

Absolutely Perfect

CHERYL
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Praise for *New York Times* Bestselling Author
CHERYL HOLT

“Best storyteller of the year ...”

Romantic Times Magazine

“Cheryl Holt is magnificent ...”

Reader to Reader Reviews

“Cheryl Holt is on my ‘favorite authors’ list. I can’t wait to see what she’ll write next.”

The Reading Café

“A master writer ...”

Fresh Fiction

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Gladys

“It was fabulous! I laughed, I cried, I got angry, and I smiled. I read the whole book without stopping.”

Robin

“Action, drama, and intrigue. I read it in one afternoon. I couldn’t put it down!”

Gina

“You just can’t wait to turn the page to see what happens next. Outstanding!”

Margaret

“This book is such an emotional roller-coaster. I cried and laughed and cheered. It was so good!”

Colleen

BOOKS BY CHERYL HOLT

LINKED HISTORICAL ROMANCE SERIES

RUINED!!

ABSOLUTELY PERFECT
ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL
ABSOLUTELY MINE

BAYWICK

HAPPILY EVER AFTER
LOVE EVER AFTER
MERRILY EVER AFTER

CADS

CAD'S WISH
CAD'S PICK
CAD'S CHOICE

LOST GIRLS

SOMEONE TO LOVE
SOMEONE TO CHERISH
SOMEONE TO WED

ALWAYS

ALWAYS
ALWAYS YOURS
ALWAYS MINE

JILTED BRIDES

JILTED BY A CAD
JILTED BY A SCOUNDREL
JILTED BY A ROGUE

FOREVER

FOREVER YOURS
FOREVER MINE
FOREVER AFTER
FOREVER

BABY CALEB DUET

ONLY YOU
ONLY MINE

LOST LORDS OF RADCLIFFE

HEART'S DELIGHT
HEART'S DESIRE
HEART'S DEMAND
SCOUNDREL
HEART'S DEBT

RELUCTANT BRIDES

WICKED
WANTON
WONDERFUL

LORD TRENT

LOVE'S PROMISE

LOVE'S PRICE

LOVE'S PERIL

SPINSTER'S CURE

PROMISE OF PLEASURE

TASTE OF TEMPTATION

DREAMS OF DESIRE

EROTIC HISTORICAL ROMANCES

LOVE LESSONS

TOTAL SURRENDER

ABSOLUTE PLEASURE

COMPLETE ABANDON

MORE THAN SEDUCTION

DEEPER THAN DESIRE

FURTHER THAN PASSION

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

TOO TEMPTING TO TOUCH

TOO WICKED TO WED

SECRET FANTASY

FORBIDDEN FANTASY

DOUBLE FANTASY

HISTORICAL ROMANCES

SWEET SURRENDER

NICHOLAS (republished as
MY SCOUNDREL)

MY ONLY LOVE

MY TRUE LOVE

THE WAY OF THE HEART

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCES

MOUNTAIN DREAMS

SEDUCE ME

KISS ME

LOVE ME

NOVELLAS

MEG'S SECRET ADMIRER

KNIGHT OF SEDUCTION

SEDUCING THE GROOM

OTHER NOVELS

A SUMMER WEDDING AT
CROSS CREEK INN

MUD CREEK

THE WEDDING

SLEEPING WITH THE DEVIL

NONFICTION

LITTLE MIRACLES

Absolutely Perfect

Prologue

“WE’RE GLAD YOU’RE HERE.”

“I’ll try to be glad too.”

Katherine Hastings smiled at the woman, Miss Clark, who’d just arrived. The poor dear looked nervous and beaten down, as if life had recently delivered many painful blows, but then, the first day was always the worst for their guests. None of them came in a good condition.

They were in Katherine’s office at *Mrs. Pettigrew’s Private Home for Young Ladies*. Katherine was seated at the desk, and Miss Clark was perched on the chair across. The facility was an unwed mother’s home, one that was discreetly advertised. Katherine was the caretaker, having begun working for Mrs. Pettigrew the minute the doors were opened.

A pregnancy, when there was no husband in the picture, was deemed a scandalous, shameful event. Furtive amours—that brought on disastrous results—were common, so there were many such places tucked away around the kingdom. Normally, they were awful enterprises, operated as charitable endeavors that never had enough funding.

In most cases, unfortunate females were locked away by their parents so they couldn’t run off to find the cads who’d ruined them. The proprietors acted as jailors, and it increased the sense that the women were trollops who’d behaved egregiously.

Mrs. Pettigrew and Katherine had both been seduced in their lives, had both birthed a bastard child, but they’d survived their

ordeals and had managed to thrive afterward. They were keen to help others who desperately needed assistance at the most dreadful time they'd ever endure.

To commence the business, Mrs. Pettigrew had purchased an old country cottage, situated in a scenic meadow that furnished views of the ocean. There was a manicured garden, with benches and walking paths that led to a rocky beach. The vistas provided opportunities for quiet reflection, which was definitely required.

Her methods were very modern. A congenial atmosphere was fostered, with the occupants treated like fond cousins. Secrets were discouraged and communal sessions were offered where they could discuss how they'd gotten themselves into trouble.

The rogues who'd participated in the debacles rarely paid a penalty for their depraved conduct so there was plenty of frank disparagement of them. Options and choices were debated, and Katherine employed a sympathetic vicar for those who sought spiritual guidance or forgiveness. She arranged adoptions too, and she'd retained a lawyer who was adept at negotiating legal settlements with philanderers. Those were the conclusions Katherine enjoyed the most.

A female, by virtue of her gender, had scant income or access to the courts, so libertines were never held to account. Katherine liked to imagine a date in the future when powerful men would be compelled to clean up their messes. It was a delightful notion to contemplate.

Childbirth was a risky proposition. Miscarriages were common. Babies died. Mothers died. It was sufficiently difficult when a woman was happily wed, but for a female with no husband, one who'd been seduced, enforced, or in love with the wrong boy, it was an especially grueling experience.

Katherine's main task was to convince their guests to buck up and realistically face their imminent tribulations. They had to improve their health and stamina, and they had to begin making plans. Many of them were too overwhelmed to think clearly, but that was a failed route that had to be swiftly abandoned.

"May I ask," Miss Clark haltingly started, "how much it will cost to stay with you to the bitter end? I have some money, but I'm not sure it will be enough."

"We don't charge for our services," Katherine said. "If you would like to give us a donation, we will gratefully accept it, but please don't beggar yourself. You'll need it after you leave us." Katherine paused, then inquired, "Have you thought about your child? Have you the resources to care for a baby on your own?"

"I haven't really considered and I don't know what's best. It all happened so fast."

"Don't fret. While you're with us, you'll be able to ponder and deliberate, and we'll aid you in devising some feasible solutions. You should also be aware that we arrange adoptions."

"You're being so kind to me."

Miss Clark gazed down at her lap and burst into tears. She was very pretty: curly blond hair, big green eyes. But then, their guests were always pretty. Scoundrels never seemed to bother with plain girls. It was the young beauties whom they destroyed.

Katherine grabbed a kerchief out of her drawer, and she leaned over and slid it into Miss Clark's hand so she could dab at her eyes. Katherine had a drawer filled with kerchiefs. Her job put her directly in the path of women who cried a lot.

"I like to be kind," Katherine said, "and helpful. I survived my own birth of a bastard. I'd like you to understand that fact about me. You'll survive your dilemma too. I'm certain of it."

Katherine was forthcoming about her past sin, and Miss Clark smiled wanly. "I will use you as my role model."

"The man who caused this crisis, is there any chance he might behave appropriately toward you? Should we contact him? If you're too distraught to write to him yourself, we have a lawyer who could communicate with him on your behalf."

Miss Clark blanched. "I can't contact him. He's engaged to be married. To an heiress."

"Oh." Katherine sighed, her loathing for men increasing by the minute. "Let's get you settled in your room. I'll have the maids unpack your bag, then you can wash and change your clothes. You must be weary after your trip down from London."

"I am very weary."

"You can have a nap, then I'll introduce you to everyone. We'll have you feeling better in no time at all."

Chapter

1

Five months earlier ...

“YOU CAN DO THIS.”

Rosalie Clarkson, who’d previously shortened her name to Rose Clark, took a deep breath, tugged on her jacket, then marched up to the imposing mansion that towered over her. She banged the knocker, expecting the butler to peek out and greet her, but no one came. She counted to thirty, then tried again, with the same result.

After a bit, a stableboy walked by out in the curved driveway.

“Excuse me!” she shouted when he ignored her. “Is this the Grenville River House? Am I at the right place?”

“Yes, this is the River House,” the boy said.

“I’ve knocked and knocked, but there’s no answer.”

“You can go in and wait in the foyer. Sooner or later, someone will stroll by and assist you.”

He continued on, and she glared after him, wishing she could yank him back with her fierce scowl. Was he serious? Could she simply strut in without invitation?

It had been seven years since she’d trotted about in London, and she recognized that a few societal rules might have been altered

while she was away, but she doubted routines had become so lax that a stranger could saunter into an earl's residence unannounced.

She knocked until her arm was tired, then she gave up and followed the stableboy's suggestion. She opened the door and went inside. The entryway was just as she'd figured it would be, with high ceilings and marble floors, but it was different too. Where there should have been large oil paintings on the walls or priceless objects displayed in obvious spots, they were absent. It looked as if thieves had snuck in and stolen all the treasures.

"Hello? Is anybody here?" she inquired, but silence reigned supreme.

There was a chair in the corner and she sat down. It was eerily quiet, as if a sorcerer had waved a magic wand and the humans had vanished. An ornate parlor was off to her left, and it was a complete mess, as if a storm had blown through. The tables were covered with empty liquor glasses and plates of half-eaten food. Wine decanters had been haphazardly tossed, and several of them had spilled their contents on the rug, leaving bright purple stains that would never be sponged out.

She wondered about the abandoned food. Dare she take some of it? She was carrying a satchel that contained her forged reference letters and resume. She could pull them out and fill it with food instead. Should she?

She wasn't exactly flat broke, but that situation was bubbling up on her personal horizon. If she could bring supper to Fog and Eddie, it would be a huge blessing that would make the whole blasted day worth the aggravation.

Agnes Fogbottom, called Fog by acquaintances, had been a fetching neighbor in Rose's childhood village. Rose's despicable father had seduced her, then thrown her over after he'd planted a babe in her belly. Her son, Eddie, was Rose's half-brother, and Rose

supported them—but not very well. She didn't have many skills other than fabrication and deceit.

Eventually, footsteps sounded down a hall, and a footman emerged from the shadows. He hadn't realized anyone would be seated in the foyer, and he blanched as if she were a ghost.

“May I help you?” he asked.

“I'm here to speak with Lord Grenville. Mrs. Ford sent me.” He stared blankly so she added, “From the Ford Employment Agency?”

“I'm sorry, but we're not hiring any housemaids. The Earl doesn't employ females so it was a wasted trip.”

“I'm not interviewing as a housemaid. I'm to be considered as a governess for the Earl's son.”

The boy smirked at that, and she couldn't deduce what his reaction indicated. She was attired like a governess so he shouldn't have doubted her. For the appointment, she'd dressed in a bland grey gown with a white collar and cuffs so she'd appear to be precisely who she was pretending to be.

She had merry green eyes that sparkled with too much mischief and that had landed her in plenty of jams in the past so she was wearing spectacles—spectacles she didn't need. They hid some of the conspicuous coloration so she looked older and more stern than she really was.

She was very thin too, having lost the plumpness of her earlier years, the years before disaster had struck. Any potential employer would like her to be slender. It would show she never crept down to the kitchen at night to pilfer from the larder.

Her main problem was her hair. In its natural state, it was a vibrant, unusual shade of blond that was much too noticeable. She rinsed it with a dye made of walnut shells so it was a bit darker than the original.

During what she thought of as her rough-and-tumble period, when she'd been unable to afford a maid, it had been too difficult to brush and style it so she'd chopped it short. It was also another ruse meant to conceal her true identity. It curled around her shoulders so she couldn't pin it up in the type of fashionable chignon that a governess would be likely to exhibit.

Instead, she'd slapped a straw bonnet on her head so the curls wouldn't become too unruly.

She was intent on seeming competent and in control, when in reality, she hadn't a clue what she was doing. In the exhausting era she'd been banished by her father to live abroad, she'd learned to lie and dissemble on the spur of the moment so she was an expert at fooling people to obtain what she required. She was positive she could persuade Lord Grenville that she was the perfect candidate to teach his son.

She'd tricked Mrs. Ford, hadn't she?

Rose had submitted a stack of fake, glowing letters of recommendation, plus an invented resume, so she might have been the most experienced governess in the history of governesses. They were from falsified foreign employers so the snooty matron couldn't check them, and if she had, she'd have merely been apprised that Rose was a total fraud.

Mrs. Ford wasn't fully convinced about Rose so she'd offered her a challenging assignment as a chance to prove that she deserved to be represented by the agency. Mrs. Ford provided nannies, governess, and companions to London's wealthy families, and it was her claim to fame that she only used the best girls. Well, Rose had once been the *best* at everything: the most moral, upstanding, and honest female who'd ever been born.

That ethical person was still rattling about deep inside, but circumstances had forced her to keep her better qualities at bay.

From the day at seventeen when she'd been ensnared in her unending scandal, she'd discovered that the world was a brutal place for a woman, and special skills were necessary to survive.

And that's what she was: a survivor. She'd suffered no guilt over deceiving Mrs. Ford. She'd been marvelous in the past, and she would be in the future—if she could just get herself back on track. Currently, that didn't seem possible, but she was an optimist.

“Is Lord Grenville expecting me?” she asked the footman.

“I have no idea. I don't believe he's climbed out of bed yet.”

“But it's three in the afternoon.”

The boy shrugged. “He revels until dawn so he sleeps in.”

“Will he see me? How long will I have to wait?”

“I suppose, if you want the job, you'll wait until he's ready to receive you.”

Numerous rude retorts surged to the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed them down. After working so diligently to coax Mrs. Ford into giving her a try, she couldn't skuttle the opportunity when confronted by the first obstacle.

“Can you tell him I've arrived?” she asked.

“I wouldn't dare wake his grand self. It would be far above my remit to bother him.”

“Could you make an exception for me? It's June so the days are lengthy, but after we're finished talking, I have to walk back to town. I can't do it in the dark.”

“I'll find the butler. Maybe he's brave enough to go upstairs.”

The household was very strange, and it was obvious the proper rules weren't followed, but she couldn't stop herself from saying, “You have a butler?”

“Of course we have a butler.” He scoffed, as if it was a ridiculous question, then he started off, tossing over his shoulder, “This might take awhile. Sit yourself down. I’ll let you know what’s happening once I know myself.”

She never did what she was told. She’d been on her own for too many years, without any supervision. *She* had been in charge, having to support Fog and Eddie, but having no particular gifts or talents that would have improved their lot. They’d staggered through the worst of times, but they were home now, back in England and struggling to regroup. She would land this post if it killed her!

The boy’s footsteps faded, and she went into the parlor and assessed the clutter. Apparently, there had been a wild party the night before, and no servants had mustered the gumption to clean up the detritus. It clarified many details about the residence: The butler and housekeeper were lazy and unreliable. The footmen were left to their own devices, and there was no one to check that tasks were completed.

And Lord Grenville lived a very dissolute life.

She didn’t possess much information about him. He was an elderly aristocrat who was pompous and entitled. For decades, he’d been one of the kingdom’s most important citizens, and he had a reputation for being fussy and cruel. He had high standards so he was hard on his servants and even harder on his friends and family.

Mrs. Ford had explained that any position with Lord Grenville would be extremely taxing. He ground people down with his routines and orders, and according to Mrs. Ford, if Rose could handle this horrid situation, she could handle anything.

Rose had been raised by her grim father, Colonel Alfred Clarkson, so she’d learned how to deal with a temperamental, egotistical tyrant. She’d assumed she could manage Lord Grenville

too, but on hearing that there were no housemaids on the premises, she was unnerved.

Why weren't any females employed? Was he a lecher who inflicted himself on the staff? Was there even a housekeeper? With the place being in such terrible shape, she was betting not, but why would an arrogant narcissist like Grenville deliberately allow his home to deteriorate? How peculiar was he?

It was none of her business. She desperately needed a job and she needed *this* job. Any minor complications were irrelevant.

An hour passed, where she twiddled her thumbs and anxiously watched the clock. No servants wandered by. No noises wafted by. She'd just begun to wonder if the footman had forgotten her when he marched down the hall.

"The Earl is up and willing to speak with you," he said.

"Oh, good." She wasn't sure if it was *good* at all. She was having a thousand second-thoughts.

"I'll show you to him."

He dashed off, and she hesitated, not certain she should traipse after him, but he was quickly vanishing in the shadows. She ran and caught up to him just as he reached a rear staircase and started to climb.

"Where are we going?" she asked, huffing after him.

"He's in his bedroom suite."

She blanched with alarm. "Are you mad? I'm not about to meet with him in his bedroom."

"It's there or nowhere. He crawled out of bed for you so you should consider yourself lucky."

They continued to the third floor and he led her to the ornate doors at the end. With each stride they took, her pace slowed.

He was about to announce her so she scurried over and whispered, “He won’t abuse my person, will he?”

“He definitely won’t.” His insolent gaze meandered down her slender torso, snootily scrutinizing her drab outfit, and he snickered. “You’re not his type in even the slightest way. You’re much too skinny and those spectacles will cool any burgeoning ardor.”

“If I scream for help, swear you’ll burst in to assist me.”

“You won’t be screaming for help. He’s barely awake.”

The comment supplied no comfort. She was alone in an isolated mansion and about to confer with a nobleman who had bad manners and even worse habits. What might happen to her?

She must have appeared stricken because the footman snorted with disgust. “You’ll be fine. Stop complaining.” He knocked once, then stuck his head in and said, “I’ve brought Miss Clark, my lord.”

“Send her in,” was the curt reply.

The footman opened the door, and when she didn’t move to enter, he shoved her over the threshold, then shut it behind her with a determined click. She glanced around and struggled to get her bearings. The drapes were pulled so the room was black as night.

“Come over here,” a man said. “Let me look at you.”

“I’m not about to be interviewed in the dark,” she responded.

She stomped over and yanked on a drape, jerking it back so the space was flooded with light. Down below, she could see a pretty garden that needed some attention from a competent gardener. The lawns sloped to the river, where there was a stone dock, a small sailboat tied to it. A boy of ten or so was sitting by himself in the boat, as if he was about to cast off when no one was watching.

The man winced with dismay and demanded, “What did you do that for?”

“I told you I wouldn’t speak to you in the dark. I wasn’t joking.”

“I’m in no condition to have sunshine battering me. If I’ve been blinded, it will be your fault.”

“I’m sure you’ll survive.”

She located him over in the corner, slouched on a chair by the hearth. It was a warm day so there was no fire burning. It was obvious he was hungover; she could smell alcohol clear across the room.

He’d donned tan trousers and a white shirt, but he hadn’t added a cravat so the shirt was unbuttoned and revealing a significant portion of his chest. He hadn’t put on his shoes so his feet were bare, which was shocking and unscored the growing perception that she should flee immediately.

His hair was black and much too long, the thick locks unrestrained and hanging down his back. He hadn’t been barbered so his cheeks were shaded with stubble. He might have been a disheveled bandit who’d wandered in by accident.

To her great annoyance, he was incredibly handsome, and in her twenty-five years, she’d crossed paths with a ton of men. She considered herself an expert on them. Her father, Colonel Clarkson, had had a career in the army so she’d been raised around soldiers. Attractive men exasperated and irked her in equal measure.

He was thirty or so, a brooding sort of fellow, with perfect facial features and striking blue eyes. His shoulders were wide, his legs long, but he was seated so she couldn’t guess his height. She supposed he was over six feet tall. She was only five-foot-five herself so, if he’d bothered to stand in her presence, he’d have loomed over her.

“Where is Lord Grenville?” she asked.

“I’m Grenville.”

“No, you’re not. He’s old, stuffy, and impossibly arrogant, and I’ve had the most exhausting visit to this accursed mansion so please don’t play games with me. I have to meet with Grenville, then I have to head home before more of the afternoon wanes.”

“You’re here for an interview, Miss Clark. Must I remind you of that fact? You’re not making a very good first impression.”

“Where is Grenville?” she repeated more firmly. “I have a lengthy walk back to the city so I wish to conclude this farce and be on my way.”

Out of the blue, he declared, “You’re hired.”

She scowled and banged a palm on her ear. “What was that? I could swear you said I was hired.”

“Yes, and you’ll start at once.”

“I don’t want to work in this pigsty, and you still haven’t explained where Lord Grenville is hiding.”

“Are you deaf? *I* am Grenville, in the flesh. My name is Nathaniel St. James, the current and very exalted lord of the manor. I’ve announced that you’re hired and we’re not arguing about it.”

“If you’re the Earl, when did it happen? Tell me that—if you can!”

“I imagine it’s been six months ago. The Grenville you expected was my grandfather. The pathetic sot finally died so the world gets to deal with me instead.”

“Oh.”

Her consternation acute, she glared at him, debating what her opinion should be about the prior Grenville being dead and this new Grenville being the Earl. She’d been braced to dicker with an elderly brute, but now, she was being confronted by a slothful, rude nuisance. At the alteration, she was almost disappointed.

Would the position be better or worse than she'd anticipated? With this younger Grenville in charge, it would certainly be different, and with him being such an obvious laggard, she figured she wouldn't receive much supervision. She'd be able to reach her own decisions, devise her own plans, and set her own schedule. He would never notice her enough to nag or castigate.

Might it be worth it?

As she asked herself the question, she scoffed with derision. The household was in ruins and *he* was a useless prig. She had to depart and return to the room she'd rented for Fog and Eddie. She'd have to recommence her employment search, but she had a sinking feeling that, if she declined this initial opportunity, Mrs. Ford wouldn't send her anywhere else.

London's streets were awash with women hunting for work. Grenville might furnish Rose's one and only chance to glom onto a job that wasn't carried out in a brothel.

"You'll have your own private quarters," he said, yanking her out of her miserable reverie. "It won't be a closet in the attic either. This monstrosity of a mansion is filled with empty bedrooms. You can take your pick."

"No, thank you."

She was backing toward the door, but anxiously watching him, as if he might attack when she wasn't paying attention. She hoped his hangover would keep him too distracted to realize she was about to escape. He seemed very vain and wouldn't like her to leave without requesting his permission.

At her rejection of his offer, he was bewildered, as if he'd never previously heard the word *no*, and he said, "I'll give you room and board, and I'll double whatever wages Mrs. Ford quoted to you."

"Sorry, but you can't tempt me with money."

“I’ll triple the amount.”

“Liar. You never would.”

“You doubt me, Miss Clark?”

Suddenly, he wasn’t quite so sluggish. Before she could react, he pushed himself off the chair, circled behind her, and stood between her and the door.

He was just as tall as she’d suspected so he towered over her, but she was made of stern stuff and men never scared her. She couldn’t be bullied or bossed and she pulled herself up to her full height. It wasn’t nearly enough to intimidate him, but she had to try.

“You’re in my way,” she said. “Move.”

“No. Haven’t you been listening to me? You’ll be my governess. I insist.”

“And *I* insist that I’m not about to do that.”

“Why not?”

