Husbandless.

Childless.

Alone.

When Delilah lost her parents, at least she had her sisters.

When she lost Lynette to Nathaniel (for while it was a wonderful giving, marriage was also a sort of taking for those not directly involved), at least she had Annabel and Temperance.

When she lost Annabel to Lucas, at least she had Temperance.

When she lost Temperance to Hugh, at least she had family to surround herself with. Family she could be a part of. Until that family began splintering off into their own separate units and she was cast adrift, bobbing amidst a sea of distracted smiles, an afterthought instead of a forethought. And although she hadn't been thrown out or completely forgotten, it still hurt

to watch everyone moving forward while she remained in the exact same spot.

“I’m so glad I talked Lucas into coming early.” Breathless from making her rounds, Annabel plopped unceremoniously into the vacant chair beside Delilah and helped herself to a chocolate tart from the 3-tiered crystal serving dish in the middle of the table. “London traffic is absolutely dreadful this time of year, and every day it just gets worse.”

Delilah bobbed her head in agreement, even though she rarely paid attention to the tangle of carriages that snarled the streets of Grosvenor Square leading up to the beginning of the Season. Why bother focusing on the messy congestion when there were blue skies to admire, and different colored birds to look at, and flowering bushes to gaze upon? Ever since she was a young child, she’d had the habit (the *annoying* habit, according to Temperance) of seeing what others so easily overlooked.

The first orange leaf in a sea of fluttering green.

A sparrow flying by with a worm in its mouth.

How the billowing sails on a ship resembled dragon’s breath.

Granted, taking note of such innocuous things meant that she was often distracted, or late to her destination, or both.

*“Here comes Delly with her head in the clouds again,”* her sisters would say as they exchanged knowing smiles.

And she’d shrug them off, content in her own little world... failing to notice that while she was wandering down a path of every day wonders, all the people that she loved and held most dear were moving on into the next chapters of their lives without her.

“I’m glad that you came early as well,” she told Annabel, fingers toying with the scalloped hem of the tablecloth. “How are you feeling? When Lynette was first expecting, she could hardly leave her room without retching into the nearest pail.”

Annabel leaned back in her chair, a satisfied smile curling her lips. “I feel amazing. A bit fatigued, maybe, but my midwife said that’s to be expected.”

“You *look* amazing,” Delilah complimented her friend. It wasn’t an exaggeration. With green eyes and golden curls framing a heart-shaped face, Annabel had always been pretty. But pregnancy had brought a rosiness to her entire countenance that was brand new and beautiful. “Lynette was green for the first three months, but you’re glowing.”

“Thank you. I’m just happy to be here, with family. I was so eager to be out on my own that I never stopped to consider how much I’d miss the craziness of everything here.” She flicked an amused glance at her husband, who had struck up a conversation with Nathaniel and Hugh at the far end of the table. “Lucas thinks it’s a symptom of being with child. He’s already counting down the weeks until we return to Canterbury. It’s the pigs,” she sighed.

“Pigs?” Delilah repeated, her brow furrowing.

“*Piglets*, I should say. Half a dozen.” Annabel nibbled on a corner of the tart. “Lucas bought them from a local farmer with the intention of fattening them up and bringing them to market this winter. But then he went and *named* them. Now they’re practically living in the house, and we’ve begun searching for a bit of land outside of the village because heaven knows a one-bedroom flat isn’t big enough for six full-grown pigs.”

“And a baby,” Delilah provided helpfully.

“*And* a baby.” Annabel’s green eyes widened. “What am I going to *do*, Delly?”

“A home in the countryside with some land sounds heavenly.” It was also heavenly to be sitting here beside her

best friend, chatting away as they'd done before husbands and babies and piglets. "You can have your very own farm."

Annabel took another bite of tart and chewed thoughtfully. "I have always wanted to set an example for sustainable agriculture that places the welfare of the individual animal above profit."

"There, you see? It'll be perfect." Delilah hesitated. "There's something else I'd like to discuss—"

"Time for ye to go upstairs and rest." Swooping in like an Irish avenging angel, Lucas placed his hands protectively on his wife's shoulders and pressed his mouth to the top of her head. "That was our agreement, and I intend to make sure that ye stick to it."

Turning in her chair, Annabel swatted half-heartedly at her husband's arm. "I can rest later. We've only just arrived, and— Lucas O'Brian, put me down this *instant!*"

Ignoring his wife's command, Lucas swept Annabel effortlessly off her feet and, cradling her against his chest as if he held all the treasure on land and sea, marched from the dining room with a polite nod at the rest of the family as if carting one's own wife off against her very loud, and very exasperated wishes, was an ever day occurrence.

While she would have preferred more time with her friend, Delilah was charmed by the romanticism of it all. *She* wanted a loving husband who would carry her off to bed. Someone to rub her feet when they swelled from carrying their child and read her poetry until her eyelids grew heavy and wake beside her each morning, ready to begin the day with a kiss.

But if she couldn't have those things, then best Annabel did.

*And Temperance*, she added as she watched her sister and Hugh depart hand in hand.

*And Lynette*, she thought when Nathaniel gently ushered his wife out the door.

*And Lord and Lady Brimshire*, she finished with an inward sigh when the earl and countess took their leave as well.

“Mr. Humphrey, I suppose it's just you and me.” She lifted the tablecloth, expecting to find the hound laying at her feet (his favorite spot during all meal times). But to her disappointment, he, too, must have left.

And she was alone once again.



## CHAPTER FOUR



GIVEN THE CHOICE, Silas favored his own company.

He liked the quiet of his mind. The ability to reflect on his thoughts without outside interference. If a household staff of twenty-three wasn't an absolute necessity to maintain a manor as large as Harpswell House, he would have rather lived alone. Just him, his ledgers, and a perfectly poured brandy. But even a duke as powerful as Silas couldn't have *everything* he wanted, and with a great deal of annoyance, he found himself forced to entertain the late-night, impromptu visit of not one, not two, but three of his so-called friends.

So-called because anyone who really knew him would know that he detested spontaneity of any kind. Especially when it interfered with time that he'd already allocated to

himself. But the Duke of Wilshire was a peer, if nothing else, and a direct snub would have made it into the gossip columns before morning tea was served.

As the only thing he abhorred more than an interruption was the tittle-tattle of little voices spinning his name in their mouths, Silas welcomed Wilshire and his companions, Lord Something-or-Rather and Mr. He-Didn't-Care-to-Remember, into the drawing room where they were promptly served the brandy that Silas would have preferred to drink alone and an artful arrangement of various meats, cheeses, and bread.

“To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?” he asked, the dry inflection in his tone revealing that their visit wasn't a pleasure so much as an unwanted pain in the arse. Not to say that pain was ever wanted. Unless it was accompanied by pleasure. But a visit at nine o'clock in the evening by three men was the exact opposite of pleasurable and thus, a complete waste of his valuable time.

He could have been reading the merger contract that his solicitor had just finished drafting.

He could have been tallying up his most recent report of financial assets.

He could have been reviewing his latest acquisition, an empty warehouse on the West End that he planned to renovate and turn into shops below and flats above.

And wasn't that the smallest bit sad, that *those* were the things he looked forward to doing on any given night?

Silas set his jaw.

It wasn't sad, it was practical.

As the old ways teetered up against the new, too many noble families were finding themselves reduced to begging for credit to sustain their lavish lifestyles as their coffers were slowly drained from decades of misuse and they did nothing to refill them. It was no longer enough to be born with an inheritance. You had to *sustain* it. Or, in Silas's case, expand it tenfold.

With the exception of a wayward great-uncle, the men in his family had always been excellent in that regard. Emotional ties and outward displays of affection (or inward, for that matter) were not something that the Byron's understood or were comfortable with. But money...money they knew.

His father had invested heavily in virgin timber that Silas had been steadily clearing and selling off in smaller pieces to

fund a controlling interest in a fledgling company that no one else saw the potential in: the Great Western Railway.

Even his own solicitor had cautioned him against such a heavy expenditure, but along with money, Silas also understood something that other people did not. Stage coaches, carriages, plow horses...they were relics of a dwindling past, and the first person to cast their eye to the future would reap the biggest reward.

“We haven’t seen you out for a while,” replied Wilshire, his mouth conforming to the wobbly smile of an individual already halfway into his cups. “And we’re on our way to the Twisted Harp. Wanted to stop by and see if you’d join us.”

Join them at a slovenly tavern renowned for its brawls, and ale that tasted like piss?

Silas would rather pluck out his own eyeballs with a dull spoon.

“I’m afraid I cannot join you tonight, gentlemen,” he said, rising from his chair. A subtle yet unmistakable invitation for his company to do the same. “Have a pint for me.”

“But why can you not come?” Lord Something-or-Rather protested. “We’ve a carriage waiting right outside.”

“I’ve business to conduct,” he said curtly. “Another time, perhaps.”

“Business. Always business with you,” Staggering to his feet, Wilshire gave Silas a hearty slap on the back. “You can’t hide from us forever, old chap. You need to enjoy yourself once in a while. Have a drink. Grab a pair of tits. Live your life as you’re meant to.”

Silas’s gaze turned sharp as the lean edge of the steel straight razor that Evansworth had used to shave his jaw that morning. “Odd, but when you needed that private loan last year, you knew right where to find me. If I am hiding, I must not be very good at it.”

“Loan?” Mr. He-Didn’t-Care-to-Remember asked curiously, switching his polished walking cane from one hand to the other. “What loan?”

“I...I have no idea what he’s going on about,” Wilshire said hastily. “It’s...it’s a jest between friends. That’s all. A *loan*.” He made a scoffing sound under his breath even as the tips of his ears burned bright red. “What need would I have to borrow money? I’m rich as the dickens.”

A gross exaggeration.

In reality, the Duke of Wilshire had been living beyond his means for quite some time. Months, if not years. It was a tragic story of blind neglect that Silas had watched unfold again and again. Men of lofty birth assumed they would always be wealthy because the men in their family had always *been* wealthy. But the days of serfdom and tenant farming by which a gentleman earned his wealth on the backs of others were rapidly dwindling. With the rising cost of materials, it was becoming prohibitively expensive to run an enormous country estate without supplemental income. He'd seen the writing on the wall when he was a boy of thirteen; a rare benefit to being kept indoors with his nose pressed to a book. But those like Wilshire—those that stank of spoil and indulgence—stubbornly refused to accept that change was occurring whether they kept up with it or not.

When the duke had come begging last autumn, Silas had patiently heard him out...

*'A misunderstanding with the creditors, I'll get it sorted soon enough. Their fault, you understand. But in the meanwhile, my wife needs a new dress and my mistress is after a pearl necklace she saw in the window of Devines.'*

...and agreed to lend Wilshire a sum of sixty pounds with a charitable interest rate of eight percent.

To date, he'd received half his money back. To be honest, it was more than he expected, but not nearly what he was owed. As a fellow peer, he'd been ready to let the rest slide. But Wilshire had pushed his patience to its limit, and now he wanted to watch the other man squirm like a worm stuck on the end of a shiny hook.

"Is that what we are?" he asked, his eyes unblinking as they drilled into Wilshire's round, slightly panicked gaze. "Friends? Because my friends pay their debts."

Off to the side, Wilshire's companions shared a glance, and the words they were thinking might as well have appeared above their heads.

*'Thank God that isn't us.'*

"We're...we're friends, Claiborne." Fumbling about, Wilshire dragged a monogrammed handkerchief from the pocket of his waistcoat and blotted at the perspiration dripping down his forehead. "We go all the way back to Eton. Practically best mates. But you have, ah, demonstrated your point and I shall, ah, have my solicitor contact your solicitor. About that, ah, business deal that we're doing together."

“Excellent. I’ll tell Mr. Wycombe that he can expect a visit within the next...two days?”

“Oh.” More perspiration. More blotting. Wilshire began to sway on his feet; a mast stuck in the swell of a storm that it couldn’t escape. “Oh, dear. Two days? I completely forgot that I’ll be out of town. For a, ah, hunting retreat. Yes. That’s it.”

“But the Staffordshire Ball is in two days,” said Lord Something-or-Rather.

Held at Staffordshire Manor, and hosted in part by the Prince Regent himself, the Staffordshire Ball marked the official start of the Season.

It went without saying that all of England’s nobility were expected to attend. Especially those of higher rank. Wilshire wouldn’t miss it. Neither would Silas, as loathe as he was to go.

As an unmarried duke, he might as well have poured honey over himself and walked into a bear den. Or so that was what it felt like, being announced into a room filled with giggling debutantes and mothers desperate to make a match.

His mood darkening even further, he decided to pluck Wilshire off the hook and toss him back into the muddy pool



of water he'd crawled out of. A bit of sport was all well and good, but not when his prey was sniveling and spineless. A cat chased the mouse that ran; not the one that curled up and waited to die.

“After the ball, then.” He spied his butler lurking by the doorway, and gestured the servant forward with a flick of his wrist. “Stevens will see you gentlemen out. Enjoy yourselves at the Twisted Harp. I’m sure our paths will cross again soon enough. Isn’t that right, Wilshire?”

“Soon,” Wilshire gasped as he nearly ran over his companions in his haste to leave the room. “Very soon.”

When they were finally gone, Silas returned to his study. But after a few minutes, it became annoyingly obvious that he wouldn’t be able to concentrate. Nor would he be able to sleep. Not until he rid himself of the hot, liquid adrenaline sluicing through his veins, at any rate.

“My coat and gloves, if you please, Stevens.”

“Should I have a carriage brought round, Your Grace?” the butler asked after he’d fetched the requested garments.

“No, I’ll be going for a walk.” Silas took a deep breath of the chilled autumn air as he stepped outside. The door closed

quietly behind him, the candles in the windows growing dimmer with every footfall that took him further away from Harpswell House.

At this late hour, the streets were largely empty save a few stragglers on their way to the pubs and taverns. There was also the theater; its globed dome looming above the jagged line of rooftops. Deliberately turning away from the distant shout of voices and music, Silas cut across onto a lesser known street that wound along the back of Grosvenor Square's grandest homes and was used primarily for deliveries.

Above him, the sky was a long unraveling roll of black velvet dotted with crystal stars. Below him, the ground was firm and level under his feet. And in front of him...in front of him was a fairy swathed in moonlight, her unbound hair a spill of flame across her back.

The woman from the park.

## CHAPTER FIVE



NO ONE NOTICED when Delilah slipped out. No one except for Mr. Humphrey, that is, who appeared at her side with a decidedly chagrined expression upon his muzzled countenance as she wound a pelisse around her shoulders and cast a furtive glance behind her before darting out the door.

“Where have you been?” she asked sternly, crouching in front of him after they were safely outside.

Abashed, Mr. Humphrey ducked his head and wagged his tail. Three slow, apologetic thumps that struck a marble pillar extending beneath the front portico.

“Shhh,” she murmured, ruffling his ears as she rose to her feet. “I don’t want anyone to hear us. Not that they’d care if I was gone or not. But you care, don’t you, Mr. Humphrey?”

Her loyal hound whined in agreement; a low, sad sound that revealed just how intuitive a pet could be.

“It’s all right. They’re not ignoring me on purpose. I don’t think.” She tapped her thigh, an absent, almost automatic invitation for Mr. Humphrey to fall in beside her as she tiptoed silently down the steps and around the side of the house, letting the night welcome her into its inky embrace.

It was a splendid evening. Not too warm or too cold, with a light breeze that ruffled the leaves and carried the sweet perfume of late-blooming aster from a nearby garden. Pulling the pins from her hair while she walked, Delilah sighed with quiet pleasure when the heavy coil of titian tendrils was released from the base of her scalp.

“That’s better,” she told Mr. Humphrey. “I should probably just cut it all off like Temperance did, but—”

“Don’t,” a masculine voice said from directly behind her.

On a choked scream, Delilah whirled around, her heart slamming against the rigid wall of her ribcage. Next to her, Mr. Humphrey let out a low, warning growl as his hackles lifted, giving her a precious moment to decide between attack or retreat. Then the clouds shifted, allowing a sliver of moonlight to escape. It shone on the side of the man’s face

where a lock of ebony hair tumbled low over a noble brow, framing piercing gray eyes. Her breath caught again, but this time for an entirely different reason.

The stranger from the park.

Impossibly, he was here...and every inch as sinfully attractive as she remembered.

She placed a restraining hand on Mr. Humphrey's head, and for once the hound obeyed, the ridge of hair along his neck flattening when he sat onto his haunches.

"Don't what?" she asked, her voice hardly more than a velvet whisper. Inside her chest, her heart continued to pound in a swift, erratic rhythm that she blamed entirely on *him*.

The devil with the scorching gaze and arrogant sneer.