She smirked. “I’d be delighted to count the reasons: You appear to be a drunkard who regularly imbibes to excess. Your home is disgusting and you don’t care that it is. Your servants are lazy and unsupervised and you employ no females. I wouldn’t tarry in a situation where there were no other women. It wouldn’t be safe.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’d be perfectly safe.”

“Finally, I haven’t met your son, but I can already predict that I won’t like him.”

“You won’t *like* him? What kind of governess are you?”

“I’m not one. My resume is fake so I have no attributes that would prepare me to succeed in this environment. If your son is anything like you, it would be an impossible task.”

“Maybe he’s nicer than me. Maybe he’s smarter and better behaved.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t matter to me.”

His temper flared. “If you refuse me, I’ll contact that old biddy, Mrs. Ford, and I can guarantee—after I speak to her—you’ll never work in this city again.”

“Go ahead and talk to her. Once she assesses your slovenly condition, she’ll understand why I couldn’t accept this post.”

“I’ll tell her about your false resume.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t be surprised about it.”

She tried to step around him, but he was quicker. Despite how she shifted, he blocked any exit.

Eventually, as a last resort, she yelled, “Help! Help!”

To her stunned amazement, the footman who’d escorted her upstairs opened the door and peeked in.

“Are you all right, Miss Clark?” he asked.

“No. I demand to depart, but this oaf is preventing me. He claims he’s Grenville. Is he?”

“Yes, he’s Grenville.”

“He’s frightened me and I think he’s dangerous.”

The boy brazenly said to Grenville, “Have you frightened her, my lord? Should you? If you terrify her, she won’t stay and you definitely need her.”

“Get out of here!” Grenville seethed.

The boy lurched away, as Grenville glowered at her. Then he slammed the door, spun the key in the lock, and stuck it in his pocket. He skirted by her and went back to his chair. He was

limping, as if he was in pain, and a teeny-tiny bubble of sympathy almost surfaced.

Perhaps he was injured and that was why he was being so surly, but the instant she realized she'd suffered a compassionate thought, she shoved it away. He was a bully and a brute who presumed he was more important than her simply because he was a male. She'd been dealing with men like him her whole life, and she was tired of being on the losing end of these encounters.

"I'll be blunt, Miss Clark," he said. "The footman was correct that I need you. I'm willing to have you, even if your credentials are forged. That's how desperate I am."

"Your comment indicates you have no standards. This is an asylum of lunatics, and I've never been keen to be trapped in a madhouse."

"You'll meet with Noah, then we'll confer again."

"Who is Noah?"

"He is to be your charge, Miss Clark. He's the boy you'll oversee."

She noted that he didn't call the boy his *son*, but nothing about Grenville was normal, and she'd never previously sparred with an aristocrat. It might be common among his class to use an odd turn of phrase.

"Since I don't intend to remain," she said, "what is the point of meeting him?"

"Well, you've met *me*, and you have to have deduced that I shouldn't be responsible for anyone. Most especially not an impressionable child."

"I can't argue with that."

“You have to assume control of him for me. Or will you dump him in my lap? Can you be that cruel?”

“I have no ability or experience with children. I lied to Mrs. Ford in the hopes of finding a job so I can’t involve myself in this situation. You have to hire someone else. I’ll explain the problem to her, and she’ll select a more appropriate person.”

She whipped away and dashed to the door, having forgotten that he’d locked it. She rattled the knob, then whirled around and said, “Let me out.”

“I will release you after you’ve agreed to chat with Noah. I’m certain, after you evaluate his plight, you’ll beg to stay. You can’t ignore the fact that I’ll triple your salary.”

“I can’t be bribed so you can stop being obnoxious.”

“In my view, money always buys me what I want. You’re no different than any other female so it will buy me your compliance too.”

The remark incensed her. She was completely unique and exotic, and she wasn’t being vain in thinking she was. Her past tribulations had altered her into a tough virago, and it was aggravating to have him imagining he’d figured her out. He never could.

“You don’t know a thing about me,” she said. “I might be a rich heiress, and I’m just working as a hobby so your dangling money at me will have no effect.”

“Nice try, Miss Clark, but you’re a terrible liar.”

“I’m a great liar. I’ve had plenty of practice.”

“Your face is an open book so you shouldn’t ever gamble with me. I’d win every hand.”

“Trust me. You and I will never gamble.”

He stood and walked over to the door. His limp was more pronounced, and rather than bite her tongue, she asked, “What’s wrong with your leg? Were you injured?”

“Yes, I was seriously injured. Not that it’s any of your business.”

He peeked out. The footman was there and Grenville said to him, “Take her to Noah, if you can locate him. After they’re finished, bring her to me so we can settle the terms of her employment.”

“I’m not working for you,” she fumed.

“We’ll see what you do in the end—and what you don’t.”

“You’re a tyrant and I don’t like you.”

“I don’t care.”

He pushed her into the hall and shut the door. She thought about bursting back in, spewing a few more contentious insults, but before she could move, he spun the key to prevent any reentry.

“Noah’s out in the garden,” the footman said.

“I’m not talking to Noah,” she complained. “Grenville can snap and bark, but he’s deranged, and I can’t abide him. I’m heading home.”

The footman’s jaw dropped. “He ordered me to take you to Noah! If you don’t oblige him, I’ll be in big trouble. Were you raised under a rock or what, Miss Clark? Lord Grenville is an earl, and in the world where we reside, we are supposed to make him happy.”

“It doesn’t matter to me if he’s happy or not.”

“It matters to me. Let’s find Noah, then you can decide your next step.”

The footman marched off, and Rose tarried in the quiet hall, raging, debating. Three words rang in her mind like a mantra: *triple the salary, triple the salary, triple the salary...*

Her finances were in such a dire condition so how could she pass it up? What if she visited Mrs. Ford to tell her she wouldn't accept the job, and Ford refused to offer her another? What then?

Grenville would be an absent, disinterested employer. She'd never bump into him so why not do it? She wouldn't be a prisoner. If it eventually turned out to be horrid, she could sneak away whenever she'd had enough. In the meantime, she'd be able to sock away funds that would help to support Fog and Eddie, and wasn't that the whole reason she had to toil away at such an awful post?

She'd converse with Noah to discover what kind of boy he was. If he was smart and polite, they'd get on swimmingly so Lord Grenville would be irrelevant.

With a groan of frustration over how spineless she could be, she hurried after the footman who'd already disappeared down the stairs.

Chapter

2

“ARE YOU NOAH?”

“Yes, I’m Noah. Who are you?”

“I’m Miss Clark. Lord Grenville would like me to be your governess. He asked me to meet you so I can figure out if I might like that too.”

He was seated on a bench on the dock and staring out at the river, as if he wished he was on it. He was the boy she’d seen sitting in the sailboat when she’d peered out Lord Grenville’s window, and she approached him cautiously.

Up close, he looked just like Grenville: black hair, striking blue eyes. He was thin and wiry, dressed in trousers and a shirt that were a bit tattered and a little too small, as if he’d grown an inch and no one had noticed.

“I don’t need a governess,” he said, his tone wary and surly.

“Well, I don’t really want to *be* a governess, so on that issue, we might be in complete accord. How old are you?”

“Ten.”

“My brother, Eddie, is ten too, so I know quite a lot about boys who are ten.”

Eddie was her father’s only son, and Colonel Clarkson hadn’t been able to resist his mother, Fog. Fog was flighty and foolish and hadn’t recognized the dangers of flirting with him. The end result had been Eddie, and from the moment Fog had announced herself to be increasing, the Colonel had lost interest in her and had moved on to the usual sorts of doxies who flitted about on the edge of army camps.

When Rose had been swept up in her own scandal, she’d been seventeen. Colonel Clarkson had been so incensed that he’d sent her out of the country and had ordered her to stay away until memories faded. She’d been too young to waltz off on her own so he’d had Fog tag along as her companion.

It had been a clever way to rid himself of his prior paramour and his bastard son, and over the years they’d been abroad, their support had fallen heavily on Rose’s shoulders. Fog was thirty-five, but she had no ability to earn an income, make good decisions, or raise Eddie by herself. Her incompetence meant that Rose might have been caring for two children rather than one.

“Maybe you and Eddie could be friends,” she said to Noah.

“I doubt it.”

“Why couldn’t it happen? It seems to me you could use a friend. It’s not as if this wretched mansion is crawling with other boys.”

They turned together to study the massive building. It was three stories high, constructed from a dark grey stone, with a center portion and two wings that protruded toward the river. The garden was untended, the leaves not raked or the grass swathed.

There was a general air of abandonment, and in the waning afternoon light, it looked more like a prison than a home. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to live in such a gloomy residence.

“It’s an awful place,” he said so quietly that she wasn’t sure she’d heard him.

“You don’t like it?”

“No. It’s terrible.”

“Are you lonely?”

He didn’t respond, and an awkward silence festered, then he stood and went over to the edge of the dock. He gazed out at the water, at the boats passing by. He appeared miserable, and if he’d have dived in and swam away, she wouldn’t have been surprised.

“If I take this job,” she said, “perhaps Eddie could come to play with you occasionally. I could probably convince your father to allow it.”

“Lord Grenville is not my father. At least he claims he’s not.”

“He’s not? Then why am I here?”

“I have no idea. I’ve only been here a few weeks myself, and he’s been very clear that I shouldn’t have bothered him.”

The curt comment opened up several cans of worms, and suddenly, she felt as if she was tiptoeing in a murky bog. Was Noah a bastard? How and why had he arrived? Who had brought him? Where was his mother? Had Grenville denied paternity?

Each question would have exhausting answers, and the problems presented would be too tricky to maneuver. It underscored her perception that she should skedaddle when Grenville wasn’t looking.

“Are you...have you...is there...” She was stammering, unable to formulate a sentence that wouldn’t sound horrid.

“What would you like to know about me, Miss Clark? Spit it out.”

He whipped around and glared at her quite imperiously, and he resembled Grenville so much—the same posture, the same angry expression, the same fire in his blue eyes—that she couldn’t believe Grenville had had the audacity to reject him.

“I plan to return to my lodging,” she said, “and pretend I never crossed paths with Lord Grenville. I don’t like him, but he insisted I chat with you. He wants you to have some

supervision, and apparently, he won't expend any effort over who he picks for the post."

"Would *you* supervise me?" he asked. "Is that a position you're dying to have?"

"Not really."

"I've always been on my own," he said, "and I don't need a nanny. Especially not one who's as silly or as irksome as you."

The petty insult annoyed her. "I'm neither silly nor irksome and I wouldn't be a nanny. I'd teach you and help prepare you for the future. Have you had any schooling? Can you read and write?"

He gaped at her as if she were a dullard, then he scoffed derisively. "Why don't you go away?"

"I can't escape until Lord Grenville gives me permission to depart."

"I guess we're both trapped then."

"If I decline this job, he'll find somebody else. I can't predict who he might select instead of me. Are you willing to risk it?"

"I don't like females and I can't bear to be bossed."

"I'm not bossy. I could have Eddie meet you. He'd tell you I'm not."

"Eddie...who could be my new best chum?"

He was practically sneering and her patience was at an end. "You've implied that Lord Grenville is *not* your father, but you're exactly alike. You have his same boorish attitude and I can't abide churlishness in a man or a child. Goodbye."

She stomped off and he called to her, "I'm not churlish. I'm unhappy."

She halted and glanced back. "The whole world is unhappy. It's our chronic state as human beings."

He was a pitiful sight, standing by himself in his tattered, too-small clothes. His hair needed a trim, and he was so thin; he was likely starving. Did the lazy staff in the manor ever remember to feed him?

"Not my problem," she muttered to herself and she kept on.

She marched through the overgrown garden and climbed onto the verandah, then she crept into the mansion and wound down the halls to the front door.

She'd intended to grab her cloak and bonnet and hurry off. The sun was dropping in the western sky and she had to get moving. It was nearly an hour's trek before she'd be far enough into the city to where she could hail a cab. She'd hate to waste the money on one, and in ordinary circumstances, she'd have walked all the way to the boarding house where they'd rented a room, but she wouldn't traipse through London in the dark.

She'd reached the foyer and had almost snuck out when Lord Grenville tromped down the stairs. His condition was significantly improved. He hadn't shaved, but he'd brushed and

tidied his hair and it was tied with a ribbon. He'd finished dressing so his shirt was buttoned, a cravat messily and inexpertly knotted around his throat. Boots covered his feet.

He hadn't donned a coat though, and the sleeves on his shirt were rolled back to reveal his strong forearms.

"In my library," he said as his greeting.

He limped by her, and she hesitated, staring after him, staring at the door.

He noticed she hadn't followed him and he snapped, "My library, Miss Clark! Now! Don't aggravate me more than you already have."

Had she no fortitude at all? Had she any pluck or temerity? The prior seven years, she'd constantly told herself she was tough and resilient. What if she wasn't?

Where aristocrats were concerned, it was so difficult to ignore them. They were so grand and imperious, and every British citizen was imbued from birth with a powerful sense of awe and hero-worship that she was certain none of them deserved. She couldn't figure out how to disobey him.

To her great disgust, she staggered after him, and as she entered the room, he was seated behind the desk. She lurched over and plopped down across from him, but the entire time, she was kicking herself for being such a coward.



NATHANIEL SCRUTINIZED MISS CLARK, wondering how much mischief she'd foment before they parted company. With how sassy and impertinent she was, he supposed *trouble* could be her middle name.

She was very pretty, but in a quirky manner that tantalized him. She was short and slender, and he never liked to observe that feminine physique. He'd preferred statuesque, buxom goddesses. She wore spectacles too, and they made her look serious and studious, but they couldn't conceal her fetching features or her gorgeous green eyes.

Her hair was an unusual, dusky-blond color, and oddly, she'd cut it so it curled over her shoulders. He was forced to admit that the style was very attractive on her, but women didn't cut their hair. It was a peculiar act that fascinated him. Why would she have done it?

He didn't like the notion of having a pretty female on the premises. He never dabbled with his servants, but he couldn't guarantee how his gaggle of footmen would view her presence. No doubt she'd generate all sorts of complications. How much disruption might she ultimately cause? Might a bit of disruption be worth it if she'd stay and help him?

She'd claimed that her resume was faked, which was hilarious. Could it be true? She was such a scamp that it probably was so she'd confessed to being a liar. What other bad qualities did she possess? If she remained on the property, would she steal the silver? Would she

gamble with the footmen or sneak off with them to bet on the horses? Would she pilfer food from the kitchen and sell it to criminals?

He suspected she was the type who might engage in any despicable conduct, and he was curious about the father who'd raised her. It was obvious, whoever he'd been, he hadn't instilled many ethical values.

Mrs. Ford had sent four other candidates to interview for the position as Noah's governess, and Miss Clark was the only one who hadn't fled in terror. He didn't much care about the commotion she might instigate in his home, just so long as she carried out her duties toward Noah so he, Nathaniel, wouldn't have to bother with the boy.

"You've spoken to Noah," he said. "What is your opinion of him?"

"He's rude, surly, and completely unlikable. In other words, he's just like you."

"He's never rude to me," Nathaniel lied. "You must have irritated him."

"He doesn't want a governess and he thought I'd be awful at it. Clearly, he has more sense than you."

"He's ten, Miss Clark. Why would we listen to him? He's running wild, with no supervision and he needs a firm hand."

"Why don't you tend him?"

"I wouldn't have the faintest idea how."

"Neither would I," she said. "I wish you'd let me depart. The sun will be setting soon and I have to return to town."

She'd just met him so she hadn't realized that he was very stubborn and he always got his way. The more adamantly she declared that she wouldn't work for him, the more staunch he'd become about it.

"I don't like your attitude, Miss Clark."

"I don't like yours."

"You're not impressed by me, but I'm an *earl*. That indicates I'm a superior person and you should heed me. Stop being so insolent."

She snickered. "I would show you some respect *if* you'd exhibited any traits that warranted admiration. So far during my visit, I haven't witnessed any stellar characteristics."

"I have some, but I shouldn't have to waste them on you."

She scoffed with derision. "Noah says he's your son, but you've denied him. Is that true?"

"The little slacker!" he fumed. "I haven't denied him. He shouldn't have told you that."

"He seems to be very smart. Why would he be confused about such a dire topic?"

Nathaniel's cheeks heated with embarrassment. Ever since Noah had arrived, he'd been in a disturbed state. "A vicar delivered him to me a month ago. I hope this story won't be too shocking for your moralistic ears—"

“My ears have never been moralistic.”

“Apparently, I had a brief amour—what might be described as a single romp—with his mother, but I have no recollection of it or her. The vicar, if he really was a vicar, insists she’s passed away and Noah had nowhere else to go.”

“Were you provided with proof of your paternity?”

“He had a birth certificate, and there are some rumors from Noah’s neighbors, but items can be forged. With my elevation to the title, I’ve received numerous inquiries and solicitations that leave me dubious. I can’t guess if his is genuine or not. I’m having the matter investigated. My clerk has traveled to the village where Noah was purportedly raised, but no final report has been drafted.”

“In the meantime, you’re ignoring Noah and making him feel unwanted. Is that it?”

“I’m not ignoring him. I’ve never been a cordial fellow, and there’s a distinct possibility that his mother is running a confidence scam on me. Until I’ve verified his account, I won’t befriend him. If I subsequently learn that he’s been deceiving me, I’ll wring his scrawny neck.”

She rolled her eyes with disdain. “Have you ever looked at him? He’s your spitting image, right down to the smug expression and surly attitude.”

He simply shrugged. He wouldn’t furnish an explanation. Nor would he quarrel. He *never* quarreled and he wasn’t about to begin with her.

He couldn’t predict if his clerk would confirm Noah’s tale or not. Nathaniel’s problem with the debacle was that he’d always been a randy libertine, but in all his philandering, he’d never sired a child. He was never cautious in his flings so how had Noah’s mother conceived?

Nathaniel couldn’t decide what to believe. He was thirty so he would have been nineteen when he’d dallied with Noah’s mother. Back then, he’d been in the army, journeying through seedy port towns and reveling with lusty camp followers.

He wished he could recall her, but he couldn’t. Despite how fervidly he searched his memories, he drew a blank. Might Noah be the sole child he ever produced? What if he was? Didn’t that prospect render Noah very special indeed?

He changed the subject. “You’ll start today, yes?”

“Ah, no.”

“But you’ve met me and Noah so you recognize why he shouldn’t be left in my slapdash care. He needs you.”

“He doesn’t like me and *you* don’t like me. There’s no benefit for me.”

“I’ve offered to triple your salary.”

“Yes, but in order to earn it, I’d have to live in this disgusting mansion. How can you stand it?”

He didn’t like to have to clarify his situation, but he figured a few details would pacify her.

“My grandfather died in debt when I was out of the country. He was a miser who owed wages to his employees.” He’d also hidden the fact that he was a dead-broke wastrel and gambler. Nathaniel didn’t add that pesky news into the mix, but creditors had seized so many chattels: furniture, rugs, paintings, priceless objects. It was mortifying. “As his estate was settled, the servants discovered they wouldn’t be paid any past-due amounts so they quit. I was handed a mostly-empty house. Some of the old stragglers remained, but they’re not very reliable, and I don’t have the heart to scold them.”

“Why haven’t you replaced the ones who fled?”

“I don’t have much money either and I hate this accursed property. It can rot to the ground, with my blessing.”

He was stunned to have blurted out his painful opinion, and he sensed that she was about to question him, but he wouldn’t enlighten her. She’d hear plenty of gossip from the shirkers who were still on the staff. They were the incompetent types who couldn’t have found positions anywhere else, and he was happy to tolerate their meager services.

His leg wound constantly plagued him, and he spent every second terrified he might suffer a bout of the jungle fever he’d contracted in the Caribbean. He didn’t have the energy to worry about the downstairs parlors. Besides, in his relentless quest to ignore reality, he hosted nightly parties so the rooms were always a mess.

Why clean them when they’d be destroyed a few hours later?

Lest she pry into issues that were none of her business, he stood and opened the safe in the wall behind the desk. He pulled out a pouch of coins, then he sat down again. He dumped them into his palm and counted out three months of wages, plus three months extra. He leaned toward her and dangled the windfall under her nose.

“I’ll provide you with an exorbitant salary that I’m positive you don’t deserve, and I’ll include this bonus that’s equal to three months of wages. Consider it a reward for coming to work for me.”

He was tempting her unmercifully and she was practically salivating. She hesitated forever, then the greedy minx said, “Six months of bonus. Not three.”

“No. Three months is already too much. Take it or leave it.”

She hesitated again, then yanked away the coins and stuck them in her satchel.

“I have several conditions,” she said. “You’ll have to agree to them and you’ll have to mean it. If you lie, or if you fail to follow through, I’ll depart without supplying any warning.”

He shifted away and bit down a smirk. Women were such simple creatures and it was so easy to manipulate them.

“Name your conditions, Miss Clark. Let’s see how amenable you can coerce me into being.”

“You’ll have to give me some pin money.”

“No.”

“It’s not for me. In case you haven’t noticed, Noah has grown taller and he needs some clothes.”

“Fine, but he’s a boy so don’t beggar me by purchasing a fancy wardrobe.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. You also have to hire a housekeeper and some maids.”

“I’m too fatigued to interview strangers so the entire notion holds no appeal to me whatsoever.”

“You’re such a spoiled brat.” She grumbled with annoyance. “I’ll do it for you.”

“I suppose I could trust you with it, but what sort of women should I expect? Will it be confidence artists like you? Will they have faked references and resumes? What’s the point of that?”

“There’s no one like me.”

He suspected that was true. She was gruff, adamant, and rude, which were traits a female shouldn’t exhibit, and she’d slyly extorted too many promises. He couldn’t fathom where it would lead, but with his health so dicey, and his mood so dour, he didn’t have the wherewithal to argue with her over a single detail.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty-five. Why? How old are you?”

“I’m thirty going on a hundred.”

She snorted with grim amusement. “You definitely act as if you’re a decrepit codger.”

“Why would you work as a governess? You claim you have no experience, but it’s obvious you’ve been highly educated. This post is beneath your social standing so why would you lower yourself? Why aren’t you married with your own husband and home?”

“I’m an orphan,” she testily replied, “so I’m alone in the world.”

“Your father left you no money?”

He’d hit a sore spot and she glared with malice. “Not everyone has a rich parent.”

He chuckled. “You have a peculiar flair that’s very interesting.”

She facetiously batted her lashes. “How kind of you to recognize my magnificent qualities.”

“You have a slight accent. Are you really British?”

“I’m British to the bone, but I traveled abroad for years.”

“I moved extensively when I was in the army. Perhaps we resided in some of the same foreign locales. Where did you live?”

“Here and there,” she vaguely responded.

Her snide tone apprised him that she wouldn’t discuss the topic. Why would that be? With her being so insolent, he imagined she could be hiding any sordid history. Again, he had

to hope she wasn't the type to steal the silver.

"Are we finished?" she asked.

"Have we resolved all our issues?"

"I guess they're resolved, except you have to assure me that I can handle Noah as I see fit *and* that you won't complain about the women I hire. I won't have you nagging and interfering."

"I never nag," he huffed.

"Right. You don't nag. I'll remember that."

She stood and marched out, and to his great surprise, he was bereft over her departure. It forced him to recall how lonely he was.

His grandfather had enlisted him in the army when he was fourteen, and for the following sixteen years, he'd journeyed far from England. Those years had been long and brutal, with his grandfather ordering the army to give him the worst, most grueling assignments, and he'd never been allowed home to visit.