She hated that he was even more magnificent swathed in shadow. Hated that he resembled a dark prince of some legend long forgotten. Hated that she *didn't* hate him, even though she should have. Even though she wanted to. Even though every fiber of her being was telling her that she needed to. But like a moth courting the very flame that would mean the end of its existence, she was unable to turn away from him. He held her

captured in his thrall, those eyes—a steel sky in the middle of winter—keeping her frozen in place.

“Don’t cut your hair. It suits you as it is.”

Of its own accord, Delilah’s fingers wrapped around an auburn tendril. “I’ll cut it if I want.” An awkward pause, and then, “You think it suits me?”

As the youngest, she had grown up accustomed to hand-me-downs.

Hand-me-down shoes.

Hand-me-down dresses.

Even hand-me-down compliments.

On the eve of her Season debut (before scandal had ruined everything), Lynette had already been considered a great classical beauty...and people had told her as much. Temperance, ever fiery, was openly admired from a safe distance. But by the time the attention shifted to Delilah, it had a way of dispersing, like sand running through open fingers.

And she hadn’t minded.

She *didn’t* mind.

Except...

Except it was nice to be noticed.

It was even nicer to receive praise, albeit in an outrageously controlling, roundabout way.

“The sun-kissed copper in the longer tendrils brings out the flecks of hazel in your eyes,” he said brusquely, as if he were an art scholar describing a painting instead of a living, breathing human-being. “I’d no more sheer them off than I would remove the moon from the night sky, as the wanton destruction of natural beauty is a sin.”

It wasn’t poetry. Not exactly. Truth be told, she was fairly certain there was an insult lurking in there somewhere. If he thought she was beautiful with her long hair, did that mean he’d find her ugly if she cut it? But his words still made her pulse flutter and the butterflies in her belly dance. Even Mr. Humphrey appeared suitably impressed, if the attentive perk of his ears was any indication.

“I...” She licked her lips and found them dry. “What is your name?”

A slight, almost indiscernible hesitation, before he said, “Silas.”

“*Just* Silas?” Here she had honestly believed him to be a marquess, or at least an earl. With those clothes and that sense of entitlement, what else could he be but nobility? Yet he’d used no rank or title to introduce himself, as a proper gentleman would have done. Still, she found it hard to picture him as a commoner. First, because there remained a nagging sense that she’d seen him *somewhere* before. And second, unless her eyes deceived her, those were gold buttons on his jacket.

“Is that a problem for you?” He crossed his arms, causing the fabric of his gold-buttoned jacket to tighten around his shoulders. His large, muscular shoulders. Usually Delilah wasn’t one to notice such things, but, well, there was so *much* of them to notice.

When her throat went dry, along with her mouth, she swallowed with a great degree of difficulty, and wished that she’d had the foresight to bring along a glass of water.

“N-no,” she managed hoarsely. “I just...I thought...”

“Were you hoping that I was some wealthy duke come to sweep you off your feet?” he asked with a dismissive twist of his lips. “How disappointed you must be. Do you’ve a chaperone or a mother lurking in the bushes, ready to leap out



and cry scandal? Best send them home before their knees begin to cramp.”

“I am here by myself,” she said, frowning. “My mother—both my parents—are deceased.”

Silas’s face went blank; a chalkboard wiped clean. “I’m sorry,” he said, and the gruff note in his voice tugged at a chord deep in her belly as she was afforded a glimpse at an emotion he hadn’t shown before.

Sincerity.

“During our previous meeting, you gave the impression that you never apologize.” A door slammed in the distance, a reminder that while they were alone, they were surrounded by houses, and their time together was limited by their chance of discovery. “Were you lying then, or are you lying now?”

“Tell me your name,” he said, ignoring her question. Long and lean and painted a sinister black, his shadow fell across her like the drape of a curtain as he stepped closer. “You know mine. It’s only fair that I know yours.”

“Is a name something to be t-traded?” she asked on a catch of breath.

While his mouth remained flat, the corners of his eyes gathered in the tiniest crinkle of amusement. “Anything can be traded, if you desire it badly enough.”

“And you...you desire to know my name?” How was it, she wondered desperately, that he even *smelled* like the darkness? Potent and rich, his scent was an intoxicating combination of plums, red wine, and something she was unable to put her finger on. Something decadent. Something dangerous. Something daring.

His eyes glowed silver in the moonlight. “I might desire even more than that, Miss...”

“Delilah.” Her fingers curled inward, nails biting into palms slick with a cool, thin layer of nervous perspiration. “Miss Delilah S-Swan.”

“*De-li-lah.*” The way he wrapped his tongue around each syllable—caressing it, tasting it—had her toes curling along with her hands. Any more and she’d be one giant knot of confused, breathless passion. All tied up with nowhere to go. And wasn’t *that* a secretly intriguing idea?

“I...I should go,” she said, and was it a question or a statement?

“Yes, you should.”

Neither of them moved.

Seconds turned to minutes, before time ceased all together.

On the ground, Mr. Humphrey released a low, mournful whine and Silas’s gaze went to the hound, sitting patiently beside his mistress, then rose slowly to Delilah’s pale face.

A muscle pulsed in his jaw.

“Go,” he growled.

Her bottom lip trembled in surprise at the sudden change in tone. “But—”

“Go, Delilah, before I do something that I shouldn’t.”

“Come, Mr. Humphrey.” She snapped her fingers, and her loyal pet padded silently beside her as she hurried back the way they’d come, leaving the shadows far behind.

## CHAPTER SIX



THE NEXT MORNING, Delilah was the last family member downstairs for breakfast. She'd slept horribly, tossing and turning into the wee hours of the night. Whenever she tried to close her eyes, she saw him. Silas. A sinister nightmare from which there was no escape...mostly because she didn't *want* to escape him. At least, not in her dreams.

No, in her dreams, where fantasy wove together an intricate web of real and imagined moments, she was running towards him. Running fast. Her breaths coming in short little bursts of air as the wind slapped at her cheeks and her skirts tangled around her ankles. He was ahead of her, always ahead, his arms outstretched as he waited for her to reach him. He offered

safety, while the beast that chased her, that snarled and howled and shook the ground, promised her damnation.

*“Wait,”* she cried. *“Wait for me.”*

But for every step she took forward, he took two back, so that she could never catch him, no matter how hard she tried.

The wind picked up. The skies grew dark. The thing at her back grew closer, and closer, until it suddenly spun her around, strong hands closing around her wrists like manacles snapping into place as she was thrown to the ground.

*“NO!”* she shrieked, kicking and fighting. *“Silas, help me! Help me!”*

Her vision blurred, obscuring the beast that loomed above her with its hungry smile and glittering gaze. Then it lowered its head, nuzzled her neck where her pulse beat wildly, and everything came into sharp, stunning focus.

*He* came into focus.

The beast that wasn't a beast.

The man that wasn't completely a man.

*“Delilah, do you know what I desire most?”* Silas asked.

“No,” she whimpered, and when he whispered the answer in her ear, her eyes went dark with desire...right before she jolted awake.

“You’re late,” Temperance commented as she joined Delilah by the side buffet and perused the feast of sliced meats, poached eggs, warm bread, colorful jam, and vanilla scones drizzled in apricot syrup that had been laid out for them. Stabbing a slab of bacon with her fork, Temperance brought it straight up to her lips and took a bite. “And you look awful. Terrible, really. Those smudges under your eyes are ghastly.”

“Thank you.” Forgoing the more elaborate dishes, Delilah used silver tongs to select a single piece of toast and spooned a smidgeon of raspberry jam onto the corner of her plate before she sat at the furthest end of the table.

“That’s it?” Temperance asked, trailing after her. “Thank you?”

“What else should I say?” Muffling a yawn, she accepted a cup of steaming hot coffee from a maid with a grateful smile, and wrapped both of her hands around the porcelain mug. Despite the fires crackling merrily in every hearth, she felt chilled right down to her bones. An after effect of her

nightmare...and the wicked words that Silas had whispered in her ear.

“You’re supposed to pay me an insult, then I insult you again, then we bicker, then Lynette gets involved, and we insult *her*.” Temperance sat beside Delilah and propped her chin on her palm. Today she wore her hair pinned up and away from a face, but a few careless wisps had already escaped to curl around her temple. She blew them out of her eyes with an impatient huff of breath. “Have you forgotten how it works?”

“Maybe I don’t feel like fighting.” Distracted, Delilah took a sip of her coffee, then gasped when it burned the tip of her tongue. Inwardly chastising herself for not being more careful, she set the mug aside and reached for the toast instead. “Where is Hugh?”

“He said he had business to attend to, but I think he went for a walk. You know he doesn’t like large crowds. Neither do I, for that matter, but at least the food is delicious. Lynette’s cook has truly outdone herself. Now are you going to tell me where you snuck off to last night, or should I start guessing?”

Perhaps it was for the best that Delilah hadn’t been able to drink her coffee, or else she would have spat it out all over the white tablecloth. “I...what...what do you mean?”

Oh, why did she have to be such an abominable liar?

It didn't matter if the fib was big or small. Speaking an untruth caused her tongue to trip over itself and a betraying flush of heat to gather in her cheeks; something that both her sisters knew full well.

“Don't worry.” Temperance snuck a glance further down the table where Lynette, Annabel, and Lady Brimshire were cooing over a giggling Regina. Their respective husbands must have joined Hugh on his ‘business’, for the men were nowhere to be seen. “I won't tell anyone if *you* tell *me* where you were.”

“But...but that's blackmail!”

“And?”

“And it's wrong.”

“Being right is boring.” Temperance feigned a yawn before she helped herself to a piece of Delilah's toast. “Besides, you can't lecture me on right and wrong. *I* wasn't the one stealing off into the dead of night.

Delilah snatched her toast back. “I wasn't stealing off. I...I took Mr. Humphrey for a walk so that he could relieve himself



before bed. I don't want to have any accidents with everyone here. That's all."

"How predictably boring. Wait." Temperance tapped her chin. "You're blushing. Why are blushing?"

"I'm not...I'm not *blushing*," she denied.

"You are as pink as that rosebush that your miscreant dog dug up last week. What are you hiding?"

"Nothing."

"Delilah..."

"I don't care to discuss him!"

It was, she realized almost immediately, the wrong thing to say.

"*Him?*" Temperance's eyes lit up as bright as the fireworks display over Buckingham Palace that marked the official start of every Season. "Oh, this is even more delicious than the food. Come on, let's go to the parlor where you can tell me every yummy detail."

Before Delilah could protest, she found herself being literally dragged from her chair.

“Where are you two headed off to in such a rush?” Lynette called out.

“Delilah is about to tell me all the details of her illicit affair last night,” Temperance said cheerfully.

“Tempy!” This time Delilah’s cheeks didn’t just blush, they burned. “How *could* you—”

She was interrupted by the combined laughter of Lynette, Annabel, and Lady Brimshire.

Even Regina giggled.

*They don't believe her, she realized. They don't believe me. That I would be capable of an affair, illicit or otherwise. Silly Delly. Why would any man bother sneaking away to kiss her?*

It should have been good that they didn’t think she had committed a scandal. No woman in her right mind *wanted* a ruined reputation, and the Swan sisters knew better than most the damage that moonlight kisses could cause. But their laughter cut into a wound that Delilah wasn’t even aware she had until it started to sting. And when an animal was wounded, even the kindest, sweetest, most dependable animal, sometimes they reacted in unexplainably volatile ways.

“I—I *did* have an affair!” she cried, wrenching her arm free of Temperance’s grasp. “Or I almost did. I might have. I thought about it!”

The laughter abruptly ceased.

“Oh,” said Lady Brimshire, her eyes widening. “Oh, my.”

“Delly?” said Annabel uncertainly.

Handing Regina off to her mother-in-law, Lynette stood up from her chair as the blood drained from her face. “Delilah Swan, my bedchamber, this *instant*.”

“You are in so much trouble,” Temperance muttered under her breath. “Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s true!” *Almost*, Delilah amended silently as she marched out of the dining room, her chin lifted high. *It’s almost true. If Silas hadn’t demanded that I leave, perhaps we would have kissed. He wanted to. I’m sure of it. And isn’t that how all affairs start? With a kiss.*

And maybe...maybe she didn’t want to have an affair with the gray-eyed devil who had haunted her dreams. Or maybe she did. Either way, she didn’t want her family to find the idea of it so preposterous that they dissolved into stitches. She was just as capable of—of passion as Lynette was! And

Temperance. And Annabel. At one point or another, each one of *them* had snuck off to meet with their would-be husbands. Temperance had done it multiple times! And each attempt (when discovered) had been met with cries of alarm and incredulity...not *laughter*.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Lynette asked once they were ensconced in her private sitting parlor, a bright, airy room that connected to the master bedchamber she shared with Nathaniel.

Ducking in right before the door was closed in her face, Temperance sat inconspicuously on a green velvet settee, her lips pinched inward with anticipation as she eagerly awaited a dressing down of someone other than her. A rare occurrence, to be sure, as out of the three of them, she was almost always the one who found herself on the receiving end of a lecture.

But not this time.

No, this time that honor was held by Delilah.

Unable to sit for the jittering anticipation pulsing through her, she began to pace back and forth while Lynette looked on with a vague expression of bewilderment, as if even *she* found it hard to fathom that Delilah was the recipient of her ire and not Temperance.

*Because you're the well behaved sister,* Delilah told herself. *The obedient sister. The sister that nobody would ever suspect of behaving in a way that was untoward or scandalous. But perhaps Temperance is correct. Perhaps being right is boring.*

"I didn't have an affair," she began, and Lynette sighed in relief.

"Thank goodness. Why would you give me such a fright? And in front of Lady Brimshire, no less. This isn't something to—"

"But I could," she went on, and felt a prick of grim satisfaction when Lynette's sigh of relief turned into a gasp of dismay. "I *could* have an affair. If I wanted. I bet he would have kissed me if I'd insisted on it." She stopped. Put her hands on her hips. "In fact, I'm sure of it. He had that—that *look* in his eye."

"What look?" Lynette demanded.

"The same look that Nathaniel gives you right before the two of you kiss. And the one that Hugh gives Temperance, and Lucas gives Annabel."

Temperance's mouth curled in a smirk. "I know that look. I'm intimately acquainted with that look."

“Well, now so am I,” Delilah said proudly.

Lynette shook her head. “But you *can't* be.”

“Why not?” She went to an upholstered bench built into the wide windowsill and perched on the edge, her thin slippers falling to the carpet with a muffled *thump thump* as she began to swing her legs. “Why does everybody else in this household get to have secret liaisons, but I don't?”

A flash of guilt crossed Lynette's countenance before the corners of her lips firmed. “With the exception of my unfortunate scandal, no one has had any secret liaisons, Delilah. Even that one was purely by accident and never should have happened. I regret my foolishness to this day, and would never want you to make the same mistake that I did.”

Temperance snorted. “Speak for yourself. Hugh and I were secret liaison-ing all over the place and I had a *wonderful* time.”

“That is not helpful,” Lynette said through clenched teeth. “Delilah, dear, the point I am trying to make is that—”

“Passionate love affairs are only reserved for you, Temperance, and Annabel?” Delilah interrupted.

“No, of course not—”

“Then why did you all laugh when Temperance said I was having one? Is the idea that a man might find me attractive *so* hilarious? I’m not a little girl in braids anymore! I’m a woman full grown, the same as you.”

“I understand that, but there are ways—”

“Maybe I should have an affair! Or two. Or a dozen!”

“This has escalated *very* quickly,” Temperance noted.

Yes, it had.

Bringing her hands to her face, warm with embarrassment and indignation and frustration, Delilah spoke through her fingers. “I just want to find love. Like you did. Like all of you have.”

“You’re feeling left out.” Her voice softening with understanding, Lynette crossed the room and sat down beside Delilah, draping a supportive arm around her hunched shoulders. “I should have sensed it sooner. How could you not? Everyone here is happily married, either with children or expecting them. But we’re also here for *you*, my dear. We want you to find love. It’s why we’ve come to London. So that you can take part in the Season.”

“You’d be in town even if I wasn’t being thrust out into the Marriage Mart. I can see the invitations piled up on your writing desk. As a love match, you and Nathaniel are the toast of the *ton*.” As bitterness crept onto her tongue, Delilah swallowed it back. She didn’t want to be jealous or spiteful. She just...she just wanted to be *seen*. Not as Silly Delly or a daydreamer, but a woman every bit as capable of a romantic relationship as her sisters.

“True,” Lynette acknowledged. “But that doesn’t make *your* Season any less important.”

“I’ve already met all of the gentlemen that are going to be at the Staffordshire Ball. None of them were a match for me last year, and I cannot foresee that much has changed.”

“This particular crop of lords *is* somewhat...lacking. But”—Lynette gave an encouraging smile—“it has often been said that men mature much more slowly than women. I’m sure the past four months has done wonders for some of them.”

Temperance snorted again. “Not likely.”

“Who invited you in here?” Lynette wondered aloud.

“I invited myself, because I knew that you would require my great wisdom and expertise.” Temperance turned her



attention to Delilah. “What is the name of your would-be lover? Where does he reside? Most importantly, is he handsome?”

“Delilah doesn’t have a ‘would-be lover’,” Lynette said sternly. “That’s how rumors start, Temperance. I should like to think this family would know better than to be so careless with their words.”

“His name is Silas,” said Delilah. “I don’t know where he lives, but he is exceedingly handsome.”

“*Delly.*” Lynette’s eyes went huge. “You didn’t.”

“No,” she admitted, lowering her hands to her lap. “I didn’t. That is to say, I didn’t have an evening rendezvous with him on *purpose*. But we didn’t do anything more than talk.”

“Boring,” Temperance yawned.

“You be quiet,” Lynette snapped, jabbing a finger at Temperance. Then she poked the same finger into Delilah’s arm. “And *you* tell me precisely what happened! All this time, I thought you were speaking in hyperbole!”

Delilah’s feet sank into a thick burgundy and gold rug as she slid off the windowsill. “Nothing happened. I was taking Mr. Humphrey for a walk, and I encountered Silas. It was a

rather fortuitous meeting, as our paths had already crossed that morning. He must live somewhere in Grosvenor Square, though I haven't any idea where."

"Is this the man you say threatened you?" Temperance asked.

She gave a slight nod.

"I thought you despised him. Now you want to have an affair with him?"

"*No one* is having an affair." Lynette slapped a hand to her forehead. "I cannot believe I even have to say that out loud. What is Silas's title? His surname?"

Delilah shrugged helplessly. "I...I don't think he has a title, and he didn't offer his surname. All I know him by is Silas."

"No title?" her sister said in a strangled sort of voice. "*No title?*"

"Hugh doesn't have a title," Temperance was quick to point out. "Nor does Mr. O'Brian. Not all of us can be married to *viscounts*, Lynette. Your snobbery is showing."

"It's not snobbery," Lynette countered sharply. "I don't care a whit that Hugh is a commoner. The most important thing is that he loves you, and is able to provide for you. But I don't

know this Silas person from a stranger on the street. Nor do I know what his intentions are, as I find it difficult to believe that he accidentally came across our sister twice on the very same day.”

“That is odd,” Temperance allowed. “But not impossible.”

Delilah frowned. “Silas is not going to do me harm, if that is what you are implying. And it *was* an accident. He appeared as surprised as I was.”

Lynette stood to her full height, which put her a few inches above Delilah. Just enough of a difference to be looked down upon. “The Season is to begin tomorrow night. We are *not* starting off with another scandal. That means any mention, jesting or otherwise, of affairs or liaisons will cease at once. You will have a proper courtship, Delilah. Not some secret midnight rendezvous with a man who lacks the manners necessary to present his full name.”

“But—”

“This is not a discussion. Furthermore, if you happen upon this Silas fellow again, you’ll *not* engage with him. Instead, you’ll report at once to Temperance or myself. That won’t be hard, as from this moment on, you are forbidden from going anywhere without a chaperone.”

“That’s not fair!” Delilah cried, driving her heel into the rug. “I am an adult, responsible for my own decisions. And what about Mr. Humphrey? He’ll need to be walked.”

“That duty can be passed onto a footman. You’ll be busy with other things.”

“A *footman*? But Mr. Humphrey won’t understand! He’s my dog. My responsibility.”

For an instant, Lynette appeared to waver in her resolve. Then her jaw set. “That may be true, but you are *my* responsibility, Delilah. One that I have not been lending as much attention to as I should have. But that changes today. Come what may, this Season *will* yield a suitable husband for you. I’ll make sure of it.”

‘*Sorry*’ Temperance mouthed silently.

With tears blurring her vision, Delilah ran from the room.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



“IF I MAY, YOUR GRACE, you look splendid.” Beaming as a proud father might (or how Silas *imagined* one might, as his never had), Evansworth took it upon himself to open the door to the massive black town coach that would ferry the Duke of Claiborne to the Staffordshire ball.

“Ready a decanter of port for my return, Evansworth, and then see yourself to bed,” Silas ordered. “There’s no need to stay up.”

The valet snapped his heels together. “As you wish, Your Grace. I do hope you enjoy yourself.”

“Not bloody likely,” Silas muttered under his breath as the driver of the coach cracked his whip and the team of six

matching greys set out at a lively pace.

He wanted to attend the ball as much as he wanted a sore tooth, but aside from feigning some sort of illness (a ruse he'd used only once before that had led to the entire parlor being filled top to bottom with white lilies and letters wishing him a rapid recovery), he had no probable excuse at his disposal to avoid the first notable gathering of the Season.

The *ton* was expecting him. Best to just get it over with, and duck out when the opportunity presented itself. A turn around the room, three dances, a glass of flat champagne, and he'd see himself out, for surely there'd be nothing and no one there to keep his attention or spark his interest.

For some, a new Season meant new possibilities.

New courtships.

New engagements.

New weddings.

But for Silas, who had no plans to marry until it became either unavoidable or advantageous for him to do so, there was nothing about this Season that made it different from any of the rest.

Oh, the faces changed from year to year. The names. The titles. But the greedy glint in many a mother's eye as she herded her darling daughter into his path like a sacrificial lamb to slaughter remained the same. The swindlers courting his favor for no other reason than his dukedom remained the same. The tedious conversations remained the same. Always, everything the same.

Except...

Except for an auburn-haired fairy with mischief in her eyes and a wolf at her feet.

Miss Delilah Swan was different.

Annoying, frustratingly, enchantingly different.

He'd told himself—ordered himself—not to think about her.

It hadn't worked.

While Silas yielded incredible control and dominance over both his equals and underlings, he lacked the same authority over himself. At least where Miss Swan was concerned.

Over the past two days, he'd thought of her far more than he would have liked, and infinitely more times than he should have. She was on his mind when he woke and when he went to

bed; an elusive wisp of a memory, a scent, a picture that wasn't quite tangible enough to take hold and remove.

If he could have, he'd yank her out from under his skin as one would a splinter. But like perfume that lingered even after its wearer had left the room, the intoxicating smell of her skin—roses, with a hint of sunshine—continued to haunt him through long days and longer nights.

The carriage rocked from side to side as it ascended the steep, winding drive that led to Staffordshire Manor. Set right outside the city, it was a magnificent example of modern architecture blended with old. Stone turrets that had once flown the Staffordshire rampant in times of battle were now surrounded by glass domes framed with strips of shiny copper. Where torches had burned, lanterns now hung, beckoning guests towards a marble pavilion where costumed jesters spun balls of fire in the air and servants served bubbling champagne in crystal flutes.

As the hosts of the first ball of the Season, the Earl and Countess of Staffordshire traditionally set a high bar for their peers to follow, and if the swans patrolling the front lawns dressed in glittering collars of sapphires were a sign, they'd outdone themselves this year.



Courtesy of his late arrival—a duke was never expected to be on time to such events—Silas was able to disembark at the top of the circular drive. The heels of his polished Hessians crunched on freshly raked gravel as he gradually made his way around a fountain spewing arcs of pink water high into the air (Lady Staffordshire’s favorite color) and up to the front entrance where a footman expertly whisked his overcoat away and another servant, presumably the butler or someone of equally high rank, bellowed out his name to the guests already mingling within.

Silas had a stiff, formal smile fixed upon his countenance before everyone stopped what they were doing to stare up at him, a few pushing others out of the way to catch a much sought after glimpse at the Duke of Claiborne.

They always stopped.

They always stared.

This, too, was the same.

When he first took the dukedom upon his shoulders, it had bothered him. The blatant goggling. The excited whispers. The fans that popped out of every orifice to wave in front of flushed, sparkling-eyed faces. Silas was not an outgoing man by nature. Neither charming nor particularly endearing, he was

not given to fits of expressive socialization. Fortunately, he had soon come to the realization that more often than not, his mere presence was enough to satisfy the masses.

A smile, a polite nod, a dance or three, and he considered his duties fulfilled.

In that way, he was no different from his father.

The only sameness that did not sit well with him.

“Fashionably late, as always, my darling Claiborne.” Accompanied by a bevy of women clothed in a nauseatingly colorful mixture of satin, Lady Staffordshire glided up to Silas and cooed happily when he made a show of placing his lips within half an inch of her heavily rouged cheek. “Here I was just beginning to worry you weren’t going to show.”

“Miss the most brilliant ball of the Season?” He gave a grave shake of his head. “Never.”

“Brilliant. *Brilliant.*” The countess’s fan fluttered indecisively as she tested out the word. Then it snapped closed. “I love it. Provocative, yet simple. The most brilliant ball. Yes. Yes. That’s exactly what this is! Are you in agreement, Lady Elmwood?”

“Oh, very much so,” Lady Elmwood replied, bobbing her chin with such enthusiasm that her hair piece—a gravity defying concoction of ribbons and pasted curls—almost went sailing off into a bowl of iced shrimp.

“A fine way to describe your divine skills as hostess,” Lady Masterson gushed.

A third woman, whom Silas didn’t know, held up an empty flute. “To the most b-brilliant ball in London,” she hiccupped before tottering off to presumably find more champagne.

“My darling Amelia has been eagerly awaiting your arrival.” Shooing her companions away, Lady Staffordshire latched possessively onto Silas’s arm as they began a turn around the receiving parlor. “She’s already in the ballroom, but has made sure to reserve a space for you on her dance card. I would so love to see the two of you spending more time together.”

‘Darling Amelia’ was a frivolous, shallow woman whom Silas had done his best to avoid since her debut three years prior when she’d made it obvious that her singular goal in life was to exceed her mother’s title and become a duchess. Young, old, fat, thin, agreeable or not. Amelia didn’t care what

traits her would-be husband possessed so long as he was addressed as ‘Your Grace’.

Their interactions thus far had been blessedly brief. A waltz here and there. A shared box at the theater. Breakfast during a house party before he’d suddenly remembered a pressing matter in London that required his immediate attention.

Every meeting had left a sour taste in the back of his throat, as if he’d bitten into an apple that, while shiny on the outside, had started to rot from within. Because Amelia, for all her beauty—and she was beautiful, as pretty porcelain dolls often were despite their glassy black eyes—embodied everything that he despised about the *ton*.

Were he not a duke, she wouldn’t have tossed him a cloth if he were bleeding out in the street. And it wasn’t necessarily her fault. She’d been molded into who she was just as they’d all been. Living, breathing caricatures of their parents. The only difference between Silas and the rest of them was that he didn’t *want* to be his father. The dukedom wasn’t a gift, as so many assumed. It was a bloody yoke around his neck tying him to a wagon of old hurts and heartaches.

The late Duke of Claiborne had been a bastard in all but name. If the son was cold, then the sire had been frozen. An

arctic statue comprised of ice and a steely-eyed gaze filled with disappointment for his child and disdain for his wife.

In his rebellious youth—what there was of it—Silas had sworn up and down that he'd never, *never* become his father. But a tree had to grow where it was planted, and without warmth or sunlight, what choice did it have but to harden its trunk and shore up its branches?

It turned his stomach to know that he if looked in a mirror, he'd see his father staring back at him. Solemn. Serious. Somber. Yet there remained a sliver of hope. A ribbon of possibility. If Silas married for even mild affection (or even better, never married at all), then he'd be doing more than the late duke ever had.

“I shall make sure to greet Lady Amelia before I leave,” he said, as that was as much of a commitment as he was prepared to give.

Lady Staffordshire sniffed, showing that she wasn't pleased, but in a room filled with dozens of eyes watching her every move, there was nothing more that she could do. Silas wasn't her friend or her husband, easily brought to heel. If he were, he'd already be married to her spoiled brat of a daughter.

“Make sure that you do,” she said with decidedly less affability as their circle around the parlor brought them to the entrance of the ballroom, where couples danced in perfectly timed unison to the melodic strains of Ludwig van Beethoven. “I have other guests to attend to, Your Grace. You understand.”

Silas executed a short, stiff bow. “I do, my lady. Enjoy your evening and thank you, as always, for the consideration of an invitation.”

Another sniff (she wasn’t going to forgive his slight that easily), and the countess veered back into the parlor, where she was immediately surrounded by a fawning circle of sycophants, while Silas proceeded into the ballroom by himself.

The ceiling had been painted a pale blue to mimic the sky, its globe shape lending itself to the heavens. Life-sized murals of angels dressed in white robes decorated the walls, while white horses paraded around the lower half atop a background of green.

Atop a dais that had been constructed in the middle of the room and swathed in white, a string quartet played for the benefit of the dancers, their faces red from exertion and slick

with perspiration courtesy of the half dozen or so golden chandeliers.

French doors on the side of the ballroom had been propped open with a matching set of potted ferns, but the cool autumn breeze flowing in from outside wasn't quite enough to bring the temperature within to a comfortable level. It felt warm and sticky; the air a mixture of candlewax, floral perfume, and stale sweat.

Servants dressed in black circulated through the fray, their arms bending beneath the weight of silver platters heavy with fruit, drink, and sweets. Helping himself to a ripe red strawberry, Silas popped it absently into his mouth as he surveyed the crowd. He spotted the Duke of Wilshire and Lord-Something-or-Other straight away. Dressed like a right proper dandy in a towering black hat and purple cravat run through with an oversized ruby broach, Wilshire was impossible to miss.

As if he could somehow sense the censorious weight of Silas's gaze he abruptly looked up, and beneath the powder that had been heavily applied to his face, his cheeks drained of color.

Silas smiled thinly before purposefully directing his focus elsewhere. Wilshire and the debt that he owed still needed to be dealt with, but not tonight. Tonight wasn't for the business of numbers, but the business of socializing. Of gaining favor by rubbing up against certain shoulders and stirring gossip by ignoring others. It was a tiresome game that hadn't changed its rules since the first King George sat upon the throne, and one that Silas had no interest in playing. But he was a duke. And dukes were not absolved from mingling amidst their peers, no matter how much wealth or power they accrued.

His gaze wandered further, traveling past the waltzing couples to the far wall where dejected wallflowers sat slumped in various stages of wilt. Past them was a side board the size of a small sailing vessel, and—

Wait.

Silas's nostrils flared as his eyes darted back to where they'd already been. Past a mousy brunette and over a snoring blonde before they landed on a wallflower with her nose pressed to a book.

But not just any wallflower.

No, *this* wallflower had a delicate build, firelight hair in a loose tumble of curls at the crown of her head, and winged



eyebrows that moved expressively with every turn of the page.

Her face was nearly covered—the book appeared to be thick and quite cumbersome—but he’d recognize the stubborn tilt of that chin anywhere.

Before he was fully aware of what he was commanding his legs to do, Silas was bearing down on the row of unsuspecting wallflowers with the stony determination of a ship setting out for uncharted waters.

The brunette saw him first. With a frightened squeak, she nearly fell off her chair. The blonde gave an extra loud snore as he strode past. But when he stopped in front of Miss Swan, hands on his hips and thighs braced apart, she barely glanced up from her book.

“I’m sorry,” she said, slowly flipping to a new page. “But my dance card is very full.”

“Delly,” the brunette hissed, flapping her arms. “Delly, it’s *him*.”

“Who?” Delilah asked, still not bothering to look.

“*Him*.”

“Margaret, I don’t mean to be rude, but Lord Chesterfield is just about to proclaim his love for Vanessa and—*what are you*

*doing?”* she said on an outraged gasp when Silas leaned forward and plucked the book from her hands.

“*‘Lady Vanessa waited with bated breath as Lord Chesterfield folded himself upon bended knee,’*” he read aloud before his brow furrowed. “How, exactly, does one fold themselves upon their knee? Sounds painful. And what happens if Lady Vanessa forgets to start breathing again? No sensible man wants to begin a courtship with an unconscious woman. He’d have to summon the doctor, and the wait would be terribly inconvenient.”

“What you doing here? Give that back!” Brown eyes flashing, Delilah sprang to her feet, yanked the book from Silas’s grasp and hugged it against her chest. “For your information, Vanessa has already proven herself to be of a most sturdy disposition. She would never swoon at such a momentous occasion. And it is not painful for a man to lower himself in front of the woman that he loves, it is *romantic*.”

When Silas’s mouth threatened to twitch in amusement, he gave a subtle cough. “I can assure you that there is nothing the least bit romantic about a splinter in one’s knee. Is the floor our valiant Lord Chesterfield prostrating himself upon at least carpeted?”