He didn't have any friends in London. He welcomed regular guests to the River House, but it was a group of corrupt scoundrels who rode out from town to gamble and revel. They brought their doxies with them so he was surrounded by reckless, debauched people he didn't like.

He opened his door to them, simply because they offered a diversion that kept him from focusing on the present or ruminating over his depressing past. She was the first person he'd spoken to in ages with whom he'd actually enjoyed talking, and he couldn't bear to have her leave.

"Where are you off to?" he asked.

"I have family members waiting for me and the afternoon has completely waned. If I don't get back soon, they'll worry."

"We'll send a messenger. I expect you to begin immediately so you'll spend the night here. You have to head upstairs and pick out a bedroom suite."

"I'm sorry, but it's not happening and you can't boss me about it. I'll see you in the morning at eight o'clock. I'll begin then."

She continued on and he astonished himself by shouting at her. "Miss Clark! Weren't you listening? You're starting at once."

"I'm not, Lord Grenville. I've deduced that this will be an awful job, with horrendous working conditions. I'm doing you a favor and I won't be bullied."

"A favor!" he fumed.

"Yes, so I'll show up when I can. That would be tomorrow."

"You are entirely too impertinent."

“I always have been so I’m certain my annoying traits will drive you mad, but then, it will be your own fault. I warned you that I’d be a terrible employee, but you ignored me. Now then, I have to go!”

She whipped away and he barked to her retreating back. “Miss Clark! Hold it right there!”

He was determined to have the last word, to demonstrate his authority, to inform her of who was in charge. He couldn’t have her assuming she could act however she pleased.

She halted and sighed dramatically. “Grenville? You’re nagging already.”

Then she stomped off, and he sat in his chair, flummoxed, as her strides faded down the hall. If he’d been feeling better, he’d have jumped up and chased after her, but he’d never chased after a woman, and he wasn’t about to start with her.

Plus, his leg was killing him, and alcohol was the sole cure he’d devised that eased any of the pain. He was drinking too much; he realized he was, but his bad habit couldn’t be helped. He needed a curative whiskey much more than he needed to argue with her. Why had he hired her? What had he been thinking?

Well, he knew why. Of all the candidates Mrs. Ford had furnished for his consideration, she was the only one who’d been brave enough to stay.

“You’ll do, Miss Clark,” he muttered to himself. “You’ll do just fine.”

He hobbled over to the liquor tray in the corner. He poured himself a tall whiskey, and as he sipped the contents, he snuck over to the window and peeked outside. He was hoping he’d observe her walking down the driveway, but he didn’t have the correct view.

He spun away and headed to his bedroom. As he limped along, he passed the front parlor, and it was just as disgusting as Miss Clark had described. Maybe she’d find some capable servants who would clean it up. Maybe she’d put her foot down and repair what was broken so it might be a perfect ending.

Since he’d returned to England, he’d proved that he had no stamina to manage even the most paltry aspects of his life. If she could manage them for him, if she was that much of a miracle-worker, it would be worth it to tolerate her smart mouth and impudence.

He reached the foyer, as Noah came in from the rear of the house.

“Must Miss Clark be my governess?” he asked. “I don’t like her.”

“I don’t like her either, but we’ll muddle through.”

“If you don’t like her, why hire her?”

“I have absolutely no idea. She seems so competent that I couldn’t resist.”

He trudged up the stairs, and at the landing, he paused and peered down. Noah was staring up at him, his expression grim, as if he’d figured out that Nathaniel was totally inept. The boy was mostly right, but if he had any notion of the tribulations Nathaniel had endured and survived, he might be a little less judgmental.

Nathaniel kept on, struggling to ignore Noah's disapproval. When he peered down again, Noah had disappeared. It was a benefit for which he was exceedingly grateful. He was fully aware that he was falling apart. No one should have to watch it occur.

Chapter

3

NATHANIEL'S CARRIAGE RATTLED TO a halt, and he waited impatiently for his driver to open the door and set the step. He had so few servants at the manor that he hadn't dragged a second one away to serve as an outrider so the driver was performing two jobs. He didn't seem to mind, or if he did, he'd concealed it well.

In a prior, healthier period, Nathaniel wouldn't have waited for the step. He'd have jumped to the ground without hesitating, but it would have killed his leg so he was having to languish and let himself be pampered.

He was at Mrs. Ford's Employment Agency and he had to speak with her about Miss Clark. It was after eleven and Miss Clark hadn't shown up to begin her duties. She'd promised to return by eight, but even though he'd given her bonus money to ensure her compliance, she'd grabbed it and vanished.

He was so surprised by her duplicity that he felt dizzy from trying to deduce how she'd tricked him. Generally, he viewed himself as being a very astute judge of character, and he'd deemed her to be smart, sassy, and bluntly honest. It had never occurred to him that she was an unabashed thief.

He staggered out of the vehicle, waving away the driver when the man extended a hand in order to steady him as he descended. Nathaniel wasn't an invalid and he didn't need any help. He walked over to the door of the building, and as he would have reached for the knob, someone emerged from the inside. When he saw who it was, he blanched with astonishment.

"Miss Clark!" he said, his tone scolding. "You're late. Where have you been? Your story had best be a good one."

"I'll be there soon," she had the temerity to reply. "I just visited Mrs. Ford to inform her that I can't work for you. I begged her to send me to another post, but she won't, so you're stuck with me. And *I* am stuck with you."

He was flabbergasted by her audacity. "You were quitting? Already?"

"Yes. I don't like you or your son. Your home is disgusting and your life is riddled with problems. I'm not up to the task of fixing what has to be mended and you're insane to suppose I can."

"I don't expect you to fix anything. I merely insist you deal with Noah while I figure out a viable path for him." He gestured to the carriage. "Get in. We'll ride out to the manor

together.”

“I can’t. I must run some errands, then I have to fetch my belongings. I’ll be there in an hour or two.”

“You’re coming now,” he said, his temper flaring. “I’m convinced that you’ll never arrive unless I force you to oblige me. In case you’ve forgotten, I presented you with a bonus yesterday, but I’m starting to presume that you stole it.”

“I didn’t steal it!” she huffed.

“I don’t believe you so get in the carriage! You’ve ruined my entire morning and I’m weary of fussing with you.”

She was carrying her satchel and she peeked into it and dug around in the contents. She retrieved a pouch of coins and slapped it into his palm.

“That’s most of what you gave me,” she said. “I spent some of it on supper, but you can have the rest back. Would you like to count it?”

“You’re not quitting and I don’t accept it. Must I talk to Mrs. Ford about you? Could she tamp down your absurd attitude?”

Miss Clark grumbled with frustration. “I will report to work shortly so please stop harassing me.”

She stomped off, leaving him standing in the street like a spurned suitor. He was once again on the verge of chasing after her, but why would he? She was deranged, and he had no doubt she’d be more trouble than she was worth, but he didn’t want to consider other candidates, for he was certain none of them would have her pluck or fortitude.

He was fascinated by her, and the more she annoyed him, the more he would feel compelled to have her obey. He was contrary that way and always had been.

His driver had been hovering off to the side, pretending not to listen, and Nathaniel said to him, “She’s a nuisance.”

“Yes, she seems to be, my lord.”

“I’d like to follow her and discover where she’s going.”

“Are you sure you should?”

“Probably not, but we will anyway. I have nothing else to do today.”

He hefted himself into the vehicle and they meandered after her. After a bit of a journey, they reined in at a boarding house where she likely rented a room.

Nathaniel climbed out and stared up at the place. It was a decrepit old building and he chuckled at having stumbled on the method to coerce her. His riverside manor wasn’t exactly in stellar condition, but as his employee, she’d have a massive upgrade in her lodging. Especially if she found him a competent housekeeper to clean his messes.

When she was living here, and she could live there, why would she dither? Her decision made no sense and underscored how ridiculous she was being. But then, in his opinion,

females were incredibly ridiculous. It was why men ruled the world.

He marched in and a brusque matron greeted him.

“May I help you?” she asked.

“I’d like to speak with Miss Rose Clark. I believe she’s a resident?”

“Yes, but no gentlemen are allowed to visit. I’ll bring her down for you.”

The woman went up the stairs, and the instant she wasn’t paying attention to him, he tagged after her to the second floor. She was down the hall, at the third door, and he heard her say, “You have a caller.”

Miss Clark asked, “Who is it? Who would visit me?”

“He didn’t give his name.”

Nathaniel took that as his cue to bluster forward. “Tell her it’s Lord Grenville.”

“Sir!” the matron snapped. “I told you that my boarders can’t have guests! Return to the parlor immediately.”

“I’ll be departing shortly. So will Miss Clark.”

He eased the woman aside and shut the door in her stunned face. He studied the surroundings, and it was one room, with a narrow bed, a dresser, and a small stove in the corner. That was it. But there were traveling trunks stacked everywhere, along with several portmanteaux and boxes. Every inch of space was crammed full of her possessions.

Evidently, she’d suffered a catastrophe that had pitched her down society’s ladder, and he was much too curious about what the incident might have been. How far had she fallen? She was too exotic to toil away as a governess, and he hadn’t forgotten how she’d claimed her resume was fake.

Apparently, she was a survivor who was brave enough to stagger through a calamity. He was extremely impressed.

A woman and boy were with her, sitting on the bed and appearing a tad startled at having him barge in. Well, they could join the club. He was a tad startled himself.

The woman was thirty-five or so, petite, pretty, and plump, with brown hair and eyes. Her hair was showing a few strands of grey, as if the past decade had been difficult. The boy was about Noah’s age. He was thin and wiry, but with blond hair and blue eyes. He resembled the woman sufficiently that Nathaniel supposed he was her son, but he looked like Miss Clark too.

Before he could inquire about them, Miss Clark said, “You followed me?”

“Of course, I followed you. I wasn’t about to let you out of my sight. My carriage is outside. Let’s go.”

She didn’t budge, but spun to the woman and said, “See what I mean? He’s an impossible brute.”

The woman shrugged. "All noblemen are impossible, Rose. Arrogance is in their blood." Then she stood and said to Nathaniel, "Rose never remembers her manners so may I introduce myself? I am Agnes Fogbottom. People call me Fog, and you're welcome to call me Fog too. This is my son, Eddie."

Nathaniel nodded imperiously, then he said to Miss Clark, "How are they connected to you?"

"Fog is my friend and companion and Eddie is my half-brother. They were with me when I was living abroad."

The women exchanged a significant glance that hinted at secrets he would eventually pry out of them. If he was a bit obsessed with her, it was an indication of how tedious his current existence was proving to be. There wasn't much to enliven his dreary hours, and he was terribly afraid he might glom onto her in a failed attempt to have her entertain him.

He assessed the room again, the stacked luggage, Fog and her son. Numerous details became abundantly clear.

"Are you supporting them?" he asked Miss Clark.

"It's very rude of you to raise the topic," she said, "but, yes, I am."

"They'll be a distraction that will constantly drag you away from your duties."

She shook her head. "They won't drag me away. I swear. I stopped by to inform them that I would be taking the job after all. I have to pack a portmanteau of my clothes, then I'll be ready to leave."

"Bring Fog and Eddie with you."

"No. It wouldn't be right and I don't wish for them to be a bother."

"They won't be a bother." He looked at Eddie and said, "How old are you?"

"Ten," Eddie replied.

Nathaniel told Miss Clark, "Noah desperately needs a friend. One of your chores will be to teach him his school lessons and it would be a benefit to have Eddie study with him. When I was a child, I had to endure my lessons by myself. It was lonely and boring."

She sighed quite dramatically. "You're pressuring me unmercifully and I can't figure out why you're interfering like this."

"Don't you know, Miss Clark? You've greatly annoyed me and you're fighting me over every paltry issue. I demand you cease your battles."

Fog saved them from a full-blown quarrel. "We would be honored to move in with you, Lord Grenville. Thank you very much for offering. I've been worried about Rose working there when there are no other females on the premises. I would be relieved to be close by."

He smirked. "I'm glad to hear that one of you has some common sense."

"Eddie could use a chum too," Fog added. "He's been despondent since we returned to England."

“Mother!” Eddie complained. “I’m not despondent.”

She ignored him and continued. “I agree about their schooling. They’ll be much happier if they can study together.”

She stared down Miss Clark and Nathaniel did too. He was tickled to discover Fog was a cunning ally.

Miss Clark glared at Fog and said, “Trust me on this, Fog. You don’t want to live in his home. It’s awful.”

Fog gestured around the cramped, overstuffed space. “It can’t be worse than this.”

“It is and you won’t like it.”

“We’ll muddle through. I’m sure of it.”

Miss Clark tsked with exasperation. “If you think it’s horrid, don’t blame me.”

“I won’t blame you.” Fog spun to Nathaniel and smiled. “When would you like us to join you? Could it be now?”

He grinned and motioned to the door. “Yes, *now* would be fine. I’ll send someone for your belongings.”

Fog grabbed her cloak and bonnet off a hook on the wall, then she and Eddie walked out. Miss Clark was rooted to her spot and glowering at him.

Finally, Fog nagged at her, saying, “Rose! Don’t dawdle. We shouldn’t keep the Earl waiting.”

Nathaniel snorted with amusement and it yanked Miss Clark out of her stupor. She stomped by him, and as she passed, she muttered, “You are a menace.”

“I know,” he muttered in response, and he snickered and followed her out.



ROSE WENT DOWN THE hall at the Grenville River House, and she was so nervous that she was practically tiptoeing. She hated to be so anxious, but she couldn’t help it. It had been a day of petty frustrations, with Lord Grenville manipulating her in a dozen different ways. She was exhausted and angry, but Fog was pleased as punch.

From the minute they’d arrived in England, nothing had gone right. Rose had been able to return simply because her father had died. Prior to that sad event, he’d refused to permit her to come back. She’d been excited to have their banishment over, and she’d assumed she would have inherited her childhood home, that they’d tarry there and would have money to pay the bills and reestablish themselves. But to her vast astonishment, the Colonel had been deeply in debt.

Their property had been sold to satisfy creditors, and he hadn't bequeathed a penny to her or Eddie. For a few pointless weeks, they'd loafed in the country, assessing their limited options, then they'd headed to London and had rented their room at the boarding house. London was very expensive though, and there were so many women in dire straits. They were all searching for work, and for each opening, there were hundreds of applicants.

The burdens for solving their plight had fallen on Rose, which was how it had been for the previous seven years. She'd begun to despair over their fate, then she'd realized she had to be more devious. She'd penned her fake references, then had tricked Mrs. Ford into accepting her as a client and she wasn't sorry. However, she *was* sorry that she'd landed the job with Grenville. She couldn't imagine it ending well.

Fog believed there was no downside to befriending a nobleman and she was convinced he'd mend their problems. The fact that Fog had always been flighty and unreliable, that she made dreadful decisions and couldn't take care of herself, indicated how incorrect she was as to how their association with Grenville would play out.

Rose would allow her to wallow in her fantasy—until it collapsed in a huge morass.

They'd spent the afternoon snooping through the empty suites, and they'd moved into an isolated wing that they would have pretty much to themselves. They'd arranged several salons with adjoining doors so it was like a comfortable, spacious apartment they could call their own.

It needed a thorough dusting, but it was only their first day. Matters would improve. She was certain of it.

Grenville had had some footmen retrieve their belongings and it had surprised her. He was such a slacker that she'd presumed she'd never see her things again, but their trunks and boxes were stacked in their new apartment. After they unpacked, it would seem as if they were residing in a real home.

Since Grenville had delivered them to the manor, he'd vanished and had left them to settle in with no guidance as to how they should accomplish it. Noah was nowhere to be found, but they'd been fed supper on trays that had been carried up from the kitchen. The food had been hot, but mediocre.

She was astounded that anyone had remembered to feed them so she wasn't about to complain that the meal hadn't been very good.

Her next order of business was to meet with an employment agency about hiring a housekeeper and some housemaids. Once the female servants had the main parlors in suitable shape, perhaps she'd stop feeling that she was treading water and about to drown.

She was the governess. How exactly had she become Grenville's personal assistant? She'd been charged with tasks a wife or clerk would have managed, and it was up to her to get the place in a habitable condition. It occurred to her that he was very sly, and he was able to coerce her into doing things she didn't really want to do and that she didn't know how to do.

In her dealings with him, she had to be on guard lest he burden her even more onerously.

She reached the end of the hall, and she knocked on the ornate double doors. As was typical in the blasted mansion, no one answered so she knocked again, then peeked inside.

“Lord Grenville,” she called. “It’s Miss Clark. Are you in here?”

“Yes, Miss Clark, I’m here.” He popped up in the doorway to the bedroom. “Why are you pestering me? What’s happened?”

“I have to talk to you.”

“Can’t it wait until morning?”

“No.”

He was wearing formal clothes, as if he was off to the theater. His hair was slicked back with a fragrant pomade, the lengthy locks tied with a ribbon. His black suit was flawlessly tailored from the most expensive fabric, his shirt sewn from the softest linen, the cravat stitched from the finest Belgian lace. His valet hadn’t knotted it yet though so it was hanging loose.

Did he have a valet? She had no idea.

So far in their brief acquaintance, she wouldn’t have viewed him as the sort of gentleman who would allow a fellow to fuss over his wardrobe. He seemed more rough-and-tumble than that, but he looked amazingly elegant. There was very little evidence that he was the same bedraggled oaf she’d initially encountered.

He cleaned up nicely; there was no doubt about it.

“What is it you need?” he asked. “And please be quick about it. I’m in no mood to be scolded.”

He spun away and went into the interior portion of the suite. She hesitated, then traipsed after him to the dressing room. He was in front of the mirror and wrestling with his cravat.

Without glancing around, he said, “Have you contacted an employment agency about a housekeeper and housemaids?”

“No. I haven’t had time.”

“Have them furnish some candidates to be my valet. Pick somebody who won’t irk me to death.”

“Am I holding the interviews for you?”

“Yes. I don’t care who you select. Just be sure they won’t sneak off with the silverware.”

He finally peered around and he scoffed with derision. “You’re frowning so hard that I’m afraid your face might crack. What is vexing you?”

“There’s a party in progress down in the lower parlors. The salons are filling up with strangers.”

“Didn’t I mention it? I have a party every night. It keeps my mind off my troubles.”

“You can’t carry on like this while I’m on the premises. Fog is here too and you have two impressionable boys as well. They can’t be exposed to such decadent frivolity.”

“Then you should stay upstairs so you won’t have to witness any of it.”

“That’s not a satisfactory reply. I won’t work in a bawdy house. Nor will I subject Eddie and Fog to people with bad morals. You shouldn’t subject Noah to them either.”

He scowled ferociously. “Why would you automatically assume my guests have bad morals?”

“I saw some of the women who’ve accompanied the men. They appear to be doxies.”

“Your assessment is spot-on, Miss Clark. Will that be all?”

She narrowed her gaze, as if to bring him into clearer focus. He was the most peculiar person she’d ever met. Was he concerned about any issue? He might have been floating on a slow-moving river, almost as if he was in a daze.

How had he become such a wretched individual? How could she shake him out of his odd lethargy?

For reasons she didn’t comprehend, he’d glommed onto her as if she might supply him with a vigor he was lacking, and he imagined *she* could mend the problems in his home. Obviously, the situation had been deteriorating for ages, but he was an adult. Why couldn’t he take appropriate action? Why rely on her?

He was so positive she’d succeed, but she was totally incompetent at every domestic chore. She constantly tiptoed on the edge of ruin so his faith in her abilities was misplaced and bewildering.

“What is wrong with you?” she blurted out.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a complete laggard who has let this beautiful manor fall into a hideous state of disrepair. You can’t concentrate, and now, I discover you regularly host parties where lewd roués are in attendance. I’ve explained that this is unacceptable, but you don’t understand why it would be.”

“I understand, but I’m not about to stop so your complaint is irrelevant to me.”

“You’ve decided *I* should be put in a position of authority to fix what has been broken. Why can’t you handle it? You’re not a child. You’re not mentally deficient. You’re not an invalid so I repeat: What is wrong with you?”

He gaped at her for an eternity, and just when she thought he might expound, he said, “My presence is required downstairs. Can you tie my cravat for me?”

“No. I have no idea how.”

He rolled his eyes, as if she was being a nuisance, then he spun to the mirror and made a half-hearted attempt to knot it. He strolled by her and proceeded out to the door. She followed him, watching how he limped, his leg visibly paining him. She’d have to gossip with the footmen to learn a few details about him, but she wondered how much they knew.

He gestured for her to depart, saying, “We’ll talk in the morning. You can share your plans for Noah’s schooling.”

“Are you dismissing me?”

“Yes. Will you go?”

She marched over, grabbed the door away from him, and slammed it. Before he could react, she locked them in as he'd done to her previously. She stuck the key in her pocket.

“Sit, Lord Grenville!” She pointed to a chair over by the hearth.

“Are you bossing me, Miss Clark? Do you think you can?”

“Don't argue about it. Sit!”

To her surprise, he meekly obeyed, his wily grin apprising her that she was hilarious. He hobbled over and eased down, and she stood in front of him, aggravated beyond her limit.

“This discussion will be finished after you've clarified a few things,” she said. “You're an earl so you're weighed down by a thousand responsibilities, yet you drift along on a cloud above it all. It seems as if you lost your way somewhere and you're wandering blindly. Have you been ill? Are you injured? Why are you so distracted and inept?”

“If I tell you, will you let me join my guests?”

“I wish you wouldn't, but it's your house. I don't suppose I can prevent you from behaving like an ass.”

He snorted at that. “My grandfather sent me to the army when I was fourteen.”

“I realize it's permitted at that age, but were you eager to enlist?”

“My parents were deceased so he was raising me and I was a handful. He declared me to be incorrigible and he felt the army would straighten me out.”

“Did it?”

“For the most part, yes. He arranged for me to have the most dangerous postings and assignments so it was very difficult.”

“I hate him already,” she said.

“I struggled at first, but eventually, I thrived in my enforced situation. It was merely the prior year or two that laid me low.”

“What happened? Was it very bad?”

“I was a prisoner. In Spain? I was captured with several other soldiers by a rogue band of mercenaries. The British government ransomed the other men, but they didn't ransom me. I was left behind.”

Her jaw dropped with astonishment. “Why would they have?”

“My grandfather was very powerful, and I figure he convinced them not to, probably to teach me some sort of lesson. I don't have any evidence that he interfered to halt my release, but that's what I've always assumed.”

“How were you able to make it home?”

“He died and I was the new earl. I guess somebody in authority decided a British nobleman shouldn’t languish in a foreign prison.”

“That’s the most hideous story I’ve ever heard.”

“Isn’t it though?” He smiled an odd smile. “The ordeal scrambled my wits so I apologize if I’m being overly peculiar. I’m trying to regroup and recuperate, but occasionally, I fall off the fence where I’m balanced.”

She was being pummeled by the most potent wave of sympathy. She could barely keep from hugging him and telling him everything would be all right.

“Why are you limping?” she asked.

“I have a wound that hasn’t healed correctly. On my ankle? It bothers me.” She yearned to see it, but before she could inquire, he lifted the cuff of his trouser and showed it to her. “I was held in chains for over a year and the shackle rubbed the skin raw. I can’t mend it, no matter what remedy I apply.”

He’d explained the dilemma so casually, as if he was discussing the weather, but she was terribly distressed by it. He’d haphazardly tied a bandage around the injury so she could view portions of the angry, open sore. It completely circled his leg. Her urge to hug him was growing by leaps and bounds.

“Have you had a doctor examine it?” she asked.

“Just some quacks who made it worse. I treat it myself, but I’m not a very good nurse.” He stood, suddenly looking all business. “Have you any other questions? Or have I supplied sufficient details to satisfy your curiosity?”

“I suppose I’m satisfied.”

“Then I would like to head down to my party, and if I choose to revel outrageously, I’m sorry that it annoys you, but please don’t pester me about it.”

He extended his hand, visually ordering her to give him the key. She placed it in his palm, and they went over to the door together, but his limp was more pronounced. He tottered to the side and bumped into her so they were pressed tight from chests to toes. She could feel every inch of his male torso, her feminine areas practically celebrating at the thrilling agitation their proximity produced.

The strangest aura enveloped them. Time stopped ticking. The wind out in the trees ceased to blow. There was the eeriest perception in the air that the universe was marking the encounter, ensuring they marked it too.

They tarried forever, frozen in their spots and gazing into each other’s eyes, but he broke the unusual moment.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he murmured, his cheeks heating, as if he was embarrassed by the admission.

“I guess I’m glad too, but I can’t imagine I’ll be a competent assistant. I have an imposing record of failure dragging behind me.”

“You’ll be fine.”

His tone was tender, almost affectionate, as if they were closely attached, as if they might even be sweethearts. The notion was bizarre and unnerving.

He walked out and she watched him go. She thought he might glance back to offer a pithy parting comment, but he didn’t. He simply strolled to the stairs and disappeared down them.

She dawdled, replaying every word of their conversation, and she couldn’t help but notice that her anatomy was enlivened in a lusty manner. It had been exhilarating to have his masculine body crushed to hers, and the recognition was disturbing on many levels.

At age seventeen, she’d proved she was a tart, that a libertine could sway her with amorous physical conduct. Because of it, she’d been pitched into a series of calamities from which she’d never recovered. Her folly had resulted in her being disgraced, then banished from England by her father.

She was still suffering from the catastrophes she’d set in motion, and over the years, she’d prided herself on how she’d reined in her more salacious appetites. Her father had accused her of being exactly like her mother, of possessing her mother’s same libidinous qualities, and ever since, Rose had struggled mightily to show he’d been mistaken.

Yet a handsome bachelor had merely leaned into her and she was on fire. She couldn’t wait to be that near to him again, just as soon as she could arrange it. What was wrong with her? Had she no sense remaining?

Clearly, she shouldn’t be alone with him and she resolved to make herself scarce. He didn’t seem to want her to be around and underfoot and she was happy to oblige him. It was a huge house and there was no reason for her to cross paths with him. She would hide and ignore him. Starting immediately.

She would become invisible, and she wouldn’t think about him, or his dreadful past, or the wound on his leg. She wouldn’t commiserate, wouldn’t ruminate over his low condition. He had too many problems that needed fixing and she couldn’t fix them.

She departed, but in the opposite direction from him. She was determined not to run into him again unless it was absolutely necessary.

Chapter

4

NOAH WAS SITTING IN the nursery, in the nanny's old rocking chair. He couldn't guess how long it had been since the spot had been used, but the prior occupant had to have been a girl. The room was filled with dolls, tiny tea sets, and other feminine toys.

When he'd first been brought to the Grenville River House, Lord Grenville had had no idea what to do with him so he'd been handed over to the footmen. They were a polite, but apathetic bunch, and because he was ten, they'd deposited him in the nursery. He was expected to play in it, then sleep in the adjoining bedroom, but it was decorated in frilly shades of pink so he avoided it like the plague.

During the night, he crept through the mansion and he was gradually learning its secrets. He'd found a nook on the landing where he could spy on Grenville's dissolute companions as they caroused in the downstairs parlors. After he grew weary of watching them, he investigated the numerous empty suites, dozing in them as if he were a ghost.

Occasionally, he snuck out into the garden and down to the dock. He'd stare at the river and ponder his escape. There was a small boat tied there, and he could have sailed it to the village where he'd resided with his mother, but with her being deceased, there was no reason for him to return. He hadn't run away though.

He was afraid he'd arrive in the village, only to be sent back, so he kept loafing in his father's home and waiting for something to happen: for the Earl's paternity to be confirmed, for the Earl to notice him, for school to start, for tasks to be assigned.

He'd always toiled away at the portside tavern where his mother had been a serving wench, and he hated to be idle. He'd once asked the Earl if he could be given some regular chores, but Grenville had gaped at him as if he were insane.

Footsteps sounded out in the hall, which was odd. He was so far from the main portions of the manor that he couldn't imagine who it might be. A boy his own age popped into the doorway and he was stunned. He had to blink several times to be certain he wasn't hallucinating.

"I'm Eddie," the boy announced, proving he was real and not an apparition.

"I'm Noah."

"I live here now. I just moved in with my mother and my sister, Rose Clark. She's to be your governess and Lord Grenville said my mother and I could come with her. He said it's a

big house and we wouldn't be a bother."

"He said that? I can't believe he focused sufficiently to be kind."

"You and I are supposed to be friends and we'll be doing our school lessons together."

"Who decided that?"

"Lord Grenville."

The news was intriguing and astonishing. Noah had been fuming and stewing, feeling sorry for himself and terribly worried he might simply vanish and no one would care, but the changes might be all right.

"I'm very smart," Eddie said.

"So am I."

"Rose will let us read novels about pirates and adventurers."

Noah's education had been intermittent. One of his mother's customers at the tavern had provided him with sporadic lessons, and he'd picked up his letters and numbers so quickly that he could have been bound for university.

"What if we don't like each other?" he asked. "What if we don't wish to be friends?"

"I'm a grand fellow," Eddie told him. "I'm sure you'll like me."

"I met your sister and I didn't like her. I warned Lord Grenville not to hire her."

Eddie shrugged. "She'll grow on you. She's not fussy and she never nags. She won't be very adamant about teaching us so we won't be trapped inside for hours and having to practice our multiplication tables."

"That's good to know."

Eddie wandered around, snooping through the toybox, the dolls on the shelf, then he wrinkled up his nose. "This room is awful. Must you stay in here?"

"No. I merely use it to hide when I'm aggravated."

"Has anyone realized you're not a girl? It's too bad there aren't any tin soldiers. We could fight war battles with them."

"There's not a tin soldier anywhere, but I'm too old for toys. I've been working for as long as I remember. I never play games."

"I haven't ever worked. What's it like?"

"I helped my mother and I was always busy."

"My mother doesn't work," Eddie said.

"What does she do?"

"Think? Dream? Fret?"

"Where were you living previously?" Noah asked. "Are you from London?"

"No. We lived in Egypt."

Noah's jaw dropped. "You're joking."

"No. We had a house up on a hill and the Nile River was down below. It was hot there and the sun shone all the time. I miss it. It's too rainy in England."

"Have you seen a pyramid?"

"I've seen dozens of pyramids."

Noah studied him, wondering if he was lying so he'd seem more interesting, but he appeared to be sincere.

"Why were you in Egypt?" he asked.

"My father sent Rose there. She got herself in trouble with a boy and there was a huge scandal that wouldn't die down. We returned three months ago." He walked over and sat on the floor by Noah's feet. "Rose told me you just moved in too, that you just met your father."

"A vicar delivered me to him, but Lord Grenville hadn't heard about me so he was very surprised. My mother passed away and I didn't have any relatives except him. I could have taken care of myself, but no one would let me."

"Are you glad to have a father?"

"Not really. Mostly, I'm bored and twiddling my thumbs."

"I've arrived though. That's exciting, isn't it?"

"I guess."

"We should make this our secret spot," Eddie said. "If I can't find you, I'll look here."

"And I'll look here too. The adults never visit this section of the manor. I'm supposed to sleep in the adjoining room, but I choose a different bedroom every night."

"Hasn't anyone noticed?"

"No. I'm pretty much on my own so I can carry on however I want."

"This building is so old and drafty. Have you stumbled on any ghosts?"

"Not yet."

Noah had never socialized with other boys. In fact, he'd been serious when he'd admitted that he never played much with other children. From his first memories, he'd pitched in at the tavern. It had taught him to be tough, clever, and shrewd, and he possessed skills that most boys could never hope to attain. It might be nice to have a friend. He hadn't imagined he'd like it, but he suspected he would.

He pushed himself to his feet. "Would you like me to show you some of my favorite places?"

"Sure," Eddie said, standing too.

"We can spy on the grownups down in the front parlor. They drink liquor and act like idiots. It's funny."

"We shouldn't ever tell my mother about it. It might upset her."

“Don’t worry. I never tell women anything.” They started out and Noah said, “After we’re finished spying, we can go out in the garden and down to the dock. There’s a boat tied up there. If we ever decide to run away, we can sail off in it.”

“Why would we run away?” Eddie asked. “I watch over my mother and sister. They constantly land themselves in jams so I have to keep an eye on them. You can be my partner in protecting them. Besides, compared to some of the hovels I’ve had to live in recently, this could be Heaven.”

“Just wait until you’ve been here for awhile. You’ll see what I mean about it being horrid.”

They left together and Noah nodded with satisfaction. He’d been stuck with Lord Grenville for a month, and he’d been so unhappy, but maybe with Eddie on the premises, things would get better. They couldn’t get worse.

He grinned and led the way.



“I DON’T KNOW WHAT’S best, Mother. There have been such hideous stories about him. Aren’t his wits addled?”

Annette Adair stared at her mother, Ambrosia. They’d snuck away from the ballroom and were chatting in the women’s retiring room. They were debating an engagement to Nathaniel St. James.

Annette was an heiress, and she’d skated through three Marriage Seasons already and hadn’t picked a husband, but she was twenty and moving into spinster territory. She couldn’t continue to delay. She was eager to buy herself a spot in the aristocracy, but it was a lean year for noble bachelors. There were also several other heiresses strutting about, hoping to snag one of the small group of candidates. The competition was incredibly fierce and she was fussy.

Her mother had explained the physical behaviors required in marriage, and she could only bear to participate if her spouse was young and handsome. She wouldn’t shackle herself to an elderly codger or a sloppy drunkard. She wouldn’t tolerate immoral habits or extreme gambling.

It was a gentleman’s prerogative to wager excessively, but she was bringing a fortune to the table, and she expected it to be used to provide her with a grand existence. She wouldn’t have a husband who would squander it in the gaming hells.

“Grenville hosts those ribald parties,” she said to her mother.

“Rich and powerful men carouse with their dissolute companions. You can’t fault him for it.”

“Then there’s his mental state. It’s widely claimed that he’s mad.”

“We’ve met him, Annette, and he’s as lucid as you or me. It’s been a slow summer and people are spreading ridiculous tales because they’re bored. He’s not out in society much so he’s not available to counter the gossip.”

“Gossip usually has some basis in fact though. What if I wed him, then I found out he really is deranged? What then?”

“Then you and I will travel to Italy and pamper ourselves there—without him to annoy you. I’ll have the nuptial contracts written to protect you. If it becomes impossible for you to remain by his side, you won’t have to worry.”

“I suppose it could work out,” she glumly muttered.

“Have I ever failed you?” her mother asked. “Have I ever been wrong about any important issue?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“Well, I’m not wrong about Grenville and don’t forget that he desperately needs your dowry. His grandfather was a pious brute and spendthrift. He left the estate coffers empty and Grenville has to fill them by selecting a wealthy bride.”

Annette smirked. “I imagine poverty rivets a man’s attention. If he desperately needs my money, it means he’ll desperately need me.”

They snickered, then returned to the ballroom. They were a gorgeous pair, statuesque, blond, blue-eyed, voluptuous. Annette was twenty and her mother forty, but Ambrosia wasn’t showing her age. They were more like sisters than mother and daughter.

Annette’s father had been a sugar importer who’d been much older than her mother. He’d amassed an enormous fortune, then he’d had the good grace to pass away, leaving all of it to his widow and only child. They took great pains to ensure they were noticed and praised for their style and elegance.

They purchased their gowns from the finest dressmakers in Paris. Their jewels were designed by expert goldsmiths in Venice. When they strolled through a crowd, people gaped in awe. They might have been two princesses promenading by.

“What do you think, Annette?” Ambrosia asked. “You can’t keep dithering. Shall I speak to Grenville? Shall I propose an engagement?”

“He is very handsome, isn’t he?” Annette mused. “Despite his quirks, he’s an attractive devil.”

“Yes, he’s very handsome and I would add very *dashing* too. What girl wouldn’t like to walk down the aisle with a national hero?”

Annette chuckled. “Yes, please speak to him for me. This incessant marital plotting is exhausting. Could we have a wedding arranged by September?”

“If not by September, then certainly by Christmas, but there’s no rush. Once we have him fully bound, we’ll plan the ostentatious celebration you deserve.”

“Countess of Grenville,” Annette murmured. “That has a nice ring to it.”

“I wonder if the St. James family has a diamond-studded coronet for the countess to wear at public events. It would look marvelous in your blond hair.”

They laughed and swept into the ballroom as if they were royalty.



NATHANIEL SPUN AROUND, AND suddenly, he was staring at Annette Adair. She hadn't seen him yet so he scrutinized her without her realizing he was.

She was possessed of all the traits he liked in a female: tall, curvaceous, blond, beautiful. She exuded an intriguing languor that had a man wanting to be closer. She was obscenely rich too, which was icing on the cake.

She was nothing like Rose Clark who was short, messy, and much too thin. And gad, those spectacles! Every time he talked to her, he yearned to yank them off so her striking green eyes would be more visible.

A woman ought to be meek and demur, ought to mind her manners, heed the men who were positioned above her, and attend church on Sunday. Miss Clark had none of those qualities. She was bossy and impertinent, and she was quick to offer her opinions, even when they were erroneous or absurd. There wasn't an elegant bone in her body.

He liked her though and he wished she had a fortune. She was the brash type he should marry someday, if he could ever convince himself to proceed. It was clear she'd suffered a tragedy, one that had pitched her out into the cold, cruel world. She'd learned that life could whack you alongside the head when you weren't watching. She knew that you had to buck up and be strong, that you had to bravely march forward, even when you didn't have the energy to continue on.

He hated that he was ruminating over her. For reasons he didn't understand, she'd assumed the center spot in his musings, and he had to cease his relentless reflection. It was futile and ridiculous.

Instead, he focused on the ballroom where he was currently located. He couldn't figure out why he'd ridden into the city. A perfectly debauched party was in progress out at the River House, but a few of his guests had decided to sneak away for a bit. He'd accompanied them so he was being highly irresponsible.

He remembered how Miss Clark had scolded him about his parties, about how he was exposing Noah and her relatives to decadence. She was correct that it was grossly improper, but he'd ignored her complaint. He'd left the revelers to carry on without him so he was only inviting trouble.

He had to hurry home to ensure the manor hadn't burned down while he was away, but as with so many issues that plagued him, he was frozen with vacillation and incapable of behaving as he should.

Miss Adair must have noted how avidly he was studying her. She flashed a seductive smile and sauntered over. She appeared to glide, as if her feet didn't touch the floor. She was that gracious and stunning.

"Hello, Grenville," she said, her voice sultry and alluring. "I didn't expect to bump into you tonight. Don't you usually shun these packed fêtes?"

"I stopped by with some friends. I'm not staying."

"My mother and I were just talking about you."

"Well, that news alarms me."

"She's about to schedule an appointment with you to tell you what we discussed. I'm betting you'll like the topic. At least, I'm hoping you will."

She winked and sashayed away and she was swiftly swallowed up by the crowd.

He wasn't confused by her comment. She was an heiress who was keen to be a countess. He was an earl who needed a huge infusion of funds to stabilize his finances. It could definitely become a win-win situation for both of them.

His grandfather had presented a stern, respectable face to the world. With how he'd terrorized Nathaniel when he was a boy, he'd seemed powerful and omnipotent so it had been a shock to discover his true fiscal quagmire.

The horrid bully had been a dunce about money, about where it came from, where it went, how much, how fast. He'd gambled and had invested in dubious commercial schemes. He'd supported expensive mistresses and had purchased properties he couldn't afford. He'd mortgaged his assets over and over, and once he'd died, creditors had swooped in and seized whatever wasn't entailed to the title.

They'd taken furniture, rugs, paintings, heirlooms, animals, equipment. No item had been sacred or spared. In his various homes, most of the salons had been emptied of chattels so he owned several ostentatious mansions, but they were pathetic shells that had surrendered their prior glory.

Everything was falling apart and had to be repaired, but his grandfather's profligate habits meant that Nathaniel was out of options. He had no method to improve matters except to snag a rich bride. He was too befuddled to be a husband, but he had to get busy and fix what his grandfather had wrecked.

It was difficult to pay servants their wages and he didn't dare have more of his competent employees vanish. If he wed for money, he could implement many plans and the chores would be beneficial. If he had projects to occupy his mind, he wouldn't constantly obsess over the past.

He'd met Ambrosia and Annette Adair a few weeks earlier. From the start, he'd received the distinct impression that Miss Adair would like a betrothal. Nathaniel simply had to

propose and her answer would be in the affirmative. Would he like to marry her? She was a stranger so could he bear it?

She seemed very young to him, and she'd had no experiences that would prepare her to deal with his deteriorated condition, but was that a factor? If he could glom onto her dowry and utilize it in ways that were gravely necessary, shouldn't he do that?

If their union turned out to be less than pleasant, what was it to him? His tragedy in Spain had shown him that he could endure any ordeal. If they weren't compatible, they didn't have to live together. He suspected she'd rather tarry in London, but he'd like to tuck himself away in the country and pretend he was still a bachelor.

Should he proceed? There were plenty of reasons why it was a bad idea. Mostly, it wouldn't be fair to inflict himself on her. But money was a great motivator and he predicted he'd never be sorry that he'd grown wealthy from choosing her.

He downed his drink and fled. A footman hailed him a cab, and shortly, he was back at the River House. His own party was progressing just fine without him. No one had missed him, and while he was away, the merriment hadn't slowed.

He loafed in a corner, watching the festivities as if he were a visitor, as if he was up on the ceiling and gazing down on people he didn't know. It occurred to him that he was very lonely. He'd like to locate Miss Clark and ask her what she thought about the prospect of his shackling himself to an heiress.

He figured she'd have a ton of remarks to share on the subject and she would amuse him very much.



ROSE WAS WALKING THROUGH the foyer when there was a knock on the front door. She was drafting notes for the employment agency about the type of candidates who should work for Lord Grenville. Most times, he acted like a lunatic. Who would willingly hire on with a boss who was insane?

If any of them pressed Rose for her opinion about him, she'd have to lie. The only advantage she could claim was that she rarely saw him so he was never underfoot.

The knock sounded again, and there was no footman in the vicinity so she went over and yanked the door open.

A woman was there. She was about Rose's age of twenty-five, but she looked as if her years had been a bit more grueling than Rose's had been. Her face was lined, her frown permanent. She was petite, with blue eyes and black hair, but she was already sporting strands of grey.

Her clothes were tattered, her cloak ragged, and she was skinny to the point of emaciation. She could use a hot bath and Rose wondered if she wasn't a beggar.

"May I help you?" Rose asked.

"I hope so. I'm Janet Darnell?" The name was unfamiliar to Rose, and when she shook her head, the woman added, "I heard my brother is back and I'd like to speak with him."

Rose couldn't imagine who the woman might be seeking. They had five footmen on the staff. Could it be one of them?

"Who is your brother?" she inquired. "I'll try to find him for you."

"It's Nathaniel St. James. I was Janet St. James before my marriage."

Rose gasped with astonishment. "Grenville has a sister? Are you joking?"

"I take it he hasn't mentioned me."

"No, sorry. From how he carries on, you'd think he was raised by wolves in the forest."

"Close enough," Mrs. Darnell murmured.

Rose remembered her manners. "Come in, come in!"

She gestured into the foyer, but Mrs. Darnell hesitated, and she seemed almost afraid. "My grandfather isn't here, is he? There's a rumor swirling that he passed away. I need to be certain he's not in residence."

"Your information is correct. Your grandfather has been deceased for over a year, your brother has inherited, and he's home from his travails in the army." Rose hated for Mrs. Darnell to be so nervous and she felt as if she was soothing a skittish colt. "Please don't fret. It's obvious you're exhausted. Let's get you settled in the parlor and I'll locate Lord Grenville. I'm pretty sure he's still in bed. Is he expecting you?"

"No, I'm not expected and I'm betting my arrival will be a huge shock."

Rose had no idea if Mrs. Darnell meant *shock* in a good way or bad, and she had to pray she hadn't committed a gaffe by admitting her. Well, as she kept reminding everyone, she was just the governess. If Grenville had issues with his sister, it wasn't Rose's burden to navigate.

As if gathering her courage, Mrs. Darnell stepped gingerly over the threshold, supplying the perception that it was incredibly difficult. She stared up the grand staircase that wound to the upper floors, and the sight made her dizzy. She swayed quite determinedly, then fainted at Rose's feet.

"Mrs. Darnell! Oh, my!"

Rose dropped to her knees, and she clasped Mrs. Darnell's hand, patting her wrist, then slapping her lightly on the cheek, in an attempt to rouse her. Her efforts were swiftly rewarded. Mrs. Darnell's eyes fluttered open and she scowled at Rose.

"What happened?" she asked.

"You swooned on me."

"That's embarrassing."

She shifted about, as if she'd try to stand, but Rose was terrified she'd collapse again. Luckily, a footman bustled down the hall and Rose waved him over. Together, they lifted her and guided her into the front parlor, seating her on the sofa. Her cheeks were flushed, her mortification extreme.

"I guess I'm hungrier than I realized," she said.

Rose shared a furtive glance with the footman, then she asked, "How long has it been since you've eaten?"

"Two days? Three?"

Rose drew the footman off to the side, and they had a hurried conversation where she sent him to the kitchen to fetch a food tray. She also told him to bring Fog down so she could sit with Mrs. Darnell while Rose dragged Grenville out of bed.

Food and Fog appeared quickly, and Rose rapidly explained the situation to Fog, then left her with Mrs. Darnell. Fog was cordial and sociable and could manage any awkward circumstance.

"I'm off to awaken Lord Grenville," Rose said to Mrs. Darnell. "I'll be back shortly."

"He won't be angry, will he?"

Rose forced a laugh. "Of course not. Why would he be angry?"

She dashed away, alarmed over what kind of morass she'd landed herself in. Nathaniel St. James was a nuisance, and as she'd suspected from the start, she had no ability to maneuver through his problems, whims, and quirks.

A long-lost sister? Who was in a dire condition? Who might make him angry? What next?

Chapter

5

ROSE TIPTOED TOWARD GRENVILLE'S master suite. She never displayed anxious behavior in front of any man so she was annoyed by her fit of nerves. She'd learned the hard way that, if she showed the least bit of timidity around them, they would take advantage of her.

Her father, Colonel Clarkson, had been the worst, the type of parent to shout and hit, to berate and belittle. Growing up, she'd never understood his animosity. She'd been such a good girl, but he'd seemed to hate her.

After the debacle that had spurred her banishment, she'd found out why: She wasn't actually his daughter. According to him, her mother had had an affair when he'd been serving in the army out of the country. He'd returned on furlough and discovered she was with child.

Rose hadn't been keen to believe the story, but the Colonel had provided her with her father's name, as well as other details, so the terrible tale was probably true. If she'd ever been inclined, she could have visited him. She never had though because she wasn't sure if he knew about her or not. It was highly likely that she would introduce herself and he wouldn't have the faintest idea who she was.