He was rewarded for his uncharacteristic cheek when her bosom heaved, affording him a tantalizing glimpse at the tops of her ivory breasts magnificently displayed in a scalloped edged bodice.

While other women had chosen to draw attention to themselves with the use of plumed feathers sticking out of their heads at dubious angles and gowns of garish pea green, eggplant purple, and carrot orange, Delilah was resplendent in a dress of the palest pink, its soft, subtle color and simple cut permitting her natural beauty to shine through.

She was a daisy amidst a bed of bright tulips. And while tulips made fine center pieces, they were quick to weather and fade, whereas a daisy, hardy and sunny, spread its cheer from spring to autumn.

“I suppose you’ll have to read the book and find out.” Delilah took a small step in retreat. “But you’ll have to get your own copy, because you cannot—yes, Margaret, what *is* it?”

“It’s *him*,” the mousy brunette whispered almost pleadingly, grabbing a handful of Delilah’s skirts.

Delilah’s brows pinched. “Yes, I am aware of who it is. We’ve met before. Would you care for an introduction? I’ll

warn you now—” her gaze shifted to Silas “—his behavior leads much to be desired. To be completely forthright, I find him quite rude.”

*‘Go. Go, before I do something that I shouldn’t.’*

Those were the last words he’d spoken to her, Silas recalled with the faintest of scowls. Words born of desperation as he’d felt his blood heat and his member stiffen. And while he wasn’t unfamiliar with arousal—he’d experienced his first cockstand as a boy of twelve when the wash maid accidentally spilled a bucket of water down the front of her dress—the sheer intensity of the physical attraction he’d felt towards Delilah had caught him off guard. So he’d sent her running. As he should have done. But then what the devil was he doing standing in front of her again, deliberately teasing an indignant splash of pink into those high arching cheekbones? It was an act of perversion in its purest form.

“You—you’ve met him before?” Margaret gasped. “Oh, my. Oh, *my*.”

Delilah frowned. “Are you feeling unwell? You didn’t eat the shrimp again, did you? I’ve told you it goes bad at these events. Seafood should go from the ocean to your plate, not be carried around for hours on end.”

It was surprisingly good advice.

Silas had some as well, for himself.

*Run.*

Run away from Delilah Swan, as far and as fast as he could.

He ordered his feet to move. He *commanded* them. Instead, feeling like a puppet under the command of a master puppeteer, he watched as his arm extended towards her and his mouth formed the words, “Dance with me.”

“Dance with you?” Delilah repeated.

“Dance with him!” said Margaret.

“But...who will hold my book?” she asked, her grip tightening protectively around the clothbound tome as if it were a golden crown instead of a fairytale filled with ridiculous romantic nonsense.

Silas kept his arm out. “Do you really think it will be stolen?”

“*You* tried to steal it,” she said, glaring at him reproachfully.

“I’ll hold your book!” Jumping out of her chair, Margaret forcefully wrenched it from Delilah’s grasp. For a mouse, she

was remarkably strong. “I’ll keep it safe until you return. Go, Delly. Go dance with him!”

Still, Delilah hesitated. “As I said before, my dance card is—”

“We both know it’s empty,” he interrupted. *And every single man in here is a fool*, he added silently, *for not fighting over who can be the first to hold you in his arms.*

“All right,” she conceded, placing her small hand on top of his larger one. “I suppose that I have time for one dance. But it needs to be short, because I *must* find out how Vanessa responds to Lord Chesterfield’s proposal.”

Unfortunately for Delilah, no sooner had they taken to the floor than the strains of a minuet—notorious for its length—filled the air. Were Silas not vaguely insulted, he would have chuckled at her resulting expression of utter dismay.

“Oh no,” she groaned. “This is going to take *forever.*”

It wasn’t the usual response he received when he asked a lady to dance.

Then again, it was becoming readily apparent that Delilah wasn’t the usual lady.

The minuet required that he place his right hand on the curve of her hip, but he was reluctant to touch her. Not because he didn't want to....

But because he did.

Very much.

*Too* much.

And as they stood there facing each other, it struck him (quite belatedly) that this was a Very Bad Idea. The worst he'd had since he foolishly offered five-hundred pounds for a company that wasn't worth more than three. But he had wanted it then, as much as he wanted Delilah now. More so, even. And he was irritated to discover that it terrified him. A deep, down in the bone terror. But it also intrigued him, for he couldn't remember the last time he had been this fascinated by a woman.

Ledgers, money, mergers.

They had his head.

But his heart...his heart had long laid dormant.

Dusty, forgotten, ignored. Dying so slowly that there was a part of him that had often wondered if it wasn't dead already.

A part that wondered no more when, miraculously, his heart gave a sudden and unprecedented *thump*.

*Thump, thump.*

*Thump, thump.*

*Thump, thump.*

“The music has begun,” Delilah rightly pointed out.

“I can hear that,” he said, his jaw clenching.

“People are starting.”

“I can see that.”

“If you’ve changed your mind—”

Bloody hell.

He clamped his hand on her waist, pulling her in snug against his body. His other hand found her fingers and they interlocked, fitting together far better than they should have given the varying sizes of their palms. But then, *nothing* about them should have fit. And yet in that moment...in that moment, everything did.

Delilah’s lips parted on a small intake of breath.

Their eyes met and held.

As one, they began to dance.



## CHAPTER EIGHT



BY HER OWN ADMISSION, Delilah was not a good dancer.

The waltz was too fast.

The minuet was too slow.

All the rest were too confusing.

It was why she'd taken to bringing a book to the ball. The pages and the text within provided as much of a diversion as they were a dissuasion to anyone who might be bored enough (or desperate enough) to ask her to dance.

Except the book hadn't worked on Silas. A disappointment, to be sure, as he was precisely the sort that it *should* have worked on. Men like Silas—tall, dark, handsome, conceited—rarely noticed wallflowers like her. Put a book in her hands,

and she might as well have donned an invisibility cloak...if such things existed.

But not only had he noticed her, and not only had he snatched her book away (the sheer audacity!), but he'd asked—demanded, really—that she join him on the ballroom floor. Then stared at her in tense silence with his arms pinned to his sides.

She'd been on the verge of walking away when he forcefully yanked her against him—a possessive movement that had thrilled every bit as it annoyed—and began to move with the music, both capable and confident as he led her through the complicated series of steps.

When she almost stumbled, he was there to steady her. When she lost her balance, he set her back on her heels. And when she trod on his instep (maybe a little bit on purpose...as retribution for poking fun at Lord Chesterfield), he merely lifted a brow and slid his foot out of the way.

“You're trying too hard,” he told her, his voice a warm slide of velvet across her cheek when he bent his head low. “Relax, Miss Swan. Move to the music, don't try to make the music move to you.”

“Easy for you to say,” she grouched even as a shiver of awareness made its way up her spine, tickling along her vertebrae like the lightest of caresses.

“And why is that?” he asked, the corner of his mouth curling in what only could be described as a devastatingly crooked smile.

“Because you’re you.” They passed another couple, and she narrowly avoided giving the man a black eye with her flailing elbow. “And I’m me.”

“Is there something inherently wrong with you that I should be made aware of?” He ran his fingers down the length of her arm, pausing at her elbow to softly nudge it inward. “It’s not contagious, is it?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Clumsiness is not a disease. My limbs grew too fast when I was a child, and it never gave my mind time to catch up. I am also easily prone to distraction.” As if to prove her point, her gaze flicked to the far corner of the ballroom where a swan had waddled inside and was being chased by—

“Look at me,” Silas ordered gruffly, taking her chin between his thumb and index finger. Exerting gentle, but firm pressure, he turned her head back. “Only at me.”

She looked.

Eyes wide, tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, pulse fluttering madly, she looked.

Past the arrogance, past the sarcasm, past the apathy that he wore like armor. To the endearingly sweet, sensitive man she saw hidden away in the swirling depths of frosted gray.

*Oh*, she thought silently, a tentative smile curling her lips. *There you are. How nice it is to finally meet you.*

The room and its occupants continued to spin and twirl. But while she was vaguely cognizant of her feet moving, Delilah felt as if she were standing still. Anchored to a stranger who wasn't a stranger, a gentleman who wasn't a gentleman, a scoundrel who wasn't a scoundrel.

She hadn't the words at her disposal to describe Silas, or the golden thread that was winding and looping and weaving itself around their bodies, binding them together. Some called it love. Others, lust. Whatever it was—whatever *this* was—it was stronger than anything she'd ever experienced before. And she knew by the way his pupils dilated, and his breathing quickened, that he felt it too.

Dimly, as if from a great distance, she registered the sound of polite clapping. The minuet was over. A ten-minute dance gone by in the span of a single heartbeat. But while she'd been reluctant to step into Silas's arms, suddenly she found that she didn't want him to let her go.

"The dance has finished," he said huskily.

She nodded. "I know that."

"People are separating."

"But not us?"

It was a question.

A statement.

A plea.

A flash of unreadable emotion crossed the angular planes of Silas's countenance. He turned his head to the side, revealing a small thatch of black whiskers just under his jawbone that his valet must have missed when shaving this morning. Were they alone instead of surrounded by dozens of curious onlookers, Delilah would have given into the temptation brewing within her and kissed him there. As he had done to her on their first meeting.

“You told me your dance card was full.” Silas unveiled another half-smile as he glanced back at her, this one even more gorgeous than the last.

It almost unfair, how handsome he was.

Almost.

“I lied,” she admitted.

Silas’s eyes twinkled. “What about Lord Chesterfield?”

“Lord Chesterfield made Vanessa wait for two Seasons. He can wait a few minutes more.”

The musicians raised their bows and the music began anew; a fast-paced waltz that would put Silas’s feet in grave danger. Delilah bit her lip, and was about to do the decent thing and withdraw her request for a second dance, when he adjusted his grip and they went spinning across the marble tile. Faster than before. Faster than she had *ever* waltzed in her lifetime. But Silas maintained impeccable control, and by the conclusion of their fourth pirouette all ten of his toes remained intact.

All around them, couples burst into spontaneous applause, and Delilah blushed from the roots of her hair to the soles of her feet when she realized they were clapping for her. For him. For *them*. She wasn’t accustomed to being the center of

attention. Not in her family and not in the *ton*. And while she had occasionally dreamt of what it might be like to bask in the glow of attentive light, she found that the reality was much harsher.

When the crowd began to surge forward, she cast a startled glance at Silas. Where just a few seconds ago he'd been warm and teasing, he now wore a mask of stony indifference, his face a blank slate of granite save twin cracks of displeasure in the corners of his mouth.

“You should go,” he said, dropping his hand from her hip.

Hurt bloomed; a rose unfolding its petals to beckon someone closer right before it stabbed them with its pointy thorns.

“Did I do something wrong? I'm sorry I stepped on your foot, but—”

“It's not you,” he said, cutting her off.

“Then what...oh.” When understanding dawned, she breathed a sigh of relief. It really *wasn't* her. He was concerned for himself. It made sense, as she *had* wondered how he'd gotten in here. If not for Lynette's marriage to Nathaniel, the

Swan sisters never would have made Lady Staffordshire's exclusive list. Let alone an untitled man of mystery.

"You don't have an invitation, do you? To the ball. That's all right," she said earnestly when his gray eyes flickered. "I'll just tell them that you're my guest. Lady Staffordshire won't have you thrown out." She paused. "I don't think, anyway."

"You really are that innocent, aren't you, Miss Swan?" For an instant, he looked as though he was going to say something else. Then he gave a small, almost indiscernible shake of his head. "Thank you for the dance. It was...unexpected."

"Unexpected?" Her brow creased. "*You asked me.*"

"So I did. Goodnight, Miss Swan."

"But—"

"I said goodnight."

He walked away then, striding out purposefully into the sea of guests who parted for him as if he were a shark cutting through a school of minnows. The moment Delilah was left alone, no one spared her a second glance except for a pitying stare from an older woman in a purple dress.

For whatever the reason, Silas was the one who had captured their undivided attention. Not her. Not them. Because



there *was* no them. There never had been. There never would be. And she was as silly as everyone thought her to be for allowing herself to dream otherwise.

“Here’s your book,” Margaret said when Delilah returned to the sad line of chairs. “How was it? How was *he*? You have to tell me everything, including how you met!” Her brown curls bounced in excited as she hopped in place. “I cannot believe you hid this from me.”

“There is nothing to hide.” Delilah tucked Lord Chesterfield under her arm. As far as she was concerned, her heroes were going to remain fictional from now on. At least then they couldn’t disappoint her. “I’m very tired, Margaret. I think I’ll find my sisters and retire early.”

“But then who will sit with me?” Margaret complained.

“You’ve Agatha,” she said, pointing at the blonde two chairs down.

“Agatha hasn’t stirred since the first waltz.”

“Have you checked to make sure that she’s still breathing?”

Margaret pursed her lips in consideration, then gave Agatha a poke with her elbow. “She’s alive,” she pronounced when

the blonde gave a loud snore. “Go on then, abandon me to my misery.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I can be miserable at home,” Delilah offered.

“That *does* make me feel better.”

The two wallflowers exchanged a rueful grin before parting ways, and Delilah hadn't gone more than ten steps when Lynette appeared out of seemingly nowhere, grabbed her wrist, and yanked her into a dimly lit alcove partially obscured by silk screens depicting a sunrise over the Thames.

“What has Temperance done now?” Delilah asked, stifling a yawn. With Silas gone and the excitement at their waltz rapidly abating, she was like a sail without wind. Deflated, tired, and ready to make port. That is, curl up on her bed, cover her face with a pillow, and sleep until tonight—and Silas's public rejection of her—was nothing more than a distant memory.

“Temperance left over an hour ago.” Lynette released Delilah's arm and crossed her own. A line was wedged between her eyebrows (never a good sign), and her eyes were unnaturally big, as if she'd witnessed some shocking

supernatural event. “Do you have any idea whom you were dancing with?”

“Yes, that was Silas.” No sooner had the name escaped her lips than Delilah winced. “I’m sorry, Lynette. I know you said to avoid him, but I couldn’t deliver a direct cut in front of all these people. It would have been terribly unkind.” *Almost as unkind as walking away and leaving the woman you were just waltzing with standing there like a dolt.* “Besides, you’re forever telling me that I need to leave the wallflower section, and—”

“That was the Duke of Claiborne.”

“Where?” she asked, peering over Lynette’s shoulder. The name was vaguely familiar. She knew that there *was* a Duke of Claiborne, in the same way that she knew there was a moon in the sky. But like the moon, he was far beyond her personal orbit. A figure of the *ton* to be brought up in random conversation every now and again, like the Prince Regent or a unicorn.

“No,” her sister said impatiently. “Silas. *Silas* is the Duke of Claiborne.”

“Bollocks,” Delilah said, repeating a curse that she’d overheard Lucas using. Her cheeks heated. “I mean, um, that’s

impossible. Silas? Silas isn't a duke. He doesn't even have a title. He told me so himself."

But had he?

Had he really?

*"What is your name?"*

*"Silas."*

*"Just Silas?"*

*"Is that a problem for you?"*

*"N-no, I just...I thought..."*

*"Were you hoping that I was some wealthy duke come to sweep you off your feet? How disappointed you must be."*

Delilah's bottom lip trembled. If it was true—if Silas was the Duke of Claiborne—what a laugh he must be having at her expense! For why else wouldn't he tell her his true identity, if not to sneer at how hopelessly naïve she was?

"I haven't met him personally," said Lynette, uncrossing her arms to fuss with the strap of her reticule. "But Nathaniel has, and he swears that the man you were with is Silas Byron, the sixth Duke of Claiborne. He didn't tell you?"

Mutely, Delilah shook her head as a lump formed in her throat.

Cruel.

It was cruel of Silas to have lied to her.

Not once, not twice, but three times.

And to what end?

For the pleasure of a jest?

He was probably out on the terrace at this very minute, enjoying a cigar and chuckling with his friends over the dimwitted wallflower who had stupidly believed he didn't even have an invitation to be here. Had she not caught on, would he have continued with his trick? How much further would he have played it out? How much more humiliation would she have suffered before she finally figured out the truth?

“How strange,” Lynette mused. “His Grace must have a reason, though I cannot think of what it might be. Regardless, this is excellent news, Delly! You’ve caught the attention of a *duke*.”

“I thought I was to ‘not engage’ with him.”

“That was before I knew who he was. Now that I’ve a name, and Nathaniel is an acquaintance, he’s no longer a stranger.” Lynette placed her hands on Delilah’s hunched shoulders and squeezed. “This is grand. Absolutely grand! You could be a duchess, Delly. Wouldn’t that be a marvel?”