Luckily, she hadn't spent many of her formative years with the Colonel. For the most part, he'd been busy with his army career or his doxies, but she hadn't forgotten the brutal education he'd supplied. She wouldn't allow a pompous oaf to intimidate or hurt her ever again.

Her previous and only-ever beau, Charlie Money Penny, had conveyed many useful lessons too. He'd been a handsome army officer who'd viewed marriage to her as a route to advancing his position with the Colonel. He'd asked for her hand, but the Colonel had refused to give his permission so Charlie had persuaded her to elope.

Of course the antic had failed. The Colonel had caught her and dragged her home, and after that fateful day, her life had been on a downhill trajectory.

He'd taught her that she was foolish and gullible, that she had no ability to judge people or situations. Due to her outrageous conduct with Charlie, the Colonel had cast her aside, and she'd been on her own ever since, while trying to keep Fog and Eddie safe.

The Colonel had been a petty, horrid fiend, and he'd cast them aside too, and Rose felt bad that they'd had to rely on her. She wasn't a person anyone should have to trust. She struggled valiantly to exhibit a firm, feisty façade so men would never deem her to be weak or frivolous, but with Grenville, she was falling into her prior pathetic habits.

She constantly noticed herself wanting to please him, wanting to make him happy, wanting him to find her pretty, sweet, and amenable. She had to cease her groveling and meager attempts to be someone she wasn't. That was a road to disaster.

She knocked once, and when he didn't answer, she figured he was still asleep. It was almost noon, and no doubt, he'd be hungover

again so he'd be grouchy. She wondered how he'd take the news about his sister arriving. Would he become more surly or less?

She opened the door just a crack and peeked in. The sitting room was empty, and she could see his bed in the bedroom beyond. He wasn't in it. She stepped inside and called, "Grenville, are you in here? It's me, Rose Clark."

He called back from farther in the suite. "You don't have to announce yourself, Miss Clark. I always know when it's you."

"How?"

"I have a second sense about you. When you're nearby, my entire anatomy seems to be alerted."

"Well, that's totally bizarre. May I speak to you?"

"No."

"It's important."

"I don't care."

"Are you hungover? Are you grouchy?"

"Yes, I'm hungover, but I'm never grouchy."

She scoffed and muttered to herself, "You are so full of it."

"What was that? I couldn't hear you."

"I was simply mumbling a denigration. You didn't need to hear it."

It sounded as if he snickered. "Are you coming in or not?"

"Will you come out to me or not?"

"Not."

She was about to stomp off, but poor Mrs. Darnell was down in the front parlor. Rose had to apprise him, and he had to get himself into some sort of condition where he could talk to her. It was

obvious Mrs. Darnell had suffered a catastrophe and Grenville had to help her. If he behaved like his usual lackadaisical self, Rose would demand he pitch in.

She marched over to the bedroom and he was standing in the doorway to the dressing room. He'd just bathed so he was mostly naked, his chest and arms bare, his legs and feet bare too. The middle of his body was covered by a towel that was wrapped around his lean waist, and his nude state vividly reminded her that she shouldn't be so impulsive.

He'd washed his hair and droplets had wet his shoulders. He was about to shave, and he was holding a brush and cup of lather so he could swathe his face with it. He looked decadent and dangerous, the type of rogue your mother warned you about, but also the exact type you couldn't wait to meet.

As she'd proved at age seventeen, during her aborted amour with Charlie Money Penny, she had some very lusty traits. She'd buried them, but she was tantalized by handsome men. She couldn't ignore how alluring some of them were.

She shrieked with dismay. "Ah! You're not dressed!"

"You just barged in. I didn't have an opportunity to stop you."

Every inch of her torso, down to the smallest pore, was enlivened with excitement. She yearned to run over and rub herself against him like a contented cat. What was wrong with her? Why didn't she possess the strict moral compass females were supposed to have?

Another one of those eerie moments spun out between them. Time halted again, the universe marking the encounter. Alarm bells were clanging in her head, telling her to race downstairs as fast as she could, but her feet might have been nailed to the floor.

He placed the shaving utensils on a nearby dresser, then he sauntered over to her. She watched him warily, thinking trouble was approaching, destiny was approaching, disaster was approaching. He continued until they were toe to toe, and she was bowled over by masculine scents of skin and soap. They enticed her on a debauched level, urging her to commit a few sins, to reach out and grab for what she should never have.

He smiled a smile that tempted and tormented her in equal measure. Then he said, "Praise be! You're not wearing those blasted spectacles."

"Oh. I forgot to put them on."

"Have I mentioned that you have the most gorgeous green eyes I've ever seen on a woman?"

"No, I don't believe you have."

"They *are* gorgeous and I'm mentioning it now."

They were next to his massive bed, and before she understood what he intended, he lifted her, twirled them, and tumbled them onto the mattress. In a blink, she was flat on her back, and he was stretched out atop her. The dissolute positioning was exhilarating and she reveled with joy.

"Let me up," she fumed, not certain she was serious.

"No. I like having you right where you are."

"I mean it. I can't guess what you're planning, but whatever it is, we're not doing it."

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that you shouldn't sneak into a man's bedchamber?"

"I didn't sneak. I knocked."

"We're not arguing semantics, Miss Clark, and I'm calling you Rose from this point on."

With that, he dipped down and kissed her. For a crazed instant, she hesitated, feeling aghast and upset, then it occurred to her that she wasn't really distraught. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back, imbuing the embrace with all the desire and affection she could muster.

Was she suffering from desire and affection for him? Could that be correct? If she'd been pressed to offer an opinion, she could have sworn she didn't even like him, and fraternization was hazardous. It might begin innocently enough, but scoundrels were never satisfied so he'd relentlessly push her to surrender numerous boons he had no business requesting.

She'd struggle to fend off future advances, but she wouldn't be able to remain firm. She'd dig herself into a hole, and eventually, it would grow to be so deep that she couldn't climb out of it.

"Grenville!" she said, as they came up for air.

He didn't heed her. He simply delivered another string of stirring kisses she couldn't resist. Her anatomy relished the attention he was supplying, and she jumped in with both feet, not finding a reason to end her participation.

He quickly had her overwhelmed and she was making deals with herself. There might have been a devil and an angel hovering. The devil was coaxing her to misbehave, claiming there was no harm in it, but the angel was scolding her, insisting that this was the road to perdition.

She'd waltzed down it once before and had swiftly discovered that there was no safe conclusion. She'd wrecked her life, had wrecked her reputation, had wound up disowned and disavowed. She'd been cast out by the Colonel, sent to live in a foreign country on a meager allowance that was never sufficient to pay her expenses.

She was lucky to have survived the trials that had been tossed in her path, yet despite those obstacles, she'd ultimately returned to

England and had landed herself in a stable spot. She'd stumbled on a job with good wages. Fog and Eddie had a very fancy roof over their heads.

Would she jeopardize all of it for a fleeting interval of bliss with a dashing, disturbed libertine?

She yanked her lips from his and said, "Grenville! Stop it!"

He grinned. "Why should I? I must confess that you have furnished a very thrilling start to my morning."

"It's almost afternoon and I am not about to loaf so I can be kissed by you."

"You're not? It seems to me that it's already happened so why complain? Don't pretend you didn't like it. I'll never believe you."

"I *didn't* like it," she said, merely to be contrary.

"You were destined to join me in my bed. I realized it the minute I met you."

"Don't be ridiculous. There's no destiny percolating between us. You're simply a deranged lunatic who assumes he can act however he pleases. I wasn't hoping to dally with your grand self. I came to impart an important message, but before I could tell you what it was, you grabbed me and mauled me."

"I didn't maul you. I seduced you."

"Now who's arguing semantics?" she asked.

"You're very experienced at this type of amorous endeavor so I doubt I'm the first fellow who's ever kissed you. Are you a tart?"

"A tart! How dare you impugn my virtue."

"It was very easy to impugn it. I suspect your virtue is just as tarnished as everything else about you."

“Let me up,” she repeated. “I’m not about to lie here and permit you to insult me.”

She pushed at his shoulders, but it was like shoving at a block of marble. She couldn’t move him and he wasn’t about to roll off her. His grin widened; he grasped that he was being a beast, and he liked how he was irritating her.

He smirked again. “This brief foray into passion will spur our relationship to a much better level.”

“I’m not being spurred anywhere by you. I have to get out of here or I’m worried we’ll become even more reckless.”

“Shall we have an affair? Would you like that?”

She gasped with affront, then shoved him extra hard, still with no success. “What a horrible remark. What kind of girl do you think I am?”

“I think you’re a funny, smart, impertinent vixen, but you tamp down your lusty inclinations when you shouldn’t. If you’re a trollop, that’s fine with me. I like females who have a wicked character.”

“Will you be silent? I’m your governess, remember? That means there are boundaries to be observed by you.”

He chuckled. “You’re about to be a little more than my governess.”

For some reason, he decided to release her. He slid away and sat on the edge of the bed, his feet on the floor, as he fussed with his towel. The ribald encounter had escalated so rapidly that she’d forgotten he was nearly naked.

She was fortunate he was a bit of a gentleman. He was much bigger and stronger than she was. If he’d been overcome by desire, she wouldn’t have been able to prevent him from engaging in any dastardly conduct.

Hadn't she previously ordered herself to avoid him? Hadn't she deduced that it was perilous to dawdle in his fascinating company? It was wise to stay away from him, but it felt as if magnets were pulling them together. She didn't possess the temerity required to separate herself and follow through.

She skittered off the opposite side of the mattress. She couldn't arrive downstairs, looking as if she'd been ravaged so she hastily checked her clothes to ensure he hadn't unbuttoned any buttons. She went over to stand by the door, out of reach. If he lunged for her, she had plenty of space to escape into the hall.

He was gaping at her as if he couldn't figure out how she'd wound up on his bed. She wasn't quite certain how it had transpired either. She had no idea what his next comment might be, but when he voiced it, she laughed. He was so strange.

"Don't wear your spectacles in my presence ever again. I don't like them and they hide your beautiful eyes."

"I have to wear them."

"Why? Is your vision poor?"

"No. I just need them. I can't explain any more clearly than that."

She'd been gone from England for most of a decade, and her appearance was very different from when she'd initially sailed away. First and foremost, she was seven years older. If she bumped into a prior acquaintance, she doubted she'd be recognized, but she wouldn't take that chance. The spectacles helped.

She could see the sore on his leg and she said, "I have some salve that might heal your injury."

"Is it a remedy a quack sold to you at a fair?"

"No. I brought it home from Egypt. The Moorish doctors there are very advanced compared to ours. Before I left, I purchased all

sorts of tonics and medicines.”

“You were in Egypt? Why?”

“That, Lord Grenville, is none of your business.”

His smile was very sly. “I’ll find out eventually. You can’t keep any secrets from me.”

“I’ll keep them long enough.” Suddenly, she jumped, as if she’d been poked with a pin. “You have me so discombobulated that I didn’t deliver your urgent message.”

“You claimed it was important, but are you positive you weren’t simply using it as an excuse to seduce me? I mean, you blustered in to waylay me so we enjoyed a few private minutes.”

She scoffed with derision. “You should be so lucky to capture my interest.”

“Well, you’ve definitely captured mine.”

She ignored the thrilling remark and focused on the moment. “Do you have a sister?”

“Yes, but we were never close and I haven’t seen her since we were children. Why?”

“Is her name Janet?”

“Yes, and again, why?”

“I hope I don’t shock you, but she’s down in the front parlor.”

He studied her oddly, as if she was babbling in a foreign language he didn’t understand. “Janet is downstairs?”

“Yes, and she’s suffered some difficulties. She needs some assistance.”

He frowned. “Are you certain it’s her? No matter how dire her circumstances, she would never seek aid at Grenville.”

“You can believe that if you want, but I swear she’s here in the flesh. Put on some clothes and join us. We’ll be waiting for you.” He seemed pole-axed, as if the news had pummeled him. He didn’t move and she motioned to his dressing room. “Can you manage on your own? Or should I send a footman to serve as your valet?”

He snorted. “I’ve been taking care of myself for three decades. I can pull on a pair of trousers without a footman pitching in.”

She wasn’t entirely convinced that he’d come down and she said, “You won’t sneak out a rear door, will you?”

“I probably won’t.”

“Not *probably*, Grenville. You *absolutely* won’t. I can’t guess what sort of history you have with your sister, but today, you’re starting over.”

“As if that could happen,” he muttered.

“Get going!” she said sternly. “I shouldn’t have to tell you twice.”

Finally, he stood and strolled off, a hand tightly gripping the towel at his waist, and she was furnished with a full-on view of his back. He’d been flogged frequently, old scars crisscrossing his smooth skin, providing more evidence that he’d endured egregious conditions during his career in the army. Was it any wonder he was so befuddled and impossible?

She was swamped by the most powerful wave of affection, and she was feeling that she’d been thrust into his world for a reason, that he needed someone to watch over him, and it should be her. She wasn’t too incompetent at protecting other people. She’d dragged Fog and Eddie home to England in one piece, hadn’t she?

A hundred maudlin comments were on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to inform him of how sorry she was about his past

experiences, how glad she was that she'd met him, how the universe had guided her to his side so she could make his life easier.

But she didn't dare mention any of that, and he wouldn't like to hear it anyway, so instead, she said, "I don't give you permission to call me by my Christian name."

He stopped and glanced back. "Why would I listen to you on any topic? I'll call you Rose and you'll call me Nathaniel."

"I might use Grenville or even St. James, but we won't be more cordial than that."

He laughed. "You have the strangest notions about your interactions with me. Haven't you realized it yet? I always get my way and you'll never win against me."

"I might win. Sometimes."

"Never," he murmured. "You'll never win."

He stared at her for an eternity and many emotions were swirling. It appeared as if they were more intimately attached than they should be. Were they growing fond? She'd have liked to deny it, but she was besieged by the most potent perception that he belonged to her and would be hers forever.

It was dangerous thinking, but it sounded so true.

He nodded to the door. "Go down and tend my sister, Rose. I'll be there shortly."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

It was so difficult to yank herself away, but she succeeded. As she walked out, she was anxious to peer over at him, to have the last word, but she was so overwhelmed by sentiment that she was terrified over what she might say. She kept her gaze straight ahead and escaped without dawdling or drooling over him.

Chapter

6

AS NATHANIEL APPROACHED THE front parlor, he was practically tiptoeing. He was so nervous! Although nothing that had happened to Janet had been his fault, he felt guilty and responsible.

It had been their depressing story as children that their grandfather had been omnipotent and powerful. They'd feared him and couldn't stand up to him. He'd been a cruel bully and he'd enjoyed tormenting them. He'd thrived on it.

Their mother had died shortly after Janet was born, and their father, who'd been a terrible scoundrel, had been killed in a duel soon after that. Nathaniel and his sister had been dumped on their grandfather, but he'd been older and hadn't wanted the burden of caring for them. He hadn't liked their mother either so he'd constantly insisted he had to tamp out any bad blood they might have inherited from her.

Nathaniel had been sent away to school at age seven so Janet had been a toddler when he'd departed. He'd rarely seen her after that so they had no common bond or memories to connect them.

He'd attended a military preparatory academy, where the rules had been very strict. He'd been a rambunctious boy who'd engaged in his share of mischief. Every infraction, no matter how minor, had been reported to his grandfather, and ultimately, his grandfather had declared him to be incorrigible. He'd been forced to enlist in the army at fourteen.

Initially, he'd been overwhelmed, but he'd quickly acclimated. Even when he'd been notified later on that his grandfather had requested he be given the harshest assignments—a decree his army superiors had gleefully accommodated—he hadn't wavered in his opinion that he'd walked the right path.

He was a tough warrior, decorated over and over for his unflinching courage. He wasn't afraid of anything so he'd been the perfect soldier. It was only after he'd been captured by mercenaries in Spain, after he'd been tortured, starved, and left to rot, that he'd grown bitter. It had been especially difficult after the other prisoners had been ransomed and freed.

He'd been abandoned by them, and it was a despicable act he didn't suppose he could ever forgive.

He had scant information about Janet's life with their grandfather. He assumed it had been horrid, but he couldn't guess just *how* horrid. When she'd been an adolescent, he'd

received one frantic letter from her where she'd apprised him that their grandfather had arranged her marriage to an elderly acquaintance.

She'd begged Nathaniel to help her, to stop him, but Nathaniel had been stationed in the Caribbean and much too far away to intervene. By the time her message had been delivered, months had passed from the date she'd written it. He'd replied to explain the situation, which had been pointless. Eventually, he'd learned that she'd run away rather than shackle herself to the fiancé their grandfather had selected.

He'd had limited contact with his grandfather, and on the few occasions he'd had a chance to inquire about her, the old brute had always claimed he had no details as to where she'd gone. If the deranged despot had murdered her, Nathaniel wouldn't have been surprised.

As it was, she'd been disowned and disavowed, with their grandfather behaving as if she'd perished. He'd been that incensed by her defiance.

Nathaniel had never heard from her again so he'd had no idea where she'd been living or how she'd supported herself. On becoming earl, he'd thought about instigating a search, but he'd had no clue of where to start so it was shocking to have her arrive out of the blue.

He was working mightily to regroup, and he was worried she might pitch him back into a pit of dejection and despair from which he couldn't recover. He didn't know her at all, and while they'd been birthed by the same parents, he felt as if a stranger had strolled in the door.

What could she want? What would she demand? If she needed money, he didn't have any. If she needed commiseration over her plight, his sympathy was in short supply.

He entered the room and assessed the occupants. Fog was there, with Rose. They were seated on a sofa and chatting quietly. A footman hovered in the corner, eavesdropping and waiting to be of service. A woman was seated on the chair across from Rose, and Nathaniel studied her, trying to decide if it was Janet. She looked so beaten down that it was hard to be sure.

Rose saw him and jumped up. "There you are. Come in, come in!"

She was being too cheery and he was aggravated by her zeal. He shouldn't have dallied with her up in his bedchamber, but she was just so fetching and he hadn't been wearing any clothes. The encounter had transpired like a fatal carriage accident that had been impossible to avoid. She would completely misconstrue that type of attention, but she fascinated him in ways he couldn't fight or ignore.

He wasn't sorry he'd proceeded. He was simply sorry to have stirred a mess he'd have to fix.

"Everyone out," he said.

His tone was cold and abrupt, and she faltered, her confusion evident. Then she straightened, gamely saying, "Apparently, you haven't talked to your sister in years. Let me introduce the two of you."

"We don't require an introduction so everyone out! Including you."

It was an awful comment, and it was obvious he'd hurt her feelings, but he was dazed and bewildered so he was being a beast.

She sagged slightly, but she was a tough nut. "You don't have to bite my head off. You could ask politely."

She stomped out like a whirling tempest. He stared after her, hoping to flash an apology, but he might have been invisible. Fog stood too and walked out, waving to the footman to leave with her. She was always more courteous than Rose, but then, she was residing in his home because he was being generous.

Rose was an employee so she had a reason to be strutting around. Fog and her son were merely freeloaders so she never annoyed him.

"If you need anything," she said, "call for me. I'll be right outside."

She and the footman left, the door shutting behind them, then he went over and sat on the sofa she'd vacated. He scrutinized his sister, but there wasn't much about her that was the same. She was an adult, and she looked as if she'd endured some painful experiences so he wasn't the only St. James sibling who'd struggled.

She was Rose's same age of twenty-five, but she could have been sixty. Her face was lined, her black hair turning grey, and she was much too thin. Whenever he'd wondered about her, he'd pictured her healthy and hale, but clearly, he'd been wrong.

"Hello, Nathaniel," she said, her voice tired.

"Hello, yourself. Miss Clark told me you were here, but I assumed she was pulling my leg. I figured the Grenville River House would be the very last place you'd ever visit."

She smirked at that. "I've had to lower my standards."

"Where have you been? I received one letter from you when I was stationed in the Caribbean. It was about Grandfather betrothing you to an elderly acquaintance. After that, I never found out what happened to you."

"Really?"

She sounded very snide, as if he was lying, and he bristled. "Yes, really. You're aware of what Grandfather was like. I repeatedly asked him where you were, and he claimed you'd disappeared and he had no information about you. He claimed he'd hunted for you, but you had vanished."

"He knew where I was. He always knew."

"Where was that?"

"I eloped with my dance master. Bertie Darnell?"

Nathaniel had had so little contact with her when she was growing up that he hadn't realized she'd had a dance master or that she'd run off with him.

"You eloped?" He chuckled, eager to make light of the incident. "That's rather scandalous, isn't it?"

“You weren’t around to rescue me and I had no allies. I didn’t have any choice.”

“How could I have helped you? I was halfway across the globe so I couldn’t have intervened. Even if I’d dared, I couldn’t have dissuaded Grandfather. He never listened to me on a single topic.”

“You could have aided me later on, when my circumstances deteriorated. I wrote to you over and over, but you never answered and you never came.”

“Again, I received one letter.” It occurred to him that his grandfather must have interfered with his mail somehow. Was that even possible? Evidently, it was another sin to lay at the old brute’s feet. “Why continue to write? What were you expecting me to do for you?”

“Bertie and I married, and we were certain Grandfather would eventually stop being angry, but he was so vindictive. He cut off my allowance, then severed all contact. Bertie tried to find work, but gradually, we discovered that Grandfather had ruined his chances everywhere.”

Nathaniel scoffed with derision. “You defied him, which he never permitted. If you presumed you could thwart him, then you were completely deluded as to his propensity for malice.”

“I’ve accepted that now, but in my own defense, I was sixteen when I ran away.”

“Where is your husband?”

“He passed away last year. We were living in Scotland, hiding from Grandfather, but it seemed that his malevolence extended across borders.” She took a deep breath and slowly released it. “It’s been very hard. After I learned he was dead, I was glad. How about you?”

Nathaniel shrugged. He’d keep his opinions to himself. Since he’d rotted in a mercenary’s prison, and his grandfather had convinced the government to leave him there, he had his own issues to resolve.

His grandfather had died forsaken and alone. His only son had been deceased for decades, and he’d cast his grandchildren to the winds of fate. When his black soul had arrived at the Pearly Gates, what must he have used as proof that he deserved to be admitted?

Nathaniel wasn’t religious, but he believed in Heaven and Hell. He doubted his grandfather had been welcomed into Heaven, and he was positive the man was sweating out eternity in a spot that was quite a bit hotter.

“Why are you here?” he asked, anxious to get to the heart of the matter.

“I’m a widow, with no money, who is out of options and who has suffered grievously. You’re my sole relative. May I stay with you? Please? I am at the end of my rope and I throw myself on your mercy.”

Tears welled into her eyes and he leaned over and patted her knee. “Of course you can stay with me,” he said. “For as long as you want.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. “If you’d refused, I can’t imagine what would have become of me.”

“It’s a big house.”

“I won’t be any bother. I swear.”

He snorted with amusement. “It’s what Fog and Miss Clark told me when they moved in and they’ve been nothing but a bother.”

“They seem kind.”

“They are.”

He stood and motioned to the door. “Let’s get you settled. Have they fed you?”

“Yes, I’ve been fed.”

“Good, because you look as if you might be starving.”

“I have been hungry occasionally the past few months.”

He blanched, then shook off his reaction. He was desperate to appear as if he was in charge and in control. “At the moment, I’m short of servants so the place is a mess. Don’t be too disconcerted by the conditions; we’re making progress to fix the chaos. We’ll talk to Miss Clark and find out what suite might be available.”

“I didn’t even bring a portmanteau of personal belongings. If you’d like to tuck me away in the attic, I’d be happy with that.”