Delilah muttered something unintelligible under her breath.

“What was that?” Lynette asked, her smile slipping a notch when she belatedly took note of her sister’s ashen complexion.

“I said that I don’t *want* to be a duchess.” *Not his duchess*, she added silently.

“But—but you said that you were considering an...” Lynette’s eyes darted side to side before she lowered her voice to an almost indecipherable whisper. “...an affair with him. And just now you shared not one, but two dances. Two, Delly! Back to back. That’s nearly unheard of, not to mention on the border of unacceptable.”

“That was then,” she said stonily.

“That was ten minutes ago!”

“Matters of the heart are not subject to time.”

“Delilah—”

“I want to go home. *Please.*”

Lynette searched her face. “I’ll find Nathaniel,” she said quietly. “We’ll leave straight away.”

THEY ARRIVED HOME exactly five minutes shy of midnight, and Delilah went straight to her room. With the help of her lady’s maid, she changed out of her ball gown and into a comfortable night dress of white cotton. After guzzling a cup of warm milk, she doused the candle by her bed and burrowed under the covers, drawing the top quilt up and over her head.

To her relief, slumber came quickly. It was not a night of tossing and turning, but sheer emotional exhaustion. No sooner had her lashes come to rest upon her cheeks than sleep wrapped her in an inky embrace, dragging her down to the depths of a bottomless ocean where the waters gently rocked from side to side.

Before she fell asleep, she had hoped—prayed—to doze without dream. But it wasn’t long before a light cut through the darkness; a bright beacon amidst all the black. Curious, she followed it and found herself in a hallway. Long and narrow, without pictures on the wall or a carpet on the floor. The light grew brighter. Bolder. It sped up and she began to run, the hem

of her night dress fluttering in her wake as she raced to keep pace.

She came to a closed room at the end of the hall. The candle that had beckoned her up and out of the sea was gone, but orange firelight streamed out from beneath the door, warming her bare toes.

“Hello?” she called, tentatively rapping her knuckles against the wood.

“Come in,” a deep, rich, masculine voice replied, almost as if he’d been waiting.

And she knew that voice.

And she knew what awaited on the other side of that door.

And she knew that she ought to have turned around and fled.

But what was a dream, if not an opportunity to explore forbidden desires? To do things you’d never dare in the clear light of day.

Her hand shook when she turned the round knob. The door fell open, revealing a chamber decorated in dark burgundy with a crackling fireplace, mahogany furniture, and a four-



poster bed in the middle, its headboard nearly as tall as she was.

The canopy cast its occupant in shadow, showing only a glimpse of a bare leg covered in a light dusting of ebony hair. The skin was bronze from the firelight, the muscles taut and defined. The closer she stepped, the more skin she saw, her gaze transfixed by every inch of flesh-sculpted marble.

From a calf to a knee, a knee to a thigh, a thigh to the hard ridge of a hip, and then higher still, all the way up to the amused slant of Silas's mouth.

"Would you prefer a magnifying glass?" he queried, clasping his hands behind his head. "That's what the historians use to study their art in dusty old museums."

Delilah's eyes darted to his groin, then back to his face.

She swallowed hard.

"I-I don't think a magnifying glass will be necessary."

Silas grinned, showing off the sliver of a dimple that he'd never revealed to her in real life. That meant it had been conjured by her own imagination, but the impish indent suited him and who knew? Maybe he *did* have a dimple that he'd never shown her hiding amidst all those glowers and scowls.

He clucked his tongue. "You're wearing clothes."

"Should...should I not be?" she asked, self-consciously grasping a handful of her night dress.

"You tell me. This is *your* dream."

Yes, it was.

A dream that she should have woken up from.

Instead, she shuffled closer.

"I've never...I haven't...that is, I've not done this before," she said, gesturing vaguely at the bed.

"But you've thought about it, or else I wouldn't be here."

"I suppose that's true," she admitted, blushing.

"Am I the subject of all your wickedest fantasies, Miss Swan?"

Incapable of speech, she managed a slight nod, and Silas's eyes darkened to slate.

"Then we'd best get started."

## CHAPTER NINE



WAS IT POSSIBLE TO SWOON in your own dream? Because Delilah felt decidedly light headed when Silas stood up with only a loosely draped sheet to cover his...er...private area.

She knew what a cock looked like. She'd seen pictures in an anatomy book that she and Annabel had flipped through one night after indulging in a bit too much wine. Giggling, they'd examined the human skeleton. The muscles, bones, and tendons. All with long names that were difficult to pronounce, especially in their inebriated state. When they got to the chapter on reproduction, their education was swift and scientific. Both of them had turned pink with embarrassment, but were too intrigued to close the book. Instead, they'd read to the very end, and went to bed that night with wide eyes and racing hearts.

*That* was meant to fit *there*?

It seemed impossible.

Yet their sheer existence was proof that it worked...and houses of ill repute were evidence that it could be quite enjoyable.

“Come closer,” Silas said, his voice as smooth as velvet with a husky edge that made the fine hairs on the nape of her neck tingle.

She obeyed, eliminating the final stretch of space that separated them with five tiny steps that should have been two. Arms immobile at her sides, toes curled under, belly sucked in, she wet her lips and tipped her head back to meet his bold, unwavering stare. “What...what do we do now?”

“What do *you* want to do?” He reached out and captured the tail end of her braid. She always slept with her hair in a plait over her shoulder, tied at the bottom with a silk ribbon. He fanned it lightly across her neck, tickling the hollow at the base of her throat. A log crackled in the fireplace, causing Delilah to jump, and Silas chuckled softly. “Close your eyes,” he murmured.

“Close my eyes?” she said, alarmed.

Wasn't this *her* dream?

To do with what *she* wanted?

Why, then, was Silas the one in control?

“Yes.” He brought the end of her braid to his lips, wet the curls to a fine point with his tongue, then used it as a painter would a brush to trace the damp tip along her jaw, across her collarbone, and over the curve of her breast. “Close your eyes, Delilah.”

When he circled her nipple, she gasped and pinched her eyelids shut.

“Good girl,” he said approvingly, and the arrogance in his tone made her want to grit her teeth even as it sent a rush of slick heat to the apex of her thighs.

She heard a rustle of clothing, felt a slight tug, and then a wave of cool air left goose pimples on her flesh when her night dress pooled at her feet in a pile of white fabric. Instinctively, she went to cover herself, but he caught her wrists, gently, albeit firmly, returning her arms to her sides.

“No,” he whispered in her ear. “I want to see you. *All* of you.”

Butterflies swooped and swirled in her belly as she stood poised beside the bed, dressed in nothing but a rosy blush while his gaze traveled leisurely over her body, and even though she kept her eyes closed, she could *feel* him looking at her. The same way she felt the lick of fire on her skin and the kick of breathless anticipation high in her chest.

“You’re beautiful.” He placed his hands on her hips, his fingertips resting possessively on the curve of her buttocks. “A catch of sunlight streaming in through an open window. The first daffodil to brave the spring. The last red leaf to fall in autumn. Where have you been all this time, Delilah?”

“Here,” she panted, while a distant part of her silently thanked the copious amounts of romantic books she’d devoured to put such sweet words in Silas’s mouth. “I’ve been right here, waiting for someone to find me.”

He kissed her, and here everything began to spin into a delicious blur, for while she’d often imagined what it would feel like to have a man’s mouth on top of hers, what it would be like to have him lead her to his bed, what desire would taste like on the tip of her tongue, she’d never had such experiences in real life, and thus could not evoke them in a dream.

Instead, she watched through a shimmering veil as Silas stretched her out on a blanket of satin and they made love in the basking glow of the hearth. The air hummed with the sounds of small gasps, mewling whimpers, guttural groans.

She arched her spine off the bed when he cupped her breasts one at a time and brought her nipples to his lips, lavishing attention on the sensitive buds before kissing a path down her navel, his tongue giving a teasing flick along the edge of the russet curls between her legs.

The veil shifted, undulating as if caught in a strong wind that ebbed and flowed like the tide. In her sleep, Delilah moaned, unconsciously touching the parts of herself in real life that were on fire in dream.

Her breathing accelerated. Her pulse quickened. She writhed when Silas lowered his head, using his strong arms to anchor her to the mattress when her hips wanted to shoot up into the air as an unexplainable sensation took hold within her.

The night dress she still wore knotted at her knees, then bunched at her waist, pushed up by her own hand as she stroked along silken petals.

Testing.

Teasing.

*Taking.*

On a shuddering gasp and a muffled cry, Delilah convulsed around her fingers just as Silas buried his tongue deep inside of her. The two worlds blurred, fantasy intertwining with reality when she woke with an unsettling abruptness.

Dazed and bewildered, her consciousness not yet able to completely separate what might be from what never was, she rolled over on her side and stared out her window at the silvery light of the moon as her heartrate gradually slowed and she came back to herself.

“What happened?” she said aloud, her voice hoarse and hollow in the emptiness of her dark room. A stark contrast to the cozy glow of Silas’s bedchamber. Of the bedchamber she’d created *for* him.

Oh dear.

Maybe there was such a thing as reading too many books.

Or maybe all of her daydreaming had led to a temporary bout of insanity.

Regardless, she wasn’t in Silas’s bed. Which meant all of the touching had been by her own hand.



As she turned from the window and curled into a ball, Delilah's first instinct was to be overwhelmed with humiliation. A young lady wasn't supposed to do what she'd done. But once the initial wave of shame had passed, she was left with a vague sense of...was it contentment? Satisfaction? The precise word escaped her, but she did know that she felt better than she had before the dream. Better, and yet in some ways worse. Because while she had successfully explored the mystifying realm of self-pleasure, waking up by herself was a stark and unwelcome reminder that she was alone. That she had as much of a chance at replicating her secret fantasy in the real world as she did of...of reaching up and grabbing a star.

Silas was never going to beckon her into his bed and undress her in the flickering light of a fireplace. He hadn't even given her courtesy of his real name and title. She needed to forget him. To abandon this push and pull of tangled emotions that kept drawing them together and then shoving them apart.

A turtle could try to fly and a bird to swim, but in the end, all of their efforts would always come to naught. People and animals did what they were meant to do.

The third daughter of a baronet became a spinster with too many dogs, and the handsome duke married an impossibly poised, elegant woman who said things like “*My, don’t my roses look positively divine today*” and “*Smithers, bring the carriage round. No, not that carriage. The big carriage*”.

There was no possible future in which Delilah and Silas ended up together. And that was just fine, because she didn’t *want* to be with him. Definitely, absolutely, almost, positively not.

Tucking her knees to her chest, she closed her eyes and slipped mercifully into dreamless oblivion.

# CHAPTER TEN



MISS DELILAH SWAN.

Delilah Swan.

Delilah.

Swan.

It was a name that had plagued Silas since the night of the Staffordshire ball. A name that was always accompanied by a face. Big, brown doe eyes and freckles that weren't at all fashionable but were utterly adorable, especially when Delilah laughed and they danced across her nose. Pink lips that were thin by any measure, but he'd be willing to bet ten pounds were soft to the kiss. Long, sweeping lashes and high cheekbones. A stubborn chin.

Then there was her hair. Curls the color of a sunset that had a habit of falling free of their pins. What he wouldn't give to gather those auburn tendrils in his hands. To wrap them around his fingers and draw her head taut as he ravished her delectable little mouth until she was begging him for more.

Three days, Silas reflected with a fresh surge of annoyance as he removed his hat and placed it under his arm. Three days after the ball and he was *still* thinking about her. It was inconceivable. More than that, it was intolerable. And that was why he'd come here, to the private residence of Lord Townsend, to pay a call to one Miss Delilah Swan and tell her, in no uncertain terms, that she needed to get the hell out of his head.

He had been admitted by a maid who had blanched when she read his card, and promptly ushered into a drawing room where he had refused both tea and refreshments while he waited for Delilah to make her appearance. This was not a social visit so much as it was a battle strategy, and he refused to let himself be plied into complacency with raspberry tarts... no matter how good they smelled.

"Claiborne, I wasn't expecting you." Nathaniel Blackbourne, The Viscount Townsend, was an amicable fellow

always ready with a quick grin. Tall and lean, with an athletic build and striking green eyes, he'd turned many a head as a bachelor, and had broken more a few hearts when he married Lynette Swan. "You're looking well."

"As are you," Silas replied, and found himself mildly surprised that he meant it.

In his personal experience, men—including his own father—tended to turn a tad gray around the edges once they'd shackled themselves to a wife, like a slab of meat left out too long on the table. But by all outward appearances, Nathaniel was more healthy and robust than he'd ever been before. There were a few more creases in the corners of his eyes and mouth since the last time they'd come face to face, but the shape of them implied they'd come from laughter, and a life happily lived. While his father's lines, hard ridges that had embedded themselves deeper with every passing year, had come from scowling, and grumbling, and complaining.

As Silas sat down so that Nathaniel could do the same, he received another surprise. A completely unexpected pang of jealousy that had him stuffing his mouth with a raspberry tart to conceal an unwanted wash of emotions across his countenance.

There was no reason for him to envy Lord Townsend, and a million reasons why Lord Townsend should have envied *him*.

He was a duke; a title he hadn't earned but one that had been bestowed upon him regardless.

He was wealthy; money that he'd inherited and a gargantuan amount of it that he'd earned.

He was unfettered by wife or mistress; free to do as he pleased when he pleased it.

Why, then, this inescapable feeling of covetousness?

Nathaniel had a wife to answer to, parents to care for, and *three* sisters, if the Swans were to be included. He was a mere viscount, in possession of a moderate fortune, that was sure to be drained by the sheer amount of dress appointments he faced in the near and distant future. Yet, despite all that, he appeared happy as a damned clam. While Silas sat in jealous misery.

What sort of bloody sense did that make?

"I hear belated congratulations are in order," he said stiffly. "How is fatherhood treating you?"

Nathaniel poured himself a cup of tea. "Regina is going through a teething spell, and hasn't slept in four nights. Which means my wife and I haven't slept in four nights." He added a

lump of sugar and stirred. “Fatherhood is amazing. It has been simultaneously the most humbling and empowering experience of my life. You really ought to try it, Claiborne.”

“No, thank you,” said Silas, as if he were refusing a second raspberry tart. “Don’t you have a nursemaid? A governess?”

“A nanny. Lynette wants to be as involved as possible. So do I.”

“But...why?” The first face he remembered memorizing as a child wasn’t his mother or father’s, but his nanny’s. When he had bumped his knee, or fallen off his pony, he hadn’t gone running to his parents, but his governess. The late duke and duchess were figures to be admired from a distance, never up close. The idea that they would have had any interest in being ‘involved’ in their only child’s upbringing was laughable.

“Why?” Nathaniel repeated. He sipped his tea. “Because she is our daughter. If you’d like to meet her—”

“Another time, perhaps,” Silas cut in hastily. As a general rule, he did his best to avoid tiny humans. They were messy, whiny, and they had a habit of wiping their drool on his trouser leg. “I’m here to pay a visit to another member of your family, actually. Your sister-in-law. Miss Delilah.”

“Delilah?” Nathaniel’s affable grin faded. His gaze cooled. A man of lesser esteem might have squirmed in his chair; Silas blindly reached for another tart.

“Yes,” he said, scattering crumbs all over his lap. “I should like to speak with her.”

“I couldn’t help but notice that the two of you shared a dance at the Staffordshire Ball.” Even Nathaniel’s voice had lost its friendly cadence. Each word came out hard and flat, like the end of a hammer. “A minuet *and* a waltz, if memory serves.”

“Your memory is quite reliable.”

“What do you wish to speak with her about?”

“A private matter,” he said evasively.

“There is nothing private amidst family. My youngest sister-in-law is...sensitive. She has a free spirit, and a gentle heart.” Nathaniel’s eyes bored straight into Silas’s soul. At least, that was what it felt like. “I wouldn’t want to see it bruised.”

Silas frowned. “Neither would I.”

He hadn’t come here to hurt Delilah. The mere idea of causing her pain, of being the reason that her smile crumpled,



twisted his gut. As convoluted as it seemed, he was here to do the opposite. By formally extinguishing any flames of hope she may have been kindling that something could come of their time spent together, he'd be doing them both a mercy.

If his previous mistresses and admirers were a glimpse into the future, then she was already half in love with him. Paying a visit to end things before they began was a rare courtesy. A privilege, really. One that he'd never thought to afford anyone else.

“Are you really not going to share your intentions?” Nathaniel rose from his seat and Silas mimicked him, scattering crumbs across the carpet.

“They are honorable, if that is what you are asking.”

Lord Townsend sighed. “That’s good, as I’d hate to have to punch a duke. *I* wouldn’t mind it, but my wife is a stickler for manners. Provoking her anger would be worth it, though, if it were in defense of Delilah. Watch your step, Claiborne,” the viscount warned as he went to the door. “Or I’ll have to watch it for you.”

To date, it was the first direct threat that Silas had ever received. Well, except for the ones his father used to make, but

those had been so numerous he'd lost count after his tenth birthday.

Instead of being offended, he experienced another twinge of envy. That this family, this loud, infamous, boisterous, far too numerous family, would come together so willingly to defend one of their own...it was...foreign to him. Another language he'd never even heard of, let alone learned to speak. But maybe he wanted to. Maybe...maybe he wanted to far more than he cared to admit, even to himself.

“Lady Townsend and Miss Delilah will be here shortly,” Nathaniel said before he quit the room, once again leaving Silas to wait.

He would have rather spoken to Delilah without a chaperone present, especially her own sister, but that wasn't how these things worked. A pity, as he'd enjoyed the unsupervised time they'd spent together at the park, and then again in the alley that same night.

Wait.

Enjoyed?

Enjoyed was a strong word.

He enjoyed a vintage whisky. He enjoyed a fast ride on a big horse. He enjoyed winning at billiards. Since when did he *enjoy* the company of a woman? Particularly one as unconventional as Delilah Swan?

As he was musing over the answer, he heard the approach of footsteps and then the soft murmur of feminine voices. He squared his shoulders, inwardly preparing to deliver a form of the same speech he'd given before to varying reactions.

Some of his mistresses had sobbed when he told them it was over.

Others had thrown things.

One had gone completely mute; a welcome respite from her endless chatter.

Granted, he and Delilah weren't intimate. Not to say he hadn't thought about it. In extensive, cock-stirring detail. But even though they'd never had—and never would have—an affair, the same sentiment applied.

*This cannot go any further. I apologize. Should you require anything to make the transition easier, my valet will ensure it is delivered. Thank you for your time.*

The voices in the hallway grew louder, and noticeably more agitated.

“...cannot refuse...*duke*...”

“I...refuse anyone I...”

“Delly, be reasonable—”

“No! I don’t...see him.”

A line creased Silas’s temple. It almost sounded like Delilah didn’t *want* him here. Which was absurd. He was the Duke of Claiborne. A personal visit was a rare honor. Emphasis on the rare. The last time he’d taken the time to call on anyone of the female persuasion, it was his elderly aunt and she’d been on her deathbed. Quite simply put, he did not visit young ladies. And if they dared to visit him, he had Evansworth ready with an excuse as to why he was unavailable.

Without warning, the door flew open and Delilah stumbled inside with Nathaniel’s wife, Lady Townsend, right behind, the hand she’d used to push her sister into the parlor still raised.

“Your Grace,” she said, lifting her skirts and executing a flawless curtsy. With her sleek brown hair tied in an elegant twist at the nape of her neck, green morning dress, and matching pearls at her ears and throat, she made for a perfectly

poised viscountess. But Silas wasn't oblivious to the protective shard of steel in her gaze. The same shard he'd seen in her husband's. "What an unexpected pleasure this is."

"My lady." He bowed. "Miss Delilah." He bowed again. "The pleasure is all mine."

"Delilah?" While Lady Townsend's pleasant smile remained in place, tension ratcheted out from the corners of her eyes. "Haven't you anything to say?"

"Yes, I do." Delilah scowled at Silas. "What are you doing here?"

Suffice it to say, it was *not* the welcome that he'd been anticipating.

Where were the fawning gazes of adoration? The pink blushes? The batting eyelashes? Those he knew how to ignore. But this bristling animosity...from Delilah, of all people...it put him off balance, rocking him back onto his heels where the footing was uneven and unfamiliar.

Lady Townsend made a small choking sound, as if she'd accidentally swallowed the pit in the middle of a plum. "*Delilah,*" she hissed. "Where are your manners? This isn't how we greet our guests."

“It’s how I greet this one,” his red-haired fairy said mutinously, hands rising to her hips and elbows jutting out like twin swords she’d use to cut him if he got too close.

“I apologize, Your Grace.” Mahogany eyes, a shade darker than Delilah’s and tinged with exasperation, met his. “My sister is not feeling like herself—”

“I feel fine!”

“—and perhaps it would be best if you came to call another day.”

Another day?

Come back another day?

No, no, that wouldn’t do.

He needed to purge Delilah from his head and bleed her from his heart this morning.

This very *minute*.

Except it wasn’t starting out like it was supposed to. Nothing about her was how it was supposed to be. She was an innocent, which he abhorred. Naïve as well, which he hadn’t the patience for. Pretty enough, but on paper, she would have paled in comparison to the sophisticated beauties he usually

preferred. She lacked social grace, blurting out whatever thought entered her head. And she had a wolf for a pet.

In summary, she was a combination of all the traits he *didn't* like in a woman. But apparently she didn't care about that, because *she* was standing there rejecting *him*!

The gall.

The impudence.

The audacity.

Silas was fascinated.

"I'd prefer to speak with Miss Delilah now, if possible. My schedule, as I'm sure you can understand, is quite busy."

"I am sure that it is." Lady Townsend cast a fretful glance at her sister. "But—"

"Busy?" Delilah interrupted. "Busy? Yes, I'm sure that you are busy! Since you are a *duke*."

The title hung in the air like an accusation. As if it were somehow a stain on his reputation instead of the one thing that garnered him the most attention.

"I am," he acknowledged cautiously.

“But you told me your name was Silas!” she said, jabbing a finger at him.

“It is.” He turned his confused gaze to Lady Townsend. “I’m not sure—”

“Don’t ask me,” the brunette sighed. “Delilah rarely loses her temper. She’s always had a sunny, optimistic demeanor, even as a little girl. But when a bee does get caught in her bonnet, I’ve found it best to stay clear until the poor thing has found its way out again lest you find yourself nursing a sting. I’ll be over there”—she nodded at a piano forte in the corner of the parlor—“practicing for our upcoming recital, should you need me. Best of luck, Your Grace.”

She departed in a graceful swirl of muslin, and soon the soothing notes of Mozart’s sonata in F major filled the air, granting the illusion of privacy while adhering to the rules governing young women of High Society.

Silas gestured at a sofa upholstered in forest green with gold fringe tassels. While it only had two cushions, they were oversized, permitting him and Delilah to sit side by side without touching. The thought of being that close to her again—of seeing the sunlight reflecting off her hair and smelling the sweetness of the soap she used to wash herself—made his blood



heat and his pulse quicken. Grinding his molars together, he growled, “Should we sit?”

Delilah’s mouth took a mulish turn. “No, I don’t think we should.”

He glared at her.

She glared at him.

Neither moved.

“Are you angry with me?” he asked finally, unable to stand the silence. While he was accustomed to freezing other people out, he found the sting of the cold rather uncomfortable when it was blowing into his own face. “Have I done something I’m unaware of?”

“You lied to me,” she said, tossing her head. A filly brushing off any attempt of a groom to put a halter on.

“The devil I did,” he snapped.

A piano key gave a hard *plink*.

“What I mean to say,” he amended through clenched teeth, “was that I have made no attempt to intentionally deceive you, Miss Swan. Why would you feel otherwise?”

She flung her arms wide. “You let me believe you were a commoner! Even at the ball, you didn’t tell me who you really were. Did you do it to mock me?”

“Mock you?” he repeated, his brow creasing.

*This* was the source of her anger? That he hadn’t come right out and told her he was a duke? And maybe he should have. He would have, except...except it had been nice, to be treated as the individual he was instead of the title that he’d been born into. Even if that treatment had come with notable bumps along the way. But he hadn’t meant to upset her, and he hadn’t lied to her. All right, maybe a lie of omission. But did those really count?

“No, why would I—”

“To make me appear foolish, then? Silly Delly,” she said in a sing-song voice that abruptly turned hoarse as her beautiful brown eyes welled. “Stupid Delly, more like. Have you been laughing at me this entire time?”

“*Delilah.*” He was next to her in an instant. Before he had time to consider the consequences. Before he had time to prepare himself. Before he had time to do anything except tenderly swipe his thumb under her lash line to clear away her

tears. “I’d never laugh at you, and you’re not stupid. You’re remarkable.”

The music slowed.

Delilah sucked in a breath.

“You—you think I am remarkable?” she asked tremulously.

“Yes.” Reaching between them, he grasped her hands. They were trembling. Her entire body was trembling. He squeezed her fingers. “Whatever ills you believe of me, they’re probably true. But I didn’t keep my title from you as some type of subterfuge. During our first meeting, I was too busy trying to keep my skin in one piece to bother with my name.”

“Mr. Humphrey wouldn’t ever bite anyone,” she said, frowning.

“Mr. Humphrey is the size of an ox,” he replied dryly, “and whether he bites or not is irrelevant. When we met again, that same night, and you asked who I was, I told you. Despite most people referring to me as the Duke of Claiborne, my name *is* Silas. I was...enjoying our natural camaraderie, and I did not want my title to change how you perceived me.”

“Why would your title change how I perceive you?” she asked with such genuine bemusement that had her sister not

been sitting within eyesight, Silas would have grasped her shoulders and kissed her on the spot. “Although,” she went on thoughtfully, “it does help to explain your unbearable arrogance. I was afraid it might be a medical condition, but this makes much more sense.”

A loud series of notes from the piano forte unsuccessfully covered a snicker of laughter.

Silas glanced over his shoulder and scowled, then looked back at Delilah. Her tears had stopped and her eyes were once again sparkling; with humor instead of malice. Now that her anger had dissipated and her joy had returned, it was as if a blanket of clouds had lifted, brightening the mood of the entire room.

Silly?

Stupid?

No.

Delilah was different. But then, so was a rainbow. Different and daringly brave to shoot across a sky of blue with all of its dazzling colors. How the clouds must have looked at it! How they must have stared. But the rainbow merely shone on,

beautiful and brilliant *because* of its divergence from all that surrounded it.

“...are you doing here?” she said, causing him to belatedly realize that she’d been talking while he’d been staring at her like some love-struck fool, deaf and dumb to everything else but the glowing fairy in front of him.

“What?” he asked, unconsciously taking a step in the opposite direction. The movement was slight, but necessary. Whatever spell Delilah had cast upon him, he needed to break it. Every second that he remained transfixed was another second that could have been spent elsewhere on meaningful things, like contracts and mergers and accounting reviews.

That was why he’d come here, wasn’t it?

To be rid of her.

To be rid of this fascination he had for her.

To go back to the way he was before he met her.

Cold, aloof, and unfeeling.

“I asked what you are doing here,” she repeated, canting her head to the side. A curl slid across her cheek and his fingers itched to tuck it behind her ear. Instead, he linked his hands

together behind his back, the corded tendons in his wrists bulging as he refused to give in to temptation.

“I...” His Adams apple bobbed. “I came to clear the air, Miss Swan.”

Her smile turned quizzical. “Clear it from what?”

“From any confusion you may have as to a potential courtship.”

“What do you—”

“I am not in want on a wife,” he interrupted.

When Silas was a boy—he didn’t remember what age—he fell out of a tree and snapped his arm.

*“It is a clean break,”* the doctor said, his eyes swimming with the empathy that the Duke of Claiborne’s had lacked as he’d towered over his son’s bed. *“But it shall have to be set, or else you may lose use of the arm as you grow up.”*

*“My son won’t be a cripple,”* Silas’s father had snarled, a vein popping in his forehead. *“Do whatever needs to be done.”*

The doctor had nodded. *“I’ve laudanum here, for the pain. Setting the broken pieces won’t be pleasant. Let me get a spoon—”*

*“He doesn’t need it. Let the pain be a lesson that he has better things to do with his time than climb trees like a damned hellion.”*

*“Are you sure?”* the doctor had said doubtfully. *“I’ve done this to men fully grown, and it’s excruciating.”*

*“He’ll be fine.”*

*“Father—”*

*“He’ll be fine.”*

*“Here.”* The doctor had handed Silas a chunk of leather whittled down to a rectangular slab. There were peculiar marks in it, almost like small chips in a piece of porcelain. *“Bite onto this. I’ll try to do it quickly. Bad things are always made better if you do them quickly.”*

There was nothing ‘better’ about having the broken shards of his arm shoved back together, but at least it was fast...and Silas had learned a lesson that he’d carried with him into adulthood.

*Bad things are always made better if you do them quickly.*

Setting a bone.

Ending a conversation.

Breaking a heart.

“I am not in want of a wife,” he said again, all in a rush so that it came out in one long stream. *I am not in want of a wife.* “Not now, at any rate. But after the ball, I didn’t want to leave you with the wrong impression. So I have come here to correct any thoughts or feelings you may have to the contrary. About us, and whatever future you may have been envisioning. Because there is none. No future. Where we are together, that is. And I wanted to make that clear. In fairness to you. As a courtesy.”

Delilah’s countenance paled.

The music came to an abrupt halt.

As rapidly as he’d gone to Delilah a few moments ago, Lady Townsend came to her sister’s side now, draping an arm around Delilah’s shoulders as if she were a mother hen sheltering her chick from weather most foul.

“Thank you for your visit, Your Grace,” she said, her tone whip-sharp and her eyes brittle. “I believe it would be best if you took your leave.”

He looked from one to the other. From Lady Townsend, fierce and protective, to Delilah, bewildered and wounded. His



throat tightened. His stomach turned. Bloody hell. What had he done?

“Miss Swan—” he began hoarsely.

“That was not a suggestion.” Lady Townsend’s mouth flattened. “Your *Grace*.”

Silas executed a wooden bow. “As you wish.”

When his carriage pulled away and the Townsend manor went out of sight, it occurred to him that he was leaving with his pride and his precious time...but not much else. And what was the point of time, if you had no one to spend it with?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



“FOR THE HUNDREDTH time, I’m *fine*.” To punctuate her point, Delilah ripped out an invasive patch of kingcup with more force than necessary. The autumn soil, damp from the rain that had poured from the heavens for the past five days straight, gave up its bounty easily, and she went sprawling onto her backside, legs sticking straight up in the air.

“Yes,” said Annabel, peering down at her while balancing a basket of herbs on her hip. “You look perfectly fine. Why would anyone think something is amiss?”

Grumbling under her breath, Delilah wiped her muddy hands on the white apron she was wearing to protect the peach-colored dress underneath of it and rolled to her feet.

Hands on her hips, she surveyed the progress that she and Annabel had made in the fenced garden behind the house.

Typically, the arduous labor required to clear out the beds and harvest the herbs was done by the gardener. But Mr. Chapman's wife had just delivered a healthy baby boy, and the new family was at home becoming acquainted with their bundle of joy.

Lord Townsend had the means to hire a replacement—ten replacements, if he was of a mind to—but Delilah had volunteered her services, and this morning Annabel had joined her after the men collectively went off to Tattersalls, a renowned bloodstock auction, to find Hugh a new riding horse.

Delilah liked to garden. To plunge her hands into the earth and either create something new or rip out something old. To make a tangible difference. A change that she could bear witness to in the months and even years to come.

In preparation for the impending winter season, the flowers from summer, long gone to seed, had to be sheared off at the stem. Weeds had to be removed. Overgrowth, like the kingcup, had to be cleared away. And the herbs that they'd use in soups and teas and sauces had to be snipped and hung up to dry.

It was busy work. Physically taxing work. Welcome work. She needed to distract herself from Silas, and thus far this was the only thing that worked. Which was why, rain or shine, she'd been out in this garden, pulling and cutting and tending and collecting until her fingers quite literally bled.

“Ouch,” she hissed, sticking her thumb in her mouth when she accidentally pricked the pad on a sharp thorn nestled in the shiny green branches of a rosebush. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth, and turning her head to the side, she spat onto the ground.

“Lovely,” said Annabel, her nose wrinkling. “I’ve told you to wear gloves.”

“Then I can’t feel what I’m doing.” She pressed her thumb into her apron, adding a dot of bright crimson to the smears of mud that had already stained the fabric. “Did you find all the rosemary?”

Annabel peered inside her wicker basket, piled high with various sprigs of fragrant rosemary, thyme, basil, and fennel. “I think so. Delly—”

“Stop.” Deliberately turning her back on her friend, Delilah crouched low and resumed deadheading the rosebush, her

fingers working quickly and efficiently to pop off the old blooms so that fresh ones could grow in the spring.

“I haven’t even started,” Annabel protested. “You *have* to talk about him eventually. It’s almost been a week, and you’ve barely said a word. I can tell that you’re hurting, Delly. Anyone in your position would be.”