“That is the most pitiful statement I’ve ever heard from a woman. Buck up, Janet. We’ll have you feeling better very soon.”

She hadn’t risen with him, and he was wondering if she wasn’t too worn down to stand on her own. He pulled her to her feet, and he squeezed her hands, trying to imbue her with some of his vigor.

“It will be all right now,” he said. “You’ll see.”

“It couldn’t be worse than it’s been.”

He led her out to the foyer. Fog was there with the footman, but Rose had vanished. He left Janet with Fog, figuring Fog would be able to deduce the assistance Janet required.

“Where is Miss Clark?” he asked Fog.

“She declared you a rude beast and that she’d had enough of your pomposity. She went to the library to finish her letter to the employment agency.”

He was startled by the comment. “She’s not quitting!”

“No, she’s not. You’re having her hire some housemaids and she’s working on it.”

He sighed with relief and pretended he hadn’t been temporarily alarmed, then he said to Janet, “I have to speak with her so I’ll check on you in a bit. Have a bath. Have a nap. We’ll have supper together, just the two of us, and you can tell me about your husband and your life with him.”

“You can tell me about your army years too,” Janet said.

He smirked. “I don’t talk about them. Not ever.”

He strolled away and they gaped after him. He was more distraught by the minute. Janet had stirred too many bad memories, and he couldn't deal with the emotions that were bubbling up.

He needed a healthy distraction, and Rose Clark could divert him like an acrobat at a circus. His attention would be that riveted.

He hurried to the library, absolutely on pins and needles over having the chance to chat with her. She'd be grumpy and angry, but he'd swiftly charm her, and she'd be putty in his hands.



ROSE HEARD GRENVILLE COMING long before she saw him. She was seated at the desk in the library. The room's condition wasn't as pathetic as some of the others. The drawers were tidy, the ink jar filled, the quills sharpened. She'd decided to have it be her own personal space. If she ever actually provided a lesson to Noah and Eddie, she'd utilize it for that purpose too.

Not that lessons were on the calendar. If she taught the two boys, or if she didn't, she doubted Grenville would notice.

He marched down the hall and posed imperiously in the doorway. He was visible out of the corner of her eye and impatiently waiting for her to acknowledge him, but she wouldn't stroke his massive ego.

He broke the silence. He always did. He was so accursedly annoying.

"I can outlast you," he said.

"Outlast me at what?"

"You can act as if I'm not here, and I'll stare you down until you're forced to concede. You're such a milksop."

"Why are you pestering me? Aren't you busy? Shouldn't you be tending your sister?"

"Fog took her upstairs so she can have a bath and a nap."

It was typical that he'd dump her on someone else. He was so disinterested in what was occurring around him. He wouldn't like to be bothered with a task that mattered.

She was drafting a list for the employment agency. She had no idea how many maids he wanted, but she would have them send five. If he didn't like it, he could load them in a carriage and send them back.

She hadn't glanced up and her disregard incensed him. Up in his bedchamber, he'd kissed her passionately, then he'd blustered into the parlor and treated her like a servant. She *was* a servant, but her feelings were hurt, and her mood was very low.

When she spent intimate time with him, she mistakenly assumed they were very close, as if she was his fiancée or wife. She was such an idiot and she had to stay away from him. It was the only way she could reside in the manor without him driving her mad with his nonsense.

Eventually, he ended their paltry standoff. He entered the room and walked around the desk so he was hovered over her shoulder.

“What are you writing?” he asked.

“It’s a note for the employment agency. I’ve apprised them we need women with nerves of steel and who are mature enough to tolerate having a lunatic for a boss.”

“Very funny.”

“Who’s being funny?”

She couldn’t bear to have him loomed over her. The agitation his proximity produced was simply too frustrating to abide. But to her great astonishment, he dipped down and kissed her. For a fleeting second, she reveled in the embrace, then she pushed him away and leapt to her feet.

“Stop that!” she said.

“I can’t. I like it too much.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Liar. Are you upset with me?”

“I’d have to fancy you to be upset. Your deranged conduct has no effect on me whatsoever.”

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“No.”

She tried to skirt by him, but they were wedged in behind the desk, and he was a large man. She wasn’t strong enough to shove him away.

“It was distressing for me to have my sister arrive,” he said.

“Oh.”

She’d been expecting a nauseating comment that would have infuriated her even more so she was stunned by the admission. He wouldn’t like to declare any weaknesses.

“I might have been a little short with you,” he said.

“A little?”

“Maybe a lot?”

“What is happening between us?” she asked. “Can you explain it to me? Occasionally, I feel as if we’re inordinately attached, then occasionally, I feel like I’m your scullery maid. I can’t deal with these swings of emotion where I’m never sure of my spot with you.”

“You’re definitely not a scullery maid.”

“Then don’t treat me like one.”

“If I remember correctly, I hired you as a governess for Noah. How is that situation proceeding?”

“I’ve only been here three days! I haven’t managed to locate any slates or schoolbooks so I can’t possibly begin. And I haven’t even seen Noah! He’s very good at hiding, and he’s giving me the distinct impression that he won’t sit through any lessons. Don’t blame me if he won’t focus. Perhaps you could pitch in and order him to heed me.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I’ve exhausted myself, you big oaf, carrying out numerous chores on your behalf. It’s not as if I’m a slacker who sleeps until noon—like you. I don’t waste energy like your lazy footmen who are gulping down the wine in your wine cellar because there’s no one in charge to tell them to knock it off.”

“The footmen are drinking my wine?”

“Yes. Not that you care. You told me to get the house in shape and I’m doing my best. This place has to become habitable or I won’t stay. If you’re unhappy with my efforts, I don’t mind if you yank them away from me. In the meantime, you could be less persnickety.”

“I am the least persnickety person in the kingdom.”

“Ha! You’re fussy as a matron chaperoning a debutante.”

“I hardly know Janet,” he said, abruptly changing the subject.

“Why don’t you know her?”

“I went to boarding school when I was seven and I was rarely allowed home after that.”

“Why not?”

He stared so intently that she supposed he wouldn’t answer her question, then he said, “My parents died when Janet and I were small so my grandfather had to raise us. He wasn’t keen to have two young children foisted on him and he wasn’t kind or patient.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. My own father was a brute so I might confess—just this once—that you have my sympathy.”

“Janet is a stranger to me, and her arrival will bring many recollections to the fore that I’d just as soon forget. Also, she’s suffered many difficulties, as have I, so her visit will be challenging for me.”

“My goodness, Grenville. That sounded like a rational statement, uttered by a rational man. If you don’t watch out, I might believe you’re a normal human being.”

“Will you pardon me if I’m not constantly polite and wonderful?”

She snorted with disgust. “I’ll try to pardon you.”

He stepped in and pressed her to the wall so his torso was crushed to hers all the way down. He kissed her tenderly, as if she was his sweetheart. It was very thrilling, but it stirred too many unwelcome sentiments she hated to have surface.

She shouldn't have participated, and they were lucky no one wandered by and caught them. Especially Noah or Eddie. And Heaven forbid that Fog discover their burgeoning infatuation. Rose would never hear the end of it.

Fog had been ruined by the lord of the manor, then tossed over once she was increasing. She was hoping to remain as Grenville's guest forever, but Rose was putting their security in jeopardy by flirting with him. It was insane to permit him such liberties, but her common sense had flown out the window.

He drew away, and he was smiling at her with a fondness that was disturbing and exciting. What was she to make of it?

"Have I mentioned that I'm glad you're here?" he said.

"Yes, and I might have mentioned that I'm glad too."

"Well, I was very serious." He bent down and nibbled at her nape, sending goosebumps cascading down her arms. "Help me with my sister," he murmured. "If I act like a beast, don't be angry."

"I'm always angry with you."

"Not always," he said, as he straightened.

His smile widened into a devil's grin, and she realized, if he kept gazing at her like that, she might commit any sin he suggested.

"Are we finished?" he asked. "Have I tamped down your silly spurt of temper?"

"It wasn't silly and you're obnoxious."

"May I be excused, Your Majesty?"

"I can't figure out why you traipsed in here in the first place."

"I had to charm you so you weren't upset with me. Did it work?"

"If it did, I won't admit it."

He whirled away and started out. Without glancing back, he said, "Would you hurry and hire some housemaids? I'm tired of the mess."

"I'm dancing as fast as I can, Grenville."

He halted and peered over at her. "When will you begin calling me Nathaniel?"

"Never?"

"You will—eventually. I'll wear you down so you'll do what I'm hoping."

It was the scariest comment he could have voiced. Once previous, with her nemesis, Charlie Money Penny, she'd succumbed to a scoundrel's sly seduction. Where amour was concerned, she couldn't buck up and be strong. She simply had romantic inclinations that were so hard to ignore.

Yet she felt compelled to state, "You're much too cocky, and you shouldn't automatically assume you'll get your way with me."

“I’ve already succeeded,” he said. “So far in our brief acquaintance, we’ve engaged in two delightful trysts, and I’m sure I’ll corner you again very soon. Before you know it, I will have you fully corrupted.”

“We’re not jumping into a liaison. You’re too disoriented to enter into an ardent relationship, and there’s no benefit for me to dally with you. Behave yourself.”

“I don’t like to behave.”

He started out again and she told him, “Track down your sneaky little son. Tell him we need to meet so I can find out if he’s had any schooling.”

“Noah has had plenty of schooling, and he’s smart as a whip, but it hasn’t been definitively proven that he’s my son. Please don’t talk as if he is.”

“Oh, for pity’s sake. Look in the mirror, Grenville. You don’t have to wait for evidence from a functionary.”

He winked at her. He winked! Then he sauntered out, tossing over his shoulder, “I’ll see you later. After Janet has me completely disconcerted, I’ll locate you. You can calm me down.”

“You say that like a threat.”

“No, I say it like a promise.”

He vanished down the hall and she eased onto the chair behind the desk. She leaned forward and laid her forehead on the wood. She rested there for an eternity, pondering him, pondering their kisses, pondering the danger that was approaching.

He was in a low condition, still reeling from what had happened at his last army posting. She was in a low condition too, as she staggered about and tried to stabilize her circumstances. They were both lonely and they enjoyed a peculiar affection. She had no ability to fight it. She didn’t want to fight it.

She wanted to leap up and chase after him. She wanted to spend the afternoon, loafing in his exhilarating company, but that was an insane idea. With a rogue like him, there could be no good conclusion. A male could immorally revel, but a female couldn’t. It only brought disaster and ruin.

Hadn’t her fleeting affair with Charlie Money Penny taught her any lessons? Apparently, she’d forgotten them because she was falling for Nathaniel St. James. It was as if she’d tumbled off a cliff and she was stupidly expecting him to be at the bottom to catch her. But a man like him never caught a girl like her.

He wasn’t Prince Charming and she wasn’t Cinderella, but she yearned to cast caution to the wind and be negligently happy for a change. She yearned for Nathaniel St. James to give her everything she sought, even though he wouldn’t be sincere as he enticed her.

My, my, but wasn’t she in trouble?

Chapter

7

“DID SHE TELL YOU about where she’s been?”

“In Scotland, hiding from her grandfather.”

Rose was with Fog, in their family quarters that were located in the south wing and far away from the slothful footmen, insane Grenville, or the mess in the main portion of the manor. As opposed to the rest of the house, their rooms were tidy and comfortable.

Fog had spent several hours with Janet Darnell. She was adept at displaying sympathy, but Rose was too cynical to be of much help in the sympathy department. She expended all her energy feeling sorry for herself, and she didn’t have any compassion left for anyone else.

“Why was she so afraid of her grandfather?” Rose asked. “How could he have harmed her in Scotland? He couldn’t fly like a bird. Was she worried he’d show up at her door and shout at her?”

“When she was an adolescent, he arranged an awful marriage for her. He wouldn’t listen to her objections so she eloped with her dance master.”

Rose’s jaw dropped. “No! And here I thought *I* was the only woman in the kingdom who made such ridiculous choices.”

“She was sixteen and her grandfather was a fiend who didn’t like to be thwarted. He used his influence to ensure her husband could never find employment. Wherever they went, his spies followed them and ruined their situation.”

“What a vindictive tyrant. I always assumed Colonel Clarkson was the biggest ass in the world. Apparently, there are hordes of them lurking in the shadows.”

“She was widowed last year and she’s been waiting to hear that the old ogre was dead so she could return home.”

“Nathaniel mentioned that they are practically strangers,” Rose said. “He expects her presence to stir many emotional issues.”

She blanched. Why had she started to think of Grenville as Nathaniel? It was the height of folly to call him by his Christian name in front of Fog. In an instant, Fog pounced.

“Why on earth would you refer to him as Nathaniel?” Fog demanded. “Have you been flirting with him?”

“Why would I flirt with him?”

“How about because he’s a handsome, dashing bachelor? He’s drowning in misery and every woman wants to save a man who needs saving. It’s the idiocy that haunts our gender.”

“I’m merely trying to restore order to the manor for him,” Rose lied. “I would never attempt to save him. He has too many problems and I’m not a miracle-worker.”

Rose had fibbed so outrageously that she was surprised she wasn’t struck by lightning. She couldn’t hold Fog’s gaze and Fog wasn’t fooled.

“You’ve been misbehaving with him, haven’t you?” Fog said. “Didn’t you learn anything from your pointless fling with Charlie Money Penny?”

Rose’s cheeks heated with mortification. “I learned plenty and I’m still suffering the aftereffects. You shouldn’t fret that I’ll ever act stupidly over a man.”

“If you’ve commenced an amour with Lord Grenville, it’s clear you’re deluded. An ordinary girl like you can’t get involved with a scoundrel like him. A nobleman never marries for love and he never marries *down*. If he’s showering you with attention, he’s not contemplating matrimony. You shouldn’t imagine he is.”

“I don’t imagine that.”

Fog scoffed. “It’s another idiocy of our gender. If a rogue glances in our direction, we decide we’re irresistible. We begin to hear wedding bells.”

“Not me. I couldn’t bear to be a wife. I would never let some oaf lord himself over me. I dealt with too much of that sort of pomposity as Colonel Clarkson’s daughter.”

“I’m serious, Rose. You have to be careful. This is a good spot for us. If you fall into a romantic trap with Lord Grenville, it will end in disaster. Then where will we be?”

“There’s nothing happening between us.”

“Should I inquire of Lord Grenville?” Fog asked. “Should I seek his opinion about what’s occurring?”

“Don’t you dare speak to him. I’d be so embarrassed and you’re not my mother. I won’t have you nagging at me as if I’m a debutante who requires a chaperone.”

“No, I’m not your mother, but you have an ardent nature that can lead you astray. You succumbed to it once so you have to constantly tamp it down. You can’t allow it to flow free. Neither can I. I figured that out shortly after I told the Colonel I was in the family way. He left and I never saw him again.”

“I was there; I remember.”

“I’m a decade older than you so I’ve had more time to rein in my worst impulses. You’re still young and prone to making mistakes.”

“Would you cease your badgering?” Rose said. “I’m not about to destroy myself with Nathaniel St. James. I’m smarter than that.”

“Are you?”

The question hung in the air between them, and Rose couldn't deny that she probably *wasn't* smarter, and Fog knew it.

Rose wasn't physically ruined. She was socially ruined, her character completely shredded, her true identity buried to conceal her past. No matter how valiantly she tried, she would never be able to repair her reputation.

The whole debacle was grossly unfair, and she hadn't stopped fuming over how it had unraveled. She'd never lain with Charlie Money Penny. He'd done his best to coax her into salacious conduct, but she'd insisted she had to have a ring on her finger first so he'd convinced her to elope.

He'd believed—as Janet Darnell had believed about her grandfather—that he could wed Rose without permission, and the Colonel would eventually forgive them. Rose had been seventeen and madly in love, and he'd been a sweet-talking devil whose insane ideas had sounded rational.

She'd understood what the Colonel was like, that he never brooked any defiance, but Charlie had persuaded her that they could run off without consequence. The Colonel had chased after them and dragged her home in disgrace. Charlie had bragged about their plan to his fellow soldiers, had bragged that he'd coerced her into a carnal liaison, which was why they'd had to proceed secretly and in a hurry. When they'd fled, the entire regiment had been gossiping about her being a soiled dove, but with his marital plot foiled, he'd deserted her quickly enough.

She'd been too stupid to grasp reality though. For months, she'd counted on him to rescue her, and she'd jumped at every little noise, being certain he was about to arrive, but he'd slithered away and vanished. The Colonel had locked her in her room as he'd waited to discover if there would be a child from her misadventure. She'd sworn there wouldn't be, but he hadn't listened.

She'd been forsaken by Charlie to face the Colonel's wrath on her own, and once it was determined she wouldn't spit out a bastard, he'd banished her to Egypt. He'd had Fog accompany her, and he'd claimed a retired army chum would be there to greet and assist them, but no one had appeared. They'd staggered about in the foreign land, with no guidance and no support.

He'd ordered them to stay away until he'd calmed down, but he'd never calmed down. He'd abandoned her there, scraping by on a meager allowance, while sending her angry screeds that informed her of what a horrid daughter she'd been.

She'd spent the first year of her exile, naively watching for Charlie, being positive he'd show up, but he'd moved on without a backward glance. A man never suffered any penalty for sexual misbehavior so, as far as she was aware, he was still in the army. The Colonel had had him transferred out of the country and he'd gone on his merry way.

As to Rose, she'd been disowned and disavowed, tossed away like a sack of rubbish from all that was familiar. The Colonel had finally died so she'd journeyed to England, but

there had been no assets remaining to stabilize her circumstances. No money. No home. No friends to offer refuge or support.

When Charlie had asked the Colonel to let them marry, Rose had been bewildered over his refusal, but since then, she'd heard rumors that Charlie was a notorious scofflaw and schemer. The Colonel had known the truth, but Rose hadn't. She'd been blinded by love.

Well, she was an adult now and the blinders were off. She'd learned too much about men and their motives. It was why she was startled to be feeling some affection for Grenville. She shouldn't be enticed, but she couldn't resist.

"Please don't worry about me and Grenville," she said, eager to soothe Fog's qualms. "For seven years, every ounce of my focus has been on keeping you and Eddie safe. I would never jeopardize our situation for a silly flirtation."

"A handsome man can slyly turn a girl's head. Lord Grenville could make it easy to forget right from wrong."

"Trust me. I will never forget it. I have no desire to land myself in another amorous jam."

The door to the hall was open, and suddenly, Noah and Eddie raced by. She went out and called after them, "Hey, you two miscreants! Stop where you are!"

Eddie was generally a good boy. He listened to her and his mother, and they never had to implement any discipline, simply because he never committed any acts that would warrant punishment. What about Noah? He was a mystery.

The pair had grown to be fast friends. They were always together, and when Eddie was eating supper, it was *Noah this* and *Noah that*.

At her hollering after them, they pulled up short and peeked at each other, visually debating whether to ignore her and continue on. She marched down to them, figuring she'd grab hold of their arms if they tried to escape.

"Where are you going?" she inquired. "And don't lie to me. I can read minds. I'll know if you are."

"You can't read minds," Eddie scoffed.

"Yes, I can," she countered. "Ask your mother. She'll tell you."

Eddie said to Noah, "She's fibbing; she has no magical powers."

"Noah," she said, "it doesn't seem as if anyone is in charge of you."

"I'm in charge of myself," he boasted.

"You aren't any longer. Where do you sleep at night?"

"Here and there," he vaguely claimed.

"Who feeds you? Are you served regular meals?"

"If I'm hungry, I ask the cook to feed me."

The news was a relief. It meant Noah wouldn't starve, but he needed more structure.

Rose and Fog had their meals delivered from the kitchen, and they dined as a family so they could have Noah join them. It would provide a modicum of supervision.

"I've been thinking about you," she said to Noah.

"I wish you wouldn't."

"This is what I've decided. Until Lord Grenville declares you to be his son, you'll live with us."

Noah frowned. "I don't want to do that."

"I'm not giving you a choice."

Eddie was a peacemaker and he never bickered with Rose. He told Noah, "It'll be fun. You'll see."

"I wouldn't like her to boss me," Noah said to Eddie.

"I won't boss you. I swear," Rose said. "I'd just like you to have a more stable schedule. You'll eat and sleep with us and Fog will keep track of you."

"I especially don't want that," Noah complained. "I don't even know her."

"You'll get to know her," Rose insisted.

"My mother is very nice," Eddie said. "You'll like her."

Noah looked dubious, and he was about to quarrel over her edict, but she wouldn't tolerate any sass. She had no maternal tendencies, but she figured she could out-argue a ten-year-old boy.

"You'll share Eddie's room with him too," she said, "so your chore for this afternoon is to find a bed and bring it to our apartment. If you can't carry it, muster the footmen and have them carry it for you."

Noah was mulishly silent and Eddie said, "We'll take care of it, Rose. Don't worry."

That was all the commanding Noah could abide. He nodded to Eddie and they ran off.

"I'm serious, Noah," she yelled. "Starting tonight, you're eating and sleeping with us."

The boys waved a hand, indicating they'd heard her, then they vanished around the corner. She went back into the apartment and Fog was seated on the sofa by the fire.

"Where are they off to?" she asked.

"I wouldn't dare guess," Rose replied. "We have no information about Noah, but to me, he seems very mature and much too independent. Should we fret that he might be a bad influence on Eddie?"

"No. We should expect that Eddie might be a good influence on *him*. I think he's lonely and you're correct that he should have some supervision. I'm glad you ordered him to move in with us. I should have thought of it myself."

Rose walked to the door. "I'm heading to the library to finish my notes for the employment agency. If you need me, that's where I'll be."

“I won’t need you,” Fog said. “These days, my life is just about perfect.”

Rose crossed her fingers that Fog’s view of their situation would remain true for the foreseeable future. As for herself, she’d learned not to count on anything. Ever since she’d met Charlie Money Penny, she’d felt as if the universe was punishing her and hadn’t yet grown bored with making her suffer.

If a positive event occurred, she braced, certain a negative event would follow shortly to balance out her personal ledger.

She wandered through the large house and it was like touring a mausoleum. Most of the salons were closed off, the doors shut, much of the furniture sold at creditor’s auctions. The hallways and stairwells were currently temperate, but it was summer. If they were still present in the winter, the common areas would be very chilly so they might have to relocate to the central portion of the manor.

Would they be residing with Grenville in December? She wouldn’t try to speculate. She supposed, if she could stay away from him, it might be possible.

She reached the foyer and, as if she’d conjured him by contemplating him so fervidly, he came limping down the stairs. She gazed up at him, being exasperated by how her pulse fluttered with excitement. She was thrilled as the most naïve debutante. He didn’t halt until they were toe to toe, and he was standing so near that her skirt swirled around his legs.

“Hello, Miss Clark,” he said, smiling deliciously.

“You’re limping. Would you like me to fetch my salve? I could slather it on your injury. You’d heal faster.”

He shrugged off her concern. “Where are you off to in such a rush?”

“I’m drafting my instructions for the employment agency. I’d like to hold the interviews immediately. May I go into the city tomorrow to confer with the proprietor?”

“Of course you can. You’re not my prisoner.”

“Yes, but I would hate to have you searching for me, only to discover that I’d left without your permission. You’d probably pitch a fit.”

“Would you like me to escort you?”

At the notion of traipsing about town with him, her pulse fluttered at an even more frantic pace. What was wrong with her?