“What would you know about *my* position?” Like the thorn, Delilah’s response came out unexpectedly sharp. “You have Lucas, Temperance has Hugh, Lynette has Nathaniel, Lady Brimshire has Lord Brimshire. Even Mr. Chapman has Mrs. Chapman!” She began to yank off the wilted buds in rapid succession. “But I’ve no one. And I know that I’ve no one. And talking about it won’t change anything! So instead, I’d like to focus on what I *can* change and what *can* be helped. Like this rosebush.”

“Do you mean the rosebush you’ve just scalped?” Annabel asked seriously.

“What do you...?” Delilah looked down at her handiwork, and her lips parted in dismay. In her anger and her sadness and her frustration, she’d very nearly yanked off every single leaf along with the old blooms.

Wonderful!

Just wonderful.

Another thing ruined.

Another future cut short.

*“I have come here to correct any thoughts or feelings you may have to the contrary. About us, and whatever future you may have been envisioning. Because there is none. No future. Where we are together, that is. And I wanted to make that clear. In fairness to you. As a courtesy.”*

A courtesy.

*A courtesy.*

She'd show him courtesy when she took her shears and—

*No, she told herself firmly. That's Temperance talking. Not you.*

Never, in her entire life, had Delilah felt more connected to her fiery sister. At least now she understood why Temperance preferred sarcasm over sadness. Anger was easier than despair and fury was preferable to sorrow, but she hated that when she was mad, she didn't feel like herself.

She had always taken her eternal sense of optimism for granted. Her ability to view the best in people and situations that others might find undesirable or daunting wasn't a task or

a difficulty, but an innate talent that came as naturally as breathing. But now it was gone. Taken from her by a careless, thoughtless duke who wasn't even aware of what he'd done.

Just as she had stripped the leaves from the rosebush, so too had Silas stripped away her optimism. Leaving her exposed and vulnerable to the horrors of the world that she'd been blind to all these years.

He had shown her that sometimes, fairy-tales *didn't* have happy endings.

Sometimes, the prince didn't come charging in on a white horse.

Sometimes, the princess was left alone in her tower.

And for a girl who had grown up believing that behind every raincloud was a beam of sunlight waiting to shine, learning that sometimes there was nothing behind the raincloud but more rain was heart wrenching.

"It'll grow back," said Annabel, nodding at the rosebush. "Not to worry."

Delilah gave an aimless shrug. "Maybe. Maybe not. I'm going inside for some tea. Do you want to join me?"

Annabel hugged the basket against her belly where the tiniest of bumps had begun to emerge. "I'll finish up out here, then come in."

She waited until Delilah had walked through the French doors off the veranda and then waved her arm wildly in the air. A flash of movement in a window as a curtain dropped back into place, and then Temperance and Lynette scurried out, the latter casting a furtive glance over her shoulder.

"Well?" Temperance asked breathlessly. "What happened? Did she say anything?"

Annabel shook her head. "She refused to talk about it, or him."

"The poor dear," Lynette murmured. "I wish there was something we could do."

"There *is* something we can do," said Temperance.

"We are not killing the Duke of Claiborne."

"Don't be absurd." Temperance rolled her eyes. "We would hire someone to do it for us."

"Is she being serious?" Annabel asked.

"With Temperance? Who knows," Lynette sighed. "Regardless, murder is not a suitable solution."



“Then what are we meant to do?” demanded Temperance. “Sit on our hands and watch Delilah suffer? She’s *miserable*, Lynette. I’ve never seen her like this.”

Annabel put the basket on the ground. “Neither have I. I think...I think she really was developing strong feelings for him. Claiborne. I watched them together at the ball. When they were dancing. He couldn’t stop staring at her. I don’t know why he came here and said what he did. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was as interested in her as she was in him.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Lynette began to pace, skirts swishing around her ankles. “Our father *was* just a baronet. For some people, that matters. But the duke didn’t strike me as a man who put much stock in titles, and he certainly doesn’t need a large dowry.”

“If only we could get them together again,” Annabel mused.

“How? Delilah isn’t attending any more balls. Even if she were, Claiborne hasn’t been at them either. He was at Bramley Park for less than ten minutes before he left, and neither Nathaniel nor I saw him at Highstone Manor. For all intents and purposes, both Delilah and Claiborne have gone into hiding.”

Temperance picked up the shears that Delilah had left behind and absently twirled them in her hand. “It’s obvious they’re both avoiding the other, but why would Claiborne want to avoid Delly if he doesn’t feel anything for her? I say we use a pistol. Better for long range.”

“I’ve never killed anyone before,” said Annabel, “but I would think the first step to a successful murder plot is not to speak about the murder plot.”

“She’s not being serious.” Lynette shot her sister a quelling stare. “You’re *not* being serious.”

Temperance crossed her arms. “Do *you* have a better idea?”

“I might,” Annabel put in, her face lighting with excitement. “Didn’t they first meet at Hyde Park, when Mr. Humphrey got loose and ran into Claiborne?”

“That dog is a menace,” Temperance said with feeling.

“Maybe. Or maybe he’s just what we need to pull off a miracle...”

## CHAPTER TWELVE



“EVANSWORTH, I’VE MADE a mistake.” Scowling, Silas shoved away from his desk and stood up, bracing his hands between a pile of papers and an inkwell that had nearly run dry.

From the doorway, his valet blanched and weaved on his feet as if he might faint. An acceptable response, given that the Duke of Claiborne had never—not to anyone’s recollection, that is—admitted to any kind of fault, purposeful or otherwise.

“S-s-surely not, Your Grace,” Evansworth stuttered.

“Yes.” Silas gave a grim a nod. “Yes, I’ve made a mistake and I need to fix it.”

The valet leaned against the wall for support. “What—what can I do to help?”

Silas raked his hands through his hair, pulling the ends taut. It was longer than he preferred. But then, that was what happened when you refused to sit for a shave or a trim. Over the last week, the evening shadow on his jaw had turned into a beard, rough and bristly. The first he'd ever grown. It made him feel like a bear. And in many ways, he *was* a bear. Growling at servants. Retreating into the darkness of his study for days on end. Guzzling brandy like it was honey.

All because of *her*.

And the mistake he'd made.

Delilah's stricken expression when he'd told her that he was not in want of a wife continued to haunt his nightmares. The guilt from his cruel words had gnawed all the way down to the marrow. Any further, and his bones would begin turning to dust. No less than he deserved for what he'd done.

By pushing Delilah away, he hadn't done her a courtesy.

He'd committed a crime of the heart.

"Is...is it the ledgers?" Evansworth asked hesitantly. "Are they not adding up? Should I send for the accountant?"

Silas stared blankly at his valet. "The ledgers? The *ledgers*?" His top lip curling in a self-derisive snarl, he picked

up the stack of papers with both hands and launched them across the study. “The ledgers are bloody perfect. There’s nothing wrong with the damned ledgers!” Chest heaving, he yanked on the waistcoat draped over the back of his chair. “I’m going for my afternoon walk. Have my dinner delivered to my room.”

Evansworth respectfully bowed his head and stepped out of the way when his employer stalked past. But when the dutiful valet knelt and began to pick up the scattered array of papers, Silas stopped him.

“I’ll do that when I return,” he said gruffly.

“Your Grace?” his valet asked, visibly confused.

“It’s time I began cleaning up my own messes.”

THE COOL AUTUMN WIND slapped at Delilah’s face and wrenched her hair free of its pins, sending the auburn curls flying in all directions as she struggled to keep pace with Mr. Humphrey.

Wet nose to the ground, tail wagging fiercely, the hound followed a zig-zag of scents across the walking trail that ran parallel to a larger bridle path reserved for horses and carriages. Dimly, she registered the clip-clop of hooves and the

jingling of harnesses as she quickened her pace, her arms aching from the strength it was taking to keep her pet under control.

Surprisingly, it had been Lynette who had suggested that she take Mr. Humphrey for an afternoon constitutional...sans chaperone.

“He’s driving everyone crazy,” her sister had said, throwing up her hands. “We’ve dinner tonight with the Earl and Countess of Oakmore, and I cannot have Mr. Humphrey licking the plates like he did the last time. Maybe if you take him on a long walk, it will tire him out and he’ll sleep through dinner. I haven’t Temperance or Annabel to spare, so you’ll have to go by yourself.”

“Are you sure?” Delilah had asked, caught off guard by such a sudden offer of freedom.

“Yes, yes.” Distracted, Lynette had all but shooed her out the door. “Just be back before the first course is served. And don’t get into trouble.”

Delilah had taken Mr. Humphrey straight to Hyde Park before Lynette could come to her senses, and they were already on their second loop. Unfortunately, Mr. Humphrey showed no signs of tiring. If anything, he grew *more* excited

with each tree that they passed, especially after a loud bray at the base of an alder had flushed out a squirrel.

“Mr. Humphrey,” she begged, her heels digging into the stones that littered the twisting walkway as she hauled on the leash with all her might. “Mr. Humphrey, *please* slow down. I can’t keep up!”

But the hound, overwhelmed by the sights and sounds all around him, was beyond listening...and when a brown rabbit dashed across the path, the furry creature proved too big a temptation to resist.

“*Mr. Humphrey, no!*” Delilah cried when the rope was unceremoniously yanked from her grasp. Her words had little effect; dandelion seeds thrown into the wind. She gave chase, fear clogging her throat as she imagined what might happen if Mr. Humphrey got too far ahead and she lost sight of him. He’d never run like this before. Not after something that stayed on the ground. His usual quarry—squirrels—would eventually shoot straight up a tree, which would stop him in his tracks and allow her to catch up. But a rabbit...a rabbit could go anywhere, and Hyde Park was a vast labyrinth comprised of more than 300-acres. If Mr. Humphrey ran away,

how would she ever find him again? She couldn't lose him. She just couldn't.

A flash of black and white fur in the shrubbery ahead gave her hope. She ran faster, as fast as her skirts would allow. Her lungs were burning. Her heart beat madly. Blisters were bleeding on her heels, but it didn't matter. The only thing that did was getting her dog back. Her most loyal companion. Her best friend.

Maybe she wasn't destined to have a happily-ever-after like Lynette, or Annabel, or Temperance. Maybe...maybe the love of her life had four paws and a wagging tongue instead of two legs and an insolent smirk. But if she lost him, she'd have nothing. She'd have no one. No one solely devoted to her, as Nathaniel and Lucas and Hugh were devoted to their wives. No one to comfort her in the long hours between dusk and dawn when nightmares crept in. No one to listen to her innermost fears and hopes and dreams. No one to lick her face when she cried.

Up ahead, the trail split in two, and Delilah let out a keening sound of dismay. To the left, an arched bridge running over a stream. Would the rabbit have gone that way? Did rabbits like water? And to the right...



Halting so suddenly that she almost pitched right into a ditch, she caught herself on a slender sapling, fingers digging into the smooth bark as her eyes went round as tea saucers.

To the right was Mr. Humphrey, sitting in the middle of the path as polite as could be. His tail thumped at the sight of her, as if to say, *'Where have you been?'* But he wasn't alone.

"You," she said, peeling away from the tree. "What—what are *you* doing here?"

While Silas absently patted Mr. Humphrey between the ears, he only had eyes for Delilah. "I was walking, when this fellow came charging around the bend. We've had a nice chat while we waited for you."

"While you waited for me," she repeated.

Goodness, but he looked handsome. There was something different about him. Something wilder. Something more potent. Something that pulled straight at her core and brought a flush of heat to her cheeks.

She hated it.

She *wanted* to hate him.

Hate was easier than happiness.

But as hard as she tried, she couldn't.

She couldn't, because she didn't hate him.

She never had.

She never would.

And therein laid her greatest misery.

“Give me my dog, and go away!” she said, stomping her foot. “I—I don't want to see you.”

Her words rang hollow (she truly was a terrible liar), and Silas didn't move.

“I was going to come pay you a call,” he said, his voice—husky and deep and familiar—sending a trembling shiver of awareness down her spine.

All at once, against her will, she remembered the pressure of his fingers on her shoulder as they'd danced. The warm steal of his lips across her cheek when he'd kissed her. The way he'd first spoken her name, as if it were a secret he'd been waiting to taste.

When her knees wobbled, she glared down at them.

Useless things, knees.

What did they know?

“Mr. Humphrey, come.” She snapped her fingers in a very commanding way. Her beloved pet thumped his tail on the ground again, but remained where he was. A traitor in dog’s clothing. “Mr. Humphrey, *come*.”

“Autumn suits you,” Silas said quietly, his gray eyes as somber as she’d ever seen them. “There’s an unpredictability to it. A change in the air. A reason to let go of what no longer serves you, and embrace what does.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She curled her hand in a fist. Punched it towards the stones. “*Mr. Humphrey*.”

“I’ve never liked change.” Crouching, Silas welcomed Mr. Humphrey’s blocky head onto his lap and ruffled his fur with an affection that took Delilah aback. “I was raised to follow in the exact footsteps that my father had walked in, and his father before him. Whenever I tried to deviate from the path set forth in front of me, I was punished. I’m not telling you this to elicit sympathy, but to make you realize that...that I am the man that I was made to be, not the one I want to be. Except when I’m with you.”

Delilah wet her lips. Oh, how she wanted to leap to the best possible conclusion! But if their last meeting had taught her anything, it was that a rainbow didn’t always appear at the end

of a storm. If she wanted to protect what purity of heart she had left, she needed to proceed with the utmost caution and care.

“You told me that we had no future. That you didn’t want a wife. That you specifically didn’t want *me* to be your wife. You...you hurt me, Silas.” Her admission, softly spoken, made him close his eyes and draw a ragged breath.

“Delilah—”

“I wasn’t expecting an offer of marriage,” she pushed on. “I may be silly, but I’m not so naïve as to believe that two dances could lead to bended knee.”

“I’m on my knee now,” he said simply.

Her throat swelled. “It’s...it’s not kind to make a mockery of someone. I knew you to be arrogant, but this is cruel, Silas.”

“A mockery?” Emotion flashed across his countenance, a cloud rolling across a cold tundra. “No, I’d never mock you, Delilah. And I never want to cause you pain again. What I said before...it was for myself more than it was for you. To convince me of what I *thought* I needed. What I was told that I needed. A conventional, loveless union. A life focused on ledgers. More footsteps to follow. But then I met you, a

whimsical, beautiful fairy unlike anyone else. You lured me away from my duties. From all that was expected of me. What was demanded of me. Don't you see, Delilah? You're my sunlight. Without you, I'm lost to the dark."

She looked at him. At *them*. At the man that she was never meant to be with. At the hound that no one else wanted. And for the first time since that dreadful day in the parlor, she felt a genuine stirring of hope.

"I am sorry," Silas said hoarsely. "For what I told you. For pushing you away. For refusing to see what was right in front of me. I am sorry for all of, Delilah, and I pray that you can forgive me...but understand if you cannot."

"You told me once that anyone can give an apology, but it's meaningless unless it is accepted." Was she floating when she walked to him? She felt like she was floating. On air. On possibilities. On wishes. Mr. Humphrey whined and licked her hand, his brown eyes adorably contrite. "It's all right," she told him. "You only did what dogs do. But we *will* work on your manners. As for you..." She looked at Silas kneeling before her. Humbling himself for her as she doubted he ever had for anyone else. "Your manners could use some improvement as

well. But I suppose we've a lifetime together to work on those."

"A lifetime," he echoed as he slowly rose to his feet. His gaze tender, his touch soft, he slid his hand along the side of her face, lovingly tucking a tendril of loose hair behind her ear.

"That's a contract I'd like to sign."

"Should we kiss?" she asked, then immediately blushed. "It's just, if it were Vanessa and Lord Chesterfield, this is the part where they'd kiss."

Silas grinned...revealing a dimple high in his right cheek.

"What sort of duke would I be if I let myself be upstaged by a fictional character?" Lowering his head, he gently claimed Delilah's lips with his own...and made all of her wildest dreams come true.

## EPILOGUE



DELILAH AND SILAS engaged in a brief courtship and were married before Christmas, shocking the *ton* and giving wallflowers everywhere a glimmer of much-needed of hope that their own knight in shining armor not be quite as far out of reach as they'd thought.

Upon moving into Harpswell House, Delilah was stunned to discover that the master bedroom was nearly a mirror image from the one in her dreams. Another sign that she and Silas were always meant to be, even if it had taken him a bit longer than she would have liked to realize the inevitable.

Mr. Humphrey came along with her, of course, leading everyone in the Townsend household to breathe a sigh of relief and the servants at Harpswell House to go running in terror.

The affable hound seemed particularly taken with Evansworth, and thought it was great fun to come bounding around the corner and surprise the poor valet with a loud bark when he least suspected it.

As for the newlyweds, well, they went on to have their disagreements from time to time. Happily-ever-after contracts didn't guarantee perfection...but they did grant lots of happiness.

Months, years, and decades of it.

More than two people deserved, most likely.

But no matter what kind of storm Silas and Delilah faced, they always found the rainbow waiting for them on the other side of it.

"I love you," she said one night, which in and of itself wasn't worthy of note (the number of times they'd spoken those three words to each other had long become uncountable), but the gravity of her tone was enough to lift Silas's head from his pillow.

"And?" he asked, arching a brow. Moonlight whispered across Delilah's skin in a silvery caress as he absently trailed his fingertips along her bare arm. She was still damp from



their lovemaking—they both were—and he'd been drifting on the edge of a satisfied sleep before her proclamation had roused him into wakefulness.

“And that’s all. It has occurred to me that while I share my love for you probably more than I should—”

“There’s no such thing,” he interceded gruffly.

“—your parents never said it enough, and I’d like to make up for lost time.”

Silas blinked at her. This wondrous, amazing, ethereal creature that he had the privilege of calling his wife until his dying breath. And he fell in love all over again, as if it were the very first day instead of their seventh year.

“Come here,” he growled, yanking her onto his chest.

Her eyes widened. “Again?”

“I shouldn’t have stopped the first time.” Nipping her earlobe, he picked up right where they’d left off...

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



I genuinely hope you've enjoyed the time that you just spent with Delilah and Silas. This book has been a long time in the making...almost 6 years, for those keeping track! Without your e-mails asking (sometimes demanding!) where Delilah's story was, it never would have gotten written. So thank you. Thank you. Thank you!

While *A Duke for Delilah* concludes the Swan Sisters, I have a brand new series, The Ravishing Rosewoods, I cannot wait to share with you. Books #1 and #2 are available now, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> book, [\*The Rose and the Earl\*](#), will be out this winter! Available in ebook, kindle unlimited, and paperback. Read on for a sneak peek at [\*The Rose and the Duke\*](#), Book #1! And for a special Halloween treat, don't miss [\*The Ghostly Hour\*](#), a

collection of brand new spooky love stories from some of your favorite authors. Just \$0.99 cents until release day, 10/25.

# THE ROSE AND THE DUKE



PERTH ROBERT STEWART, 8<sup>th</sup> Duke of Monmouth, despised house parties. He bloody *loathed* them. Trapped under a roof with marriage-hungry debutantes for an entire month? He'd rather cast himself over the rail into shark infested waters and take his chances swimming to shore, thank you very much. Which was why he'd done his best to avoid them like the plague, and he was rather proud of the excuses that he had managed to come up with over the years.

Illness was an obvious choice.

His carriage got lost and somehow ended up at a pub in the highlands (he hated it when that happened).

His valet mixed up the dates.

He was away on business.

He was away on holiday.

A death in the family.

Then there really *was* a death in the family. His father, the 7<sup>th</sup> Duke of Monmouth. A right bastard of a man in personality if not blood. Whom Perth had despised almost as much as he did house parties.

Still, he hadn't rejoiced in his father's untimely demise. Unlike most firstborn sons, Perth had not been chomping at the bit to inherit his title. Not when he had been getting along splendidly as a marquess, at any rate. All of the fun and none of the responsibility that came with a dukedom. For all he'd cared, his sire could have lived to a hundred.

Instead, the old goat had choked to death on a plum. An undignified end made even more darkly humorous by the fact that he had been eating said fruit in the bed of his mistress, an opera singer of dubious origins who had risen to fame courtesy of her very talented...mouth.

Neither Perth nor his mother, Anastasia, who much preferred being the Dowager Duchess of Monmouth than the duchess, had spent much time mourning the late duke's passing. He'd been miserable to them both, and while they hadn't spit on his grave, there may have been a glass or two of champagne raised in celebration of his death.

After seeing that his mother was comfortably settled and the opera singer duly compensated (no amount of money could make up for having a hairy boar die on top of her, but a thousand pounds could buy discretion), Perth set about discovering what duties awaited him as the newly minted Duke of Monmouth. Aside from lots of Your Graces, presiding over a much larger estate in Shaffordshire, and a seat with a better view in the House of Lords, he was pleased to find that it wasn't *that* much different.

With one looming exception.

The Rosewood's annual summer house party.

For reasons that escaped him, his mother was insistent—*insistent*—on attending. It appeared she and Lady Clarenmore, now deceased, had had a close friendship, and she wanted to see how the woman's daughters were getting on. Precisely what letters were for, in Perth's humble opinion. But the dowager duchess was adamant that she see the chits in person, and as her husband was no longer alive to accompany her, the duty fell to her son.

And that was how he found himself in a carriage bound for Clarenmore Park, an estate set at the end of a long, winding stone drive lined on either side with large, stately common

oaks in their full summer foliage. The drive ended on a full circle in front of a sprawling stone manor with ivy creeping up the side and a row of matching turrets protruding from a gray slate roof.

It was a grand manor, albeit a tad shabby at the edges. The row of boxwoods framing the front wall needed to be cut back and the stone replenished in spots, but the windows sparkled with cleanliness and colorful flowers spilled from an eclectic collection of pots and wooden troughs scattered strategically along the front of the estate to soften its hard angles and straight, formal lines. All in all, as Perth disembarked from the carriage and turned to assist his mother, he was reminded of his Aunt Tabitha.

His father's only living relation aside from himself, Aunt Tabby's bloodlines could be traced all the way back to a distant cousin of King George—the very first George, not the mad one that lost Britain the American colonies. But for all her fine breeding, Aunt Tabby had always been a tad... ruffled. Mismatched stockings, feathers in her hair, a live weasel named Mr. Prendergast that she'd worn draped around her neck instead of a proper mink stole.

Clarenmore Park was rather like that. Good bones, but teetering on the brink of dishevelment. Making him wonder if the earl didn't have a gambling problem. If so, they were going to get on exceptionally well. Except last he'd heard, Clarenmore was on some belated Grand Tour.

Not that Perth was jealous. Go off adventuring across another continent, sampling foreign food, drink, and women to his heart's content? Who the devil would want to do that?

All right, he was mad with envy.

Particularly given his current circumstance: trapped under the same roof for the next four weeks as four husband-hungry sisters and their equally starved friends. If recollection served, at least the middle Rosewood chit was pretty on the eyes. Or so the rumors went. Emily? Beatrice? He couldn't remember her name. Didn't know what any of them were called, except for the eldest. And that was only because he'd had the great misfortune of dancing with her once upon a time.

Lady Lavinia Rosewood.

Wait.

That wasn't right.

Lillith?



No.

Lenora.

It was Lenora. He was almost certain.

A stiff, somber creature with big blue eyes and a chin that had jutted out in disapproval for the entirety of their waltz. All because he'd generously complimented her lovely bosom. And it *had* been quite lovely. Just the right size, neither too big nor too small. The way the candlelight had glowed on all that soft porcelain skin...sheer perfection. You'd think she would have been pleased that he had noticed. Most women would have melted at such attention. But not Lady Lenora. That little wasp had turned right around and stung him before she'd stalked off, all self-righteous indignation and corset laces that were obviously tied too tightly.

"Please tell me they at least have decent brandy here," he told his mother in a lowered voice as they were escorted into the main foyer and through a wide hallway to the rear gardens where other guests milled amidst circular tables set with white linens and an assortment of meats, cheeses, and fresh fruit. A servant circled carrying a platter of champagne, and Perth neatly nicked a glass as the fellow went by. "Because God knows I'm not going to get by on this alone."

“Can you not behave yourself for one minute?” the dowager duchess asked mildly. Small in stature but not strength, Anastasia’s serene countenance concealed a spine of steel. A spine that she’d needed to survive thirty years of marriage to a man who hadn’t loved her for a single day. Who had taken pleasure in making sure that she knew it. Who had never forgiven her for not meeting his impossible expectations.

Where the late Duke of Monmouth had grown more gluttonous with each passing year, his jowls drooping, his stomach protruding, and his gout getting progressively worse, Anastasia had maintained her natural beauty. Her demure manner, delicate build, and blonde hair, now threaded regally with strands of silver, was what had attracted the duke to her in the first place, despite her being the third daughter of a baron without political ties or a dowry to speak of.

Their connection was immediate. Their chemistry palpable. One turn around the ballroom, and she was already smitten with the tall, dashing duke who said the most gallant things to her. Quickly—too quickly—they’d moved into a courtship, and then a proposal, and then a marriage.

By the time she realized that the handsome gentleman she had given her heart too was really a proficient actor with two

mistresses on the side that he had no intention of giving up, it was too late. She was caught. A fox with her paw in the iron jaws of a trap. The more she pulled, the more she bled, until she came to the conclusion that the only way out was to be patient. To wait. To bide her time until her husband's lecherous life of excess caught up with him.

Which it had.

In spectacular fashion.

It saddened Anastasia that she saw some of Monmouth's traits in her one and only child. Perth was *not* his father. She'd made sure of it. He may have been callous, but he wasn't cruel. Quick to anger, but careful with his words when he did. Appreciative of the finer things in life, but not beholden to them. Yet he *was* undeniably charming. Even more so than his sire had been. And whether intentional or not, he'd already left a trail of broken hearts in his wake.

She hoped that by bringing him here, she might realize a wish that she and her dear friend, Lady Catherine Rosewood, had made when they were but girls at finishing school. A wish that when they were grown, and married, their children might meet and fall in love, effectively binding their two families together.

They'd tried when Catherine's eldest daughter had her debut, but their discreet nudging had ended in disaster. Perth had been, well, Perth, and by all appearances Lenora hadn't taken to him in the slightest. Ironically making her one of the *only* women to be immune to his considerable charm.

Bridget, the second daughter, was far too shy and withdrawn. Catherine and Anastasia had unanimously agreed that she and Perth would never make a good match. And so they'd set their sights on Annabel. Beautiful, confident, and witty, she was sure to turn Perth's head and hopefully had the temperament to keep him in step. But then Catherine was lost, and her husband soon after, and the Rosewoods retreated into mourning.

This would be the first time Anastasia had seen Catherine's girls since the funeral. She had kept in correspondence with a letter at Christmas and another in spring, but words written to paper were hardly a substitute for meeting someone in the flesh. She was eager to spend the next month in their company. Sad, as well, for Catherine's daughters would surely be a bittersweet reminder of Catherine herself. Lenora especially, who was her mother's walking picture.

“I *am* behaving,” Perth countered before he took a sip of his champagne. “This is me on my best behavior. Look, I’m even wearing trousers.”

“I would like you to take this seriously.” While Anastasia’s voice was stern, her gaze was soft. Her son was her pride and joy. And while he undoubtedly had his imperfections, his flaws were not so large that a loving wife couldn’t fix them. Because that was what he needed. Love. What he’d always secretly craved from his father. What she’d done her best to give him, but a mother was only capable of so much.

She still remembered, with heartbreaking clarity, when Perth was a young, impressionable boy of twelve. He had built a model boat out of kindling sticks, and even cut small pieces of canvas for the sails. She’d accompanied him into his father’s study so that he might show off his hard work. All he’d wanted was a moment’s acknowledgment. Even a nod would have sufficed. But the duke was in a mood, and he’d looked at the boat with such vile disgust that Perth’s narrow shoulders had drooped before he even said a word.

“This is what you’ve been spending your time on?” Monmouth had sneered. “What does it do?”

“It is for display,” Anastasia had intervened, desperate to save her son the pain of yet another disastrous encounter with his father. “Do you see the stitching on the sail? Perth did that himself with the use of a magnifying glass. Isn’t he talented?”

Yes.

That was all the duke had to say.

One word, three letters.

*Yes.*

But that wouldn’t bring him the satisfaction he was looking for. The satisfaction that came from asserting his dominance, his will, his control over someone smaller and more helpless than himself.

“Stitching?” he had repeated, his mouth curling a sneer. “Stitching is for girls. Are you a girl, Perth?”

“No,” Perth had mumbled.

“Speak up, girl. I can’t hear you.”

Once again Anastasia had tried to come her son’s rescue, but this time Perth had shrugged her away. Teetering between boyhood and that foreign notion of what it meant to be a man, he hadn’t wanted to appear reliant on his mother.

“I’m *not* a girl,” he’d said, his brown eyes flashing in a rare display of defiance.

“Give me the boat,” Monmouth had demanded.

Perth hesitated. “But—”

“*Give it to me.*”

Hate had risen like bile in the back of Anastasia’s throat as her son grudgingly handed over his boat. She knew what her husband was going to do even before he gave the wooden vessel a cursory study...and then threw it against the wall with all his strength.

Perth whined when it broke into pieces. A small, inadvertent sound. The same that a kicked dog might make. But it was just loud enough to cause Monmouth’s head to swivel.

“Are you *crying?*” he’d said incredulously.

“No,” Perth had denied even as he had swiped the cuff of his sleeve across his face, his lanky, half-grown body trembling from the strength it was taking to contain his emotions.

“You did not have to do that.” Anastasia had known she was risking bringing her husband’s ire onto herself, but what

was a mother's job if not to take the blows intended for her child? "He's been working on that boat for weeks. All he wanted to do was show it you."

"Toys are for girls. Crying is for girls. All you're missing, Perth, is a skirt." Monmouth had jabbed his finger at the door. "Get out, both of you. Return when you're ready to behave like a son." His enraged gaze cut to Anastasia. "And you like a wife."

They'd left. She walking behind Perth with her head held high while he shuffled along with his chin pressed to his chest and his shoulders bowing beneath the weight of his father's perpetual disappointment.

Later that evening, she had waited for Perth in the library where she always met him after an episode with his father. They would enjoy warm apple cider and she would read his favorite book to him and yes, sometimes he would cry. In the safety and the comfort of his mother's arms, his bottom lip would wobble and his voice would crack as he asked her what he could do to make his father love him.

What *he* could do.

Because even at twelve, he'd already blamed himself.



But Perth never came. When she'd tiptoed into his bedchamber, she found himself fast asleep, his sweet brow troubled. She had smoothed the hair off his face, and pressed a kiss to his temple, and left the room, burdened by the suspicion that this time...this time Monmouth's thoughtless actions had done irreparable harm to a young child's impressionable spirit.

After that day, Perth had changed. Subtle changes that most wouldn't have recognized, but she wasn't most. She was his mother. And her heart had ached as she had watched her gentle, inquisitive boy grow into a hard, cynical man. His demeanor forged in the fires of constant disapproval and mockery.

Monmouth may have never bothered to teach his son how to ride a horse, or catch a fish, or shoot a pistol, but he had imparted one lesson before he died: if you hid your hurt behind a quick wit and sarcastic smile, no one ever need know how much pain you were in.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Perth finished his champagne and absently twirled the crystal stem between his fingers. "Although I still don't see why you couldn't have written a bloody letter."

“Language,” she said, lightly tapping his arm in admonishment. “There are ladies present.”

Perth grimaced. “Please don’t remind me.”

“Give it a chance, dear. The Rosewood sisters are lovely. They are intelligent, well read, and remarkably beautiful. Particularly Lady Annabel, whom I believe you will find much in common with.”

He cast her a sideways glance. “And there it is.”

“There is what?” she said, feigning ignorance.

“The reason you dragged me out here.” Perth stopped and put a hand on his hip. “You’re after making a match, aren’t you? Well, let me be the first to tell you that this Annabeth chit—”

“*Annabel*,” she corrected.

“—could be a goddess sent from the heavens above and I’d still not be interested. How many times have I told you that I am not after a wife, Mother?”

Dozens.

They’d had this exact same conversation dozens of times.

Each more frustrating than the last.

“You have to marry eventually—” she began, but he cut her off with a snort.

“Says who? Pray tell, what law is written that says I *have* to marry?”

“Perhaps not a law, but decades—centuries—of Monmouth dukes have stood where you are. And every single one of them took a bride, or else you *wouldn't* be standing there.”

“And how did that work out for them? By all accounts, each Duke and Duchess of Monmouth were more miserable in their marriage than the last pair. Yourself included. Why would I ever care to carry on that particular tradition? It would be the very definition of lunacy.”

“For love,” she said simply.

His brow furrowed, much as it had that night so long ago when he'd laid asleep in bed, crushed by his father's maliciousness. Then he delivered a cutting laugh. “Love is a fairytale, Mother. You of all people should know that.” For an instant, his countenance softened as he lowered his head and pressed his lips to her cheek in a chaste kiss. “I love *you*. I love my horse. I love my vintage bottle of Glenavon Scotch. That will have to suffice. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to find where that nice servant went with the champagne.”

As Perth strode away, Anastasia found herself gazing up at the heavens.

*Not to worry, Catherine, she vowed silently. He may have gotten that sarcastic wit from his father, but his stubbornness is from me. And I'm not about to give up that easily.*