“Are you joking?” she said. “I can’t let the people at the employment agency meet you. If they realized what a lout you are, they might refuse to send any candidates.”

“You have the smartest mouth,” he said. “Why am I putting up with you?”

“I’m simply stating the facts. I can’t help it if the truth hurts.”

As they’d enjoyed their flirtatious banter, they’d gradually shifted so her body was touching his. Magnets might have been pulling them together, and despite the assurances she’d voiced to Fog, she was scaring herself. She might do any crazed thing.

He was staring at her so fondly. Was he about to kiss her? Right out in the open? Was he that brazen?

Before she could learn the answer to that question, footsteps sounded behind her, and he eased away so there was plenty of space between them. They peered over to see a footman marching toward them.

“Lord Grenville,” the boy said, “there you are. I’ve been hunting for you everywhere. You have a visitor.”

“My goodness. Who is it?”

“He wouldn’t give me his name, but he claims he’s an old chum. He’s in the front parlor.”

Grenville raised a brow, then he said to Rose, “This should be interesting. I wonder who it could be. I never have visitors unless they’re on the premises to eat and drink at my debauched parties.”

“Find me later so you can tell me about it. I’ll be in the library.”

“Why don’t you come in with me?”

“After how you treated me when your sister arrived, I have to pass.”

He smirked and continued on by himself, while she headed in the other direction. Suddenly, he bellowed, “What are you doing in my home? How dare you show your face here!”

There were thudding noises, as if someone had been pummeled. Then there was a loud crash, as if furniture had been knocked over.

She and the footman shared an alarmed glance, then they ran to the parlor. She dashed inside and staggered to a halt. A brown-haired man about Grenville’s age was down on his knees, blood flowing from his nose and dripping down his shirt.

Grenville was loomed over him, his fists clenched, and he said to the battered fellow, “Get out! Now! Or I’ll hit you again.”



NATHANIEL STROLLED INTO THE parlor, not sure who to expect. He hoped his guest wouldn’t sour his mood. He was actually feeling fairly spry for a change. He hadn’t waited for the footman to announce him, and when he recognized who was sitting on his sofa, his temper exploded.

“What are you doing in my home?” he demanded. “How dare you show your face here!”

His ex-best friend, Christopher Blake, the man he’d once viewed as a brother, the man with whom he’d traveled the globe, the man with whom he’d engaged in a thousand battles

and other misadventures, the man he'd assumed would stand up with him at his wedding, who would eulogize him at his funeral, pushed himself to his feet and said, "Hello, Nate. I heard you were back, and I finally mustered the courage to talk to you."

Nathaniel stomped over and punched him just as hard as he could. Christopher had always been a brawler, so he was perfectly capable of defending himself, but he hadn't anticipated an attack so Nathaniel was able to pounce.

"Calm down," Christopher said, appearing completely calm himself, and his aplomb maddened Nathaniel as nothing else could have.

"Get out! Now!" Nathaniel warned. "Or I'll hit you again."

Rose took that moment to barge in. She assessed the horrid scene, then said, "Nathaniel St. James! What are you thinking?"

He shouted at her before he could bite down the harsh words. "This isn't any of your business, Rose. Go away and don't make me tell you twice."

He should have known she'd ignore him. She blustered over, the footman by her side. They each grabbed one of Christopher's arms and lifted him up and onto the sofa. The footman retrieved a kerchief from his coat and offered it to Christopher who used it to dab at his bloody nose. His eye was swelling shut, and it would take weeks to heal, so he'd constantly be reminded that he hadn't been forgiven and never would be.

He glared up at Nathaniel, as if the paltry altercation was Nathaniel's fault. Rose and the footman were glaring too, and Nathaniel was so infuriated that he was frightening himself. He couldn't predict how he might lash out. His main impulse was to increase the assault, to beat Christopher until he was naught but a lump on the floor, but he didn't suppose he should allow Rose or a servant to observe his propensity for violence.

He said to Christopher, "I am heading up to my bedchamber. I will pull out my pistol and load it. Then I'll come back downstairs. If I stumble on you, I'll kill you. I swear I will so I suggest you oblige me and *get* out of my house!"

"Would you stop being so melodramatic?" Christopher asked.

"I'm not being melodramatic," Nathaniel told him. "I'm serious as an apoplexy. With the mood I'm in, I've decided a quick homicide would be a grand idea."

Rose intervened again, stepping between them so she blocked Christopher from Nathaniel's sight.

"You're not fetching your pistol," she scolded, "and you're not shooting anybody. You absolutely should return to your bedchamber, then stay there until this spurt of rage has waned. I will escort your visitor off the property, then I'll inform you when he's gone."

She was such a tiny little thing, but she had a cunning way of dealing with him. She had a spine of steel too. Her hands were on her hips, her expression incensed, and she was giving off the strongest impression that—if he lunged for Christopher—she'd jump in and wrestle him to a halt.

He didn't want to fight with her. He didn't want to shoot Christopher either. He simply wanted the disloyal fiend to vanish and never return.

"I will go to my room," he said to her, "and I will wait for fifteen minutes. Then I'll come back down. I swear, Rose, if he's still here, I can't be responsible for my actions. Get rid of him! Immediately!"

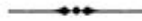
Christopher felt compelled to chime in with, "It's absolutely typical that you would refuse to talk to me."

Rose whirled around and snapped at Christopher. "You're not helping, sir. Be silent."

She stared Nathaniel down, and he hesitated for a brief instant, eager for her to understand that he was leaving because he'd chosen to depart and not because she'd ordered him out. She was the *governess*. Who the hell was she to command him over any issue?

In the months he'd been in England, he'd wondered how he'd react if he crossed paths with any of the villains who'd left him behind in Spain. He'd suspected he'd be angry, but apparently, he'd had no idea.

He whipped away and marched out without another word.



CHRISTOPHER WAS FROZEN IN his spot, listening as Nathaniel stomped up the stairs. Once the air had settled, he facetiously said, "That went well."

"Honestly!" the woman, Rose, exclaimed. "What was that about? I'm sure it's none of my business, but since I stumbled into the middle of it, I suppose I deserve an explanation."

The footman poured him a brandy. Christopher took it and downed a long swallow, then he said to Rose, "I'm Mr. Christopher Blake. I'm Nathaniel's best friend."

She snorted with disbelief. "If that's how you two conduct yourselves when you're friends, I'd hate to see how you carry on when you're enemies. Shouldn't you be going? I'm terribly afraid he's about to return with his pistol."

Christopher waved away her concern. "He won't kill me. I know him better than anyone in the world. He'll fret and stew for a bit, then his fit of rage will pass."

"I hope you're correct. I'm not keen to witness a murder."

She shoed the footman out, then grabbed the liquor decanter and refilled his glass. She plopped down on the chair across from him and introduced herself.

"I'm Miss Rose Clark."

"Are you Nathaniel's fiancée? I hadn't heard that he was engaged."

"I'm not his betrothed. I'm the governess."

“The governess? Really?”

Christopher was dubious. He’d observed the affection swirling between them, and she cleverly manipulated Nathaniel. Christopher was certain her role in the manor was much higher than a mere servant.

“Who are you serving as governess *for*?” he asked. “Is there a child on the premises?”

“Yes, there’s a child. I probably shouldn’t mention it, but a boy was delivered a few weeks ago.”

Christopher was aghast. “A baby?”

She chuckled. “No, he’s ten. His name is Noah, and it’s very likely that Lord Grenville is his father. Grenville doesn’t recall Noah’s mother though so he’s having the matter investigated. In the meantime, Noah is here, and I’ve been hired to mind him.” She flashed an impish grin. “I don’t have any maternal instincts so I’m only nominally in charge.”

He laughed at that and it made his bruises ache. He peered around the room, which was in shocking disarray. The place was a mess, the servants not supervised, the chores not being completed. There were rumors circulating that Nathaniel was hosting ribald parties every night. It was how Christopher had learned he was back in England.

“Why is the house in such a sorry condition?” he asked her. “Have you any notion of what’s wrong?”

“Again, I’m positive I’m being much too indiscreet, but Lord Grenville’s grandfather died in debt. He owed a huge amount of wages to the staff, and when the employees discovered they wouldn’t be paid, they resigned. Creditors seized numerous chattels too, so many of the parlors are empty and closed off.”

“Gad, what a disaster,” Christopher murmured, more to himself than to her.

“Lord Grenville arrived home to find the property basically in ruins. My current task is to drum up a housekeeper and some housemaids who, with any luck, will improve things very fast.”

“You’re handling it? Aren’t you the governess?”

“If I don’t take care of it, who will? Lord Grenville isn’t exactly healthy enough to deal with any problems.”

“That much is obvious.”

“How are you acquainted with him?” she asked. “And why are you quarreling?”

“We were in the army together. We were in Spain too. He’s bitter over an ordeal we survived.”

“You are a master of understatement.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll sort it out.”

“That’s a relief. I couldn’t bear to break up another brawl.”

She stared at him, her pretty green eyes digging deep. Was she aware of what had happened in Spain? Just how cordial was she with Nathaniel? Would he have shared the details with her?

Well, if he had or if he hadn't, Christopher wasn't about to unburden himself. The entire tragedy was an embarrassing nightmare, and it was his specific intent to never discuss it with anyone except Nathaniel, the trick being to get him to listen.

"Would you excuse me?" he said and he pushed himself to his feet. "I should check on Nathaniel."

"Is that wise? I thought you were departing. When he told you to go, I'm sure he was serious."

"I know him, remember? His spurt of temper will have faded so he and I will be able to behave like rational human beings."

She smirked. "You're being overly optimistic. You claim that you know him, but he's ill and rundown so I suspect—if you can persuade him to talk to you—you'll realize he's very changed. He won't act as you're expecting."

"It's my prerogative as his oldest friend that he has to pardon me for the sins I've committed against him."

At least he hoped that would become true. His transgressions were appalling and horrid, and he couldn't guess if he'd ever fix what he'd wrecked. But he had to try.

"It was a pleasure, Miss Clark," he said.

"I shall pray you're not about to be murdered. If he kills you, and your blood soaks into the rug, the footmen aren't sufficiently competent to wash out the stains."

"Has he moved into the master suite?"

"Yes. Shall I show you where it is?"

"No, thank you."

He walked out and headed for the stairs, and he climbed slowly, feeling very much like a felon marching to the gallows. He'd been correct in declaring that Nathaniel wouldn't kill him. He had no doubts on that score, but he was desperately anxious to be forgiven, and his guilty conscience wouldn't let him rest until he was.



NATHANIEL WAS LURKING BY the window in his sitting room and gazing down at the decrepit, untended garden. He wished he had a view of the driveway so he could watch Christopher slinking away, but he was located in the rear section of the house.

His fury had calmed a bit, but not nearly enough. He wouldn't slay his ex-friend, but he would definitely like to deliver a few more fierce punches, so he'd hide until Rose apprised him that the coast was clear.

The door opened behind him, and he spun around, thinking it would be her. When he saw it was Christopher, he was surprised, but not surprised too. Nathaniel always presumed he was the most obstinate man in the kingdom, but it was highly likely that Christopher was even more stubborn.

"Did you pull out your pistol?" Christopher asked like the arrogant prick he was. "Will you shoot me?"

"I was very blunt with you down in the front parlor, and you're not deaf so what part of *go away* didn't you understand?"

"I'm not leaving until we chat."

"Why would you assume that I'd like to converse? I have naught to say to you."

"Well, I have several things to say to you."

"I don't care to hear them. If you're suffering from remorse, find yourself a priest. It's futile to confess to me."

Despite Nathaniel's caustic attitude, Christopher blustered in and made himself comfortable. There was a liquor tray on the dresser. He poured them both a whiskey, then sauntered over. He extended a glass to Nathaniel, and initially, Nathaniel didn't reach for it, but he quickly relented. He was in an aggrieved state, and alcohol would have an immediate and palliative effect.

A lengthy, fraught silence ensued, but Nathaniel wasn't about to break it. He couldn't think of a single comment that would be worth uttering. Christopher felt no such restraint though.

"I spoke with Miss Clark," he said. "She claims she's your governess."

"Yes, so?"

"It's a boy!" Christopher crowed. "Congratulations."

"Bugger off."

Another silence festered, and Nathaniel tried to ignore him, but it was impossible. He was irked to discover that Christopher looked grand, as if he'd never endured a moment of tribulation. He was clean shaven, his brown hair neatly trimmed, his brown eyes alight with a hale vigor.

The last time Nathaniel had seen him, he'd been starving and thin as a rail, but since he'd been home, he'd filled out nicely.

"Miss Clark is an interesting piece of work," Christopher said, apropos of nothing.

"And your point is ...?"

"Have you seduced her?"

“What a bloody insult to her character—and to mine. Shut up or I’ll hit you again.”

“I’m just curious. The two of you seem intimately connected. I asked her if she was your fiancée. After she explained that she wasn’t, I figured you were dallying with her.”

“With my governess? What is wrong with you?”

Nathaniel yanked the liquor out of Christopher’s hand, and he stomped over and put both glasses on the tray. Then he motioned to the door, indicating Christopher should scurry out, but of course, the oaf didn’t budge.

“Will I have to throw you out bodily?” Nathaniel asked.

“I’ll go in a minute.”

“Why don’t you go *now*? That way, I won’t have to grow any angrier than I already am.”

Out of the blue, Christopher declared, “I’m sorry I didn’t come back for you.”

“So am I. I will humiliate myself and admit that I exhausted myself waiting for you, yet you never arrived. If my grandfather hadn’t died, I’d still be stuck there.”

“I intended to return.”

“Sure you did.” Nathaniel’s tone was lethal.

“I’m serious! I planned to, and I was even gathering supplies for a stealth raid, but I was laid low by a fever. I was carried on board the ship and I was too incoherent to protest. Once I regained my wits sufficiently to grasp what had transpired, I was halfway to England.”

“Bully for you, but here’s a question to answer—if you have the nerve to be truthful. In the beginning, you insisted you couldn’t save me because you were too ill. What was your excuse after you reached London? All those months, while I was chained to a tree and repeatedly tortured, while you were loafing and recuperating at home, what actions were you taking then?”

Christopher’s cheeks heated and he looked ashamed. “I have no defense for my dithering. My health was weakened and my strength depleted. I was simply glad to be alive and you were forsaken by me.”

“Exactly,” Nathaniel murmured.

“Will you ever be able to forgive me?”

“Why would I? Give me one good reason.”

“I tried to implement a few solutions. I petitioned the government to mount a rescue. I begged your grandfather to cough up funds for one. I worked to convince others to rush to your aid in my stead because I was too much of a coward to help you myself. My numerous pleas didn’t succeed, but you have to know that I tried.”

“That’s lovely to hear, Chris, but the fact remains that I was left behind by you.”

They’d been patrolling a deserted portion of the Spanish coast, hunting for a group of violent mercenaries who’d been on a murderous rampage. He still had no idea why they’d really been in the area. It hadn’t been a British colony or protectorate. As far as he was aware,

the Crown had had no business butting its nose into any mischief that was occurring in the region, but Nathaniel had been a loyal soldier who'd followed orders.

After much furious reflection, he'd decided there had been furtive dealings among his commander and some of the other men. Had it been diamonds? Gold? Women? He'd never been certain.

A soldier in their unit, an untrustworthy nuisance named Charlie Money Penny, had supposedly received information that had directed them inland to the mercenaries' camp, but it had been a trap. Nathaniel and six other men had been captured and held for ransom. Not Money Penny though. At the first sign of trouble, he'd skated away—as was his wont.

The conditions in the camp had been brutal, and Nathaniel was amazed he hadn't starved or perished from the sort of fever that had infected Christopher on the journey home.

The ransom had eventually been paid for the others, but no agreement had been struck for him. He'd had to watch his comrades march away, but he'd been positive they'd sneak back to rescue him. It had been the worst part of it. The anticipation. The yearning. Ultimately, he'd had to accept that they'd abandoned him.

He'd persevered through every adversity, then, six months later, he'd been unchained and escorted to the coast. He'd boarded a British naval vessel and had been brought to England. He'd been at death's door, an emaciated, wounded, feral kind of animal, and considering his meager state when he'd been released, he was incredibly astonished by his body's ability to repair itself.

Rose accused him of being surly and unfocused, but she couldn't have imagined what he'd endured, what he'd survived. He recognized that his grandfather had been a cruel fiend, but he didn't understand why the army had indulged him in his petty quest to punish and humiliate Nathaniel.

Why had his grandfather hated him so much? The pathetic ogre was deceased now so Nathaniel had lost the chance to pry out an explanation. The terrible treachery was in the past and it couldn't be changed.

He could simply stare at Christopher and vividly recollect how he'd been left to rot. It was a horrendous sin for Christopher—or any soldier—to commit, and he couldn't deduce how they could ever interact. Why would Christopher believe they could mend what he'd destroyed?

“Have you ever talked to Money Penny about what happened?” Nathaniel asked.

“I haven't tracked him down, but you know what he's like.”

“Slippery as an eel.”

“Yes, that's a perfect description.”

“If I ever stumble on him, I'll murder him. If you bump into him, warn him for me. Tell him he'd better hide.”

“You're in a homicidal mood today.”

“I am every day. I keep myself busy by contemplating all the people I’d like to slay.”

Christopher chuckled miserably. “Don’t slay me. Just forgive me.”

“I don’t want to forgive you.”

“We’re still relatively young, and we might live for many more decades so there’s plenty of time for you to relent. I’m an optimist so I will hope for the best.”

Christopher finally went to the door, and although it was ridiculous, Nathaniel was a tad sorry to have him depart. Only a tad however. Christopher realized why Nathaniel was so scattered in his thoughts, so disoriented in his habits. If Nathaniel unburdened himself as to his plight, Christopher would empathize as no other person could, but commiseration was pointless.

“Don’t visit me in the future,” he said.

“I can’t oblige you. I intend to become a thorn in your side. You’re hosting constant parties, but you were never much of a social animal. Why are you behaving so oddly?”

“It amuses me.” In reality, he liked having crowds fill his parlors. It helped him to ignore his problems.

“Isn’t it expensive to repeatedly entertain a ribald horde?” Christopher asked.

“Yes, it’s very expensive.”

“Then why waste the funds? Miss Clark has apprised me that your grandfather died penniless so you’re broke.”

“Perhaps Miss Clark should mind her own business.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but how can you afford such extravagance?”

“I can’t, but I’m letting my new-found friends empty Grandfather’s larder and wine cellar. It’s such frivolous conduct that he’s probably rolling in his grave.”

“He was a pitiless wretch,” Christopher said, “so that’s a very pretty picture to ponder.”

“When the food and wine are gone, I’ll have to stop.”

“For now, it’s a regular nocturnal bacchanal, and my acquaintances inform me that there is an open invitation to anyone who wishes to attend.”

“It doesn’t apply to you.”

“I’m making it apply to me.” Christopher stepped into the hall and said, “And please be careful around Miss Clark. I’m not certain what’s transpiring between you two, but you’re sending her the wrong signals.”

Nathaniel scoffed. “I need advice from you like I need a hole in the head.”

He’d thought Christopher would saunter off, but he hesitated, and they gaped at each other in a manner that was poignant and embarrassing. Eventually, Christopher said, “You look good, Nate. You look much better than I expected.”

“I am all right, but as with Miss Clark and her interfering ways, my condition is none of your business at all.”

Christopher smirked in acknowledgement. “I’ll see you tonight.”

He walked off, and it was on the tip of Nathaniel’s tongue to tell him again to stay away, but for some reason, he didn’t speak the words aloud. Dozens of people would be present for the evening’s festivities. How could it hurt to have one more guest?

Chapter

8

ROSE EXITED THE BUILDING where the employment agency was located. She'd chatted with the owner and had provided her with information about the jobs at the River House.

There were dozens of candidates Rose could have interviewed, but she'd told the woman to simply pick the people she thought would be suitable, then send them out the next day. If Nathaniel didn't like the ones who arrived, he could fire them and hire a new group. She doubted it would become an issue though. He was so disinterested in what was occurring that he wouldn't notice how they performed their assigned tasks.

He'd permitted her to ride into the city in his coach. It was very fancy and had an ornate crest on the door so she was prancing about like a countess. The pomp of it was swelling her pride and making her think she was more important than she really was.

She had no schedule that would require her to rush back to the manor, and she considered shopping for a bit, maybe purchasing a treat for Noah and Eddie, but to her great disgust, she was eager to head home on the off chance that she'd bump into Nathaniel and he'd deign to spend a private interval with her. He was like a giant gnat buzzing in her brain, and she couldn't swat him away.

Suddenly, a female called to her from down the block.

"Rosalie Clarkson! Is that you?"

At being hailed, she visibly blanched, then she straightened and continued on to the coach. She increased her pace, hoping it would keep her from being accosted.

"Rosalie!" the female said again. "I can see that it's you. You can't hide from me."

Rose sighed with exasperation. She didn't dare be recognized. She had to seem respectable so she could obtain stable, respectable employment positions, and she couldn't have old stories circulating about her past. If Nathaniel heard any of them, she didn't imagine he'd care, but she wouldn't always work for him.

If his clerk determined that Noah wasn't his son, she'd be terminated very soon. After all, if he didn't have a son, he didn't exactly need a governess, did he?

Once she reached that depressing moment, she'd have to slink to Mrs. Ford and beg to be placed at another post. If rumors spread, and Mrs. Ford learned of them, she wouldn't help Rose. How would Rose support Fog and Eddie then?

Charlie Money Penny was a notorious dandy, and their scandal had been bandied by the London gossips. It was a huge city, but in some areas—particularly the upper-echelons of the army—it was tiny as a rural village. Anyone remotely connected to the Colonel had salivated over the humiliating details of her misadventure. The situation was like a weighty parcel strapped to her back and she couldn't shake it off.

“Rosalie! It's me, Maude,” the woman said, as she stepped in Rose's path.

Rose could barely tamp down a wince. Maude was Charlie's sister and she'd blamed Rose for the entire debacle. She'd claimed Rose was a seductive vixen who'd lured her poor, innocent brother to his doom, and her comments had been disseminated everywhere. If there had been even an ounce left of Rose's reputation, Maude had shredded it.

She'd been so vocal about Rose's purported machinations that even Colonel Clarkson had ended up believing Rose was the instigator. She'd been seventeen! It boggled the mind that Maude's opinion was the accepted one.

Why was Maude in London? As far as Rose was aware, she didn't live in the city and never visited. Then again, it had been seven years. Who could guess how Maude's life had altered during that period?

Rose was a very skilled liar and she stared blankly. “I'm sorry, Miss, but you've confused me with someone else.”

“I have not and you're being ridiculous. Charlie wrote to notify me that the Colonel had died, and with him not around to stop you, we figured you'd slither home immediately.”

“Would you excuse me?”

“I don't excuse you, and I deem it to be completely typical that you're prancing about town as if no one knows who you are. You shouldn't presume that people have forgotten about your indiscretion.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Charlie will have to be apprised that you're here,” Maude said, “so he has no accidental encounters with you. I won't give you a second chance to destroy him.”

“And Charlie is...?”

“My brother, you deranged shrew.”

“Yes, fine, if I should bump into a man named Charlie, I will avoid him like the plague.”

Rose finally managed to flit on by. A footman was standing by the carriage, and as she approached, he noticed she was being harassed. He whipped the door open so she could escape.

Maude was shocked to observe the ornate vehicle and she tsked with offense. “You've certainly landed on your feet in a hurry, but with you being such a schemer, I'm not surprised. Why are you getting into that coach? What mischief are you pursuing now?”

Rose should have kept her mouth shut, but she couldn't bite her tongue. “As I mentioned, Miss, you're confused as to who I am, that being governess to a nobleman's son. I'm very

busy this morning and I don't have time to be confronted by a stranger on the street."

"A governess? Oh, that is hilarious. What sort of idiot would hire you to teach his children? It's clear he's in the dark about your sordid history. I wonder if I should contact him."

Rose rolled her eyes at the footman, and he grinned, apparently buying Rose's story that it was a case of mistaken identity. He helped her in, then latched the door and climbed up to sit with the driver. In a quick blink, the horses began to pull and she was whisked away.

She didn't glance out, for she didn't want Maude to note her peeking back, but her heart pounded with dread all the way home.



AMBROSIA ADAIR WAS SEATED in her coach, stuck in traffic, and waiting for a teamster's cart to be moved so she could continue on. She leaned out the window to ask her driver how much longer he thought it would be, and as she did, she saw Grenville's carriage parked down the block.

The following day, she had an appointment with him to discuss his engagement to Annette. Prior to it occurring, there were numerous topics that had to be addressed. The lawyers would dicker over the money, but *she* was concerned about personal issues. Despite how he seemed like a bad bet, she suspected she'd agree to the match. Annette was anxious to be a countess and he was a handsome devil. He was carrying a lot of heavy baggage though. Could Annette bear to be his wife?

Suddenly, there was some action down by his coach. A footman straightened, prepared to greet someone. Ambrosia had assumed it would be Grenville and she debated whether she should call to him and say hello.

Before she could decide, a young lady walked toward the vehicle. She was in her twenties, with bouncing blond curls and big green eyes. She was slender, shapely, and very, very fetching. Who could she be?

A second woman stomped up to speak with her and they had a contentious verbal exchange. Then the blond woman huffed off to the carriage and the servants rushed her away.

Ambrosia was rattled by what she'd witnessed. Grenville was a decorated army veteran, an attractive bachelor, and an earl. Aristocrats had mistresses and dabbled with doxies so Ambrosia would never be astonished to discover he was keeping company with slatterns. But the girl wasn't a trollop. She exuded an obvious flair and a rogue like Grenville would definitely be charmed.

Who was she? And was there reason to fret?

Ambrosia was a very protective mother. In her opinion, men were easily led astray by a pretty face, and with the betrothal a virtual certainty, she couldn't have such an alluring vixen circling in Grenville's orbit. She'd distract him, but Ambrosia wouldn't allow him to be distracted.

If he became Annette's husband, Ambrosia would expect him to jump in with both feet. Later on, after the guilt of matrimony had worn off, he could sneak around with tarts and paramours. Yet here at the start, an enticing female couldn't butt in and capture his attention.

The second woman was marching toward Ambrosia and Ambrosia had an outrider motion her over. She neared and Ambrosia smiled and lied.

"Pardon my being forward, but you were talking to that woman down the street. The carriage belongs to a friend of mine and I'm positive she shouldn't be using it. My friend is out of town on holiday and I hope his servants aren't traipsing about in his vehicle without his permission."

The woman looked fit to be tied and she was keen to gossip. "I can't predict who she's claiming to be at the moment, but her true name is Rosalie Clarkson. She's a renowned temptress, and several years ago, she seduced my brother. She convinced him to elope to Scotland, and luckily, her plot was foiled, but the scandal almost cost him his career in the army."

"My goodness."

"Just now, she pretended she wasn't Rosalie, that I had erroneously identified her, but I have no doubt it was her. She's older and thinner, but I'd recognize those green eyes anywhere."

"Yes, she has very striking eyes."

"She's been out of the country since her antics were exposed. Her father was so mortified by her behavior that he banished her, but he's passed away so she was able to return. She has an appealing quality that men can't resist, but she's a skilled confidence artist. You should warn your friend to be wary, lest he be caught in one of her schemes."

"Did she mention why she was using the carriage?" Ambrosia asked.

"She declared herself to be governess to a nobleman's son. Can you imagine? That doxy knows nothing about children!"

Ambrosia had heard enough. "Thank you very much for speaking with me. I appreciate your candor."

She eased onto the seat and let the curtain fall to shield her from view. Then she sat very still, pondering what she'd just been told.

She'd had Grenville thoroughly investigated so she'd dug up every detail about his sad life. There was no facet of his existence that was a mystery to her. She even had a report on the boy, Noah, who was supposedly Grenville's natural-born son. Grenville hadn't yet admitted paternity, but gamblers were betting that it would be proved.

Currently, Grenville was reveling wildly, but he'd eventually settle down and be ready to wed Annette. He desperately needed her dowry, but the boy presented an aggravating dilemma that made Ambrosia reluctant to hand it over. What bride wanted to marry her new husband, only to have a bastard waltz in the door shortly before the wedding?

Annette couldn't be forced to welcome him into the family or, Heaven forbid, raise him as his stepmother. It would be beyond the pale.

If paternity was acknowledged, what were Grenville's plans for the boy? Was he fond? Or was he ambivalent? If Ambrosia demanded the boy be sent away, how might Grenville respond?

In the meantime, it appeared he'd hired a gorgeous governess. What had he been thinking? Well, he was a man so he wouldn't have been thinking.

Ambrosia had learned many valuable lessons from her own mother, the main one being that a pretty servant should never be brought into a household. It simply caused too many problems with all the males in the residence. Over the centuries, how many governesses had been ruined by the lord of the manor? Men were tantalized by the lonely females in those vulnerable positions so they couldn't act rationally.

She sighed with resignation. She'd been excited about the pending nuptial conversation she'd scheduled with Grenville, but apparently, it would be much more awkward than she'd anticipated.

If a marriage to Annette was in the cards, the bastard boy would have to vanish. But the governess would have to go too. Probably in the next few days, and even then, it might not be soon enough to avert disaster.



JANET LOAFED IN A corner of a downstairs parlor, watching Nathaniel's guests mingle and chat. She kept expecting to bump into a prior acquaintance, but she didn't recognize anybody. Where had her brother found these miscreants? They were a collection of libertines and their trollops, so evidently, every degenerate in the city felt free to stop by.

He'd invited her to join in the merriment, and initially, she hadn't assumed she'd participate, but the prospect of socializing was more tempting than pacing in her bedchamber. She wasted entirely too much energy ruing and regretting.

It was surprising how fast she was recuperating with a bit of food and rest. With her finally managing to relax, it was beginning to seem as if her terrible era of heartache and deprivation hadn't happened.

Fog and Rose Clark had been especially solicitous, and there were about to be some housemaids on the premises too. She was already calculating how she could snag one of them

to serve her personally. It had been an eternity since she'd been treated like the daughter of a prominent family, and she couldn't wait to have more of her world revert to normal.

Nathaniel sauntered over and he toasted her with his glass. Was he a drinker? She knew so little about him that she couldn't guess as to his vices. He might be possessed of a thousand bad habits and she wouldn't have any idea.

"You're looking much better," he said.

"I'm feeling much better."

"Why did you run off with Bertie? Why him?"

She shrugged. "I didn't have a lot of choices. I wasn't that attached to him, but I was simply so distraught over the marriage Grandfather had arranged. Bertie pitied me. He was determined to play the part of hero so I let him. He was very kind and I leaned on him when I shouldn't have. I dragged him into my situation, but he didn't have the fortitude to be a knight in shining armor."

"I wish I'd helped you. I swear that I only ever received the one letter from you. And I was so far away. I couldn't have intervened."

"I believe you."

She wasn't sure she meant it though. Over the years, she'd written him a dozen times, begging him for aid, for money, for protection from their grandfather, but he'd never replied. Her grandfather had been very powerful, but he couldn't have controlled the national mail. He couldn't have prevented every letter from being delivered.

The more likely story was that Nathaniel had received her frantic messages, but for whatever reason, he hadn't been inclined to assist her. She was bitter about being forsaken by him, but if they were to have a relationship going forward, she had to tamp down her rancor and sense of betrayal.

"What was Bertie like?" Nathaniel asked.

"Funny, sweet. He was a dreamer and an artist. He thought people were decent and ethical, but he'd never encountered a fiend like Grandfather. No matter where we resided, he tracked us down to be certain our life was very hard."

"I'm sorry to hear it. I've been home for months, and I should have tried to find you, but I couldn't imagine where to start. I apologize for being such an awful sibling."

"Where did you think I was?"

"I hadn't a clue, but I persuaded myself—with you never contacting me—you must have been content in your circumstances. It was stupid of me to presume that, but in case you haven't noticed, I'm not in the best condition lately."

"I've noticed."

"I can barely climb out of bed in the morning so I didn't search for you. I convinced myself you were happy and fine, that you didn't need me. It reduced my guilt."

She understood and she didn't. They'd never been close so he wouldn't have felt much of an obligation to check on her. Then again, she hadn't had anyone who might have worried about her except her dashing, disturbed, disoriented brother.

"Do you like hosting these parties?" she asked.

"It passes the time and the guests keep my mind off my troubles."

"Why are you so troubled? You haven't confided in me."

For a moment, she expected him to explain some issues. Miss Clark had been very frank about his being a prisoner in Spain, which clarified some of his eccentricities. He didn't expound though. He simply said, "I never discuss what happened to me and I'll never tell you about it."

He smirked, indicating that no serious conversation would be held. Well, she'd only just arrived. There would be plenty of opportunities to dig out some confessions.

"I'm glad you joined in the festivities," he said, gesturing around the room. "Have you bumped into any old chums?"

"This isn't a group that would have strolled by in my childhood."

"They are quite debauched; I admit it. I suppose, if I was a more principled brother, I'd have told you to stay upstairs."

"Isn't that what you told Miss Clark and Fog?"

"Yes."

"Will we ever talk about Noah?"

His expression was completely blank, as if he couldn't fathom who Noah might be. "Should we talk about him? Were you hoping we would?"

"Am I about to be an aunt?"

"You'll be the first to know."

He sashayed off and she was irked by his nonchalance. He moved through the world as if he was a spectator, as if he wasn't part of the surroundings.

She was taking her meals in Miss Clark's apartment, and Noah ate there too, so she'd met him and they were cordial. Fog had whispered the gossip about him so Janet didn't necessarily need Nathaniel to provide any details. It would have been nice to hear his opinion though. It might have been a way to begin building a connection.

An intoxicated oaf wandered by, and he leered at her in such a disgusting manner that she decided to head to bed. She skirted past the crowd and out to the foyer. The front door was propped open so newcomers could enter without having to knock or be greeted by a servant, but then, there weren't many servants and they were busy.

It wasn't a proper setup, and it was a sign of the deteriorated conditions, but it didn't bother her. Her situation was vastly improved from what it had been a week earlier and it was Nathaniel's house. If people were shocked by his lack of decorum, it wasn't her problem.

She was about to climb the stairs when a man walked in. He recognized her immediately, his jaw dropping with astonishment, as he murmured, “Janet? Is that you?”

“Christopher Blake!” she replied, absurdly feeling as if she might burst into tears. “Yes, it’s me.”

She’d attended boarding school as a girl, and occasionally, she’d been allowed to spend various holidays at the other students’ homes. On one perfect visit, Christopher had been present, decked out in his army uniform so he’d looked incredibly dashing.

She’d had such a crush on him! It had blossomed into a desperate sort of love that only an adolescent could ever suffer. She’d believed they might marry someday, and there had been a particularly romantic afternoon where they’d snuck off from prying eyes and he’d declared himself to be desperately in love too.

He’d been twenty and she’d been about to turn sixteen. She’d been too young to wed, but they’d secretly promised themselves to each other. He’d vowed to speak to his father, and she to her grandfather, with both of them convinced they’d proceed in a few years when she was older.

They’d sworn to be steadfast, but a short while later, he’d been shipped out of the country, and she’d never seen him again. She had no idea if he’d ever mentioned her to his father or if she’d simply been a passing fancy. As to herself, she’d dared to approach her grandfather about *him*, but his blunt response had been that he was arranging a match for her and the contracts were nearly drafted.

She’d wept and grieved for the loss of Christopher, but her foolish infatuation had swiftly faded as she’d been overwhelmed by the reality her grandfather had set in motion. He’d intended to shackle her to an elderly acquaintance, one who’d already driven three wives to early graves.

She’d been isolated and alone, with no kin or allies to intervene. Her dear Bertie had offered to rescue her and she’d selfishly let him. She shouldn’t have involved him and her reckless act had ruined his life. When her grandfather’s malice had rained down on them, Bertie had never blamed her, but her conduct toward him was a sin she’d have to repent forever.

“What are you doing here?” she asked him, as she assessed how his beautiful face had recently been battered.

“What are *you* doing here?” he countered. He hurried over to her, and he clasped her hands and kissed her on the cheek, as if they were sweethearts.

“This is a gathering of scoundrels and trollops,” she said. “Are you sure you’re in the correct place?”

“I’m not a scoundrel, but I used to be a friend of your brother’s. He insisted I’m not welcome, but I told him to stuff it and I came anyway.”

“You told the grand and glorious Nathaniel St. James to stuff it?”

“Yes, and he was very incensed by my audacity. He was so riled that he gave me this black eye.”

“My goodness! It looks very painful.”

“It is. He throws a hard punch.”

They were toe to toe, searching features for what had changed, for what was still the same. He continued to hold her hands, as if he couldn't bear to release her.

“I wasn't aware that you knew Nathaniel,” she said.

“We served in the army together for most of a decade. Didn't he tell you?”

“I just arrived in London and neither he nor I are completely hale. I haven't sat him down and forced him to converse with me.”

“I was imprisoned with him. In Spain? Have you heard about it?”

“Ah, yes, I've heard about it.”

“I was one of the soldiers who betrayed him and he hasn't forgiven me. I doubt he ever will.”

“What a peculiar confession. I haven't seen you in ages so that's quite a comment to utter right off the bat.”

“I thought I should admit it up front. If he struts in and orders me to vacate the premises, I'd like you to realize why.” His remark had stirred a melancholy air and he shook it off and smiled. “Where have you been? How have you fared? There's been the rarest of news about you. I guess you were married? That's the last information I had.”

“I was wed, but I'm widowed now. How about you?”

“Never betrothed. Never wed.”

“I've moved home to live with Nathaniel.”

“For how long?”

“For as long as I can stand him.”

He chuckled. “He's such a mess! I'm very worried about him.”

“He's muddled and miserable and I'm worried too.”

“What are your plans at the moment?” he asked. “You were headed upstairs. Are you bored with the party?”

“I wasn't bored so much as disgusted. The guests are strangers who exhaust me.”

“If I invited you to stroll in the garden with me instead, what is the chance you might agree?”

She studied him, being delighted that Fate worked in such uncanny ways. What were the odds that she'd run into him so soon after she'd returned to London? What were the odds that he'd still appear to be so fond? Did he recall that precious afternoon when they'd promised themselves? Had he ever wished their dreams had come true?

She grinned. “I think the chance that I’d stroll in the garden with you is two-hundred percent.”

He grinned too. “It’s a pleasant evening outside, but would you like to fetch a shawl?”

“Are you joking? I’m not about to let you out of my sight.”

He offered his arm and escorted her away from the crowd. She wouldn’t miss any of them and she didn’t glance back.

Chapter

9

“HELLO, ROSE. WHAT ARE YOU doing in here?”

Rose leapt a foot and whipped around. Nathaniel was standing in the door to his bedchamber, leaned against the doorframe, and looking too decadently handsome for words. He was dressed in his formal party clothes, a black suit, white shirt, and gorgeous cravat that was perfectly tied.

His latest bacchanal was in progress down in the lower parlors so she hadn't expected him to be in his suite. Since she'd returned from her trip into the city, where she'd spoken to the owner of the employment agency, she hadn't seen him anywhere. She'd had no idea where he was, and it would have been the height of folly to pester the footmen as to his whereabouts.

Her yearning to inquire about him simply underscored how she was misconstruing their relationship. She'd allowed an inappropriate liaison to develop, and she needed to cut it off, the problem being that she couldn't bear to have it end.

With her bumping into Maude, she was feeling particularly dejected. She was dreadfully afraid that Maude might cause trouble somehow. Rose liked to assume she was very brave, that she could handle any difficult circumstance, but she wasn't really strong and never had been. She was merely adept at pretending.

She was keen to babble her secrets to him, to have him listen and tell her everything would be fine. She'd never had a man defend her, act as her hero, or save the day. It would be marvelous to have it transpire just once.

“What are *you* doing in here?” she asked him. “Why aren't you downstairs with your disgusting acquaintances?”

“They were annoying me so I snuck away for a few minutes.”

“If you can't abide them, why continue hosting them? You don't have to, you know. If you ceased all this socializing, you might be happier.”

He shrugged. “If the house wasn't full of boisterous revelers, the evenings would be awfully quiet.”

It was a poignant admission. He was suffering from an incredible amount of melancholia and he didn't seem to have any friends. Janet was his only sibling, but they weren't close. He had to be so lonely and her heart broke for him. She was lonely too, and she wished the world was different, that a humble governess could up-jump to a spot by his side. She could be a very good friend to him and maybe even a very good wife.

Except for her short romance with Charlie Money Penny, she'd never considered marrying, but if Nathaniel St. James ever claimed he was interested, she'd be his bride in an instant.

She showed him the jar she was carrying. “I popped in to leave you some of my salve.”

“What salve?” he asked, as if they'd never discussed it.

“The one I brought from Egypt.”

He walked over to her and said, “Why were you there? You never told me.”

“Fog and I were having an adventure, but we ran out of money so we came home.”

He studied her, then scoffed. “You liar. I can’t guess what part of your explanation was false, but there’s a huge fib buried in there somewhere.”

She ignored the comment and gestured to the sofa, urging him to sit down. “Would you like me to rub some of this on your leg?”

“That sounds terribly scandalous.”

Her cheeks heated. “You’re right. Forget I offered.” She put the jar on a nearby table and said, “I should be going.”

“Shouldn’t you furnish me with instructions on how to apply it?”

“You slather it on the sore several times a day. You should wash it with soap and water too and wrap it with very clean bandages. The Moorish doctors were very big on cleanliness.”

“I’ll be sure to remember that.”

She should have departed, but as with all of their previous encounters, she couldn’t tear herself away. She was anxious to confess her pathetic past, her bitter father, the humiliating situation that had chased her out of England when she’d been little more than a girl. She wanted to tell him about Maude, how scared she was that Maude might spread stories. If he heard one, would he fire her?

She’d like him to swear he wouldn’t, that Maude couldn’t hurt her anymore, but she had to stop wallowing in such flights of fancy. He wasn’t, and never would be, her champion.

“You’re sad, Rose,” he said. “Did you ride into town? Did you find me some housemaids?”

“Yes. They’ll start tomorrow. You’ll have a housekeeper and valet too.”

He smiled. "You're a miracle-worker."

She chuckled and facetiously batted her lashes. "People often say that about me."

They were frozen in place, and there was a thrilling perception in the air that any amazing incident could happen. He could reach for her and she'd fall into his arms. Or she could snuggle herself to him so he would dip down and kiss her. He didn't move though. He simply gazed at her, his expression tormented, as if he was struggling to prevent himself from instigating another amorous advance.

Finally, he said, "I should get back to the party."

"Of course you should. I apologize for delaying you."

"You're always welcome to accost me."

"I wasn't accosting you," she impishly said. "I was delivering a gift."

"I stand corrected."

She'd been dismissed so there was no reason to linger, but as she strolled out, her pace was deliberately slow. She was so certain he'd call to her, but he didn't.

She went to the stairs, and she hovered on the landing, listening to the gaiety and laughter drifting up. She was tempted by the merriment and would have loved to traipse down and join in, but she was just the governess, and despite how attached she felt to Nathaniel, she hadn't been invited.

She headed down the deserted hall to her apartment. She was lost in thought and not paying attention to her route. She rounded a corner, and to her great consternation, she smelled smoke from a cheroot. As she glanced up, a strange man was lurking in the shadows, the tip of his cigar glowing like a beacon. She was completely alone and it was very quiet.

So far during her sojourn at the River House, she hadn't stumbled into this sort of predicament. When the evening festivities were in progress, she didn't leave her room, but she'd been missing Nathaniel, and she'd used the salve as an excuse to wander to his suite when she shouldn't have.

The man saw her and said, "Can you point me to the stairs? I'm confused as to where I am."

"Yes, I can show you," Rose told him. In her firmest schoolteacher voice, she added, "In the future, you should be aware that you're not allowed up in this section of the manor. It's for family members only." She wasn't family, but the falsehood was plausible.

"I didn't exactly plan to become trapped," he said. "It's so bloody dark and there aren't any lamps. All these nooks and crannies look the same."

He was slurring his words, and there was a strong odor of alcohol wafting off his person. She spun away and said, "If you'll follow me?"

"I'd follow you anywhere," he drunkenly muttered.

She marched off at a brisk pace, and he was some distance behind her, but quickly and to her dismay, he was much closer. She would have increased her speed, but before she could, he grabbed her and yanked her to a halt. She meant to jerk away, but his grip was tight enough to bruise, and she couldn't wrestle free.

"Unhand me!" she fumed. "At once!"

"What's your name?" he asked.

"That, sir, is none of your business."

"I'm making it my business. Tell me what it is."

He wasn't as inebriated as she'd assumed. He leaned in and pinned her to the wall, his larger body crushed to hers, his liquored breath nauseating.

"Let me go!" she furiously said.

"There's no rush, is there? We can hold a party of our own. Who is there to stop us?"

Wasn't that the truth? If she screamed, would Fog hear her and come running? Would anyone come? Even though she was in an isolated spot, she would have hollered for assistance, but before she could, he clamped a sweaty palm over her mouth.

"No shouting," he mumbled. "No talking."

They were next to an empty bedchamber, one of many in the massive mansion, and he pushed the door open. He began trying to force her into it, and she fought just as vehemently to keep him from succeeding. His palm was still pressed to her mouth, and she bit him fiercely enough to break the skin.

He cursed and staggered away so she had a chance to bellow, "Help me! Help!"

She almost skittered out of his grasp, but he seized her and slapped her so hard that she saw stars. She couldn't imagine what might have transpired, but to her enormous relief, angry footsteps approached.

Another man, a very big man, clutched the villain by his coat and lifted him away. He punched the oaf twice, then tossed him away as if he weighed no more than a feather. He crashed into the opposite wall, banging into it with a painful thud, then he collapsed to the floor in a stunned heap.

She peered up at her savior, being delighted to find Nathaniel loomed over her.

"Are you all right?" he inquired.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. He merely scared the dickens out of me. Why are you in this hall?”

“I tagged after you to be sure you arrived at your room safe and sound. I guess I should have dogged your heels a little better. Why was he up here?”

“I have no idea. Stealing the silver maybe? He claimed he was lost and he asked me to guide him to the stairs.”

It was all the clarification she could provide. She started to cry and she was shaking so violently that her knees gave out. He slid an arm around her waist and hugged her to his chest.

“It’s over now,” he said. “Don’t cry.”

“I was so frightened!”

“I know, I know and I’m sorry. I can’t believe this happened.”

She could have mentioned that she’d warned him about welcoming so many debauched guests into the manor, but she was too dazed to formulate a coherent comment.

He led her away from the terrifying location, and she blithely accompanied him, not caring where they went, just so long as she didn’t have to see that unconscious dunce ever again.

In a trice, they were in the master suite. He escorted her over to a sofa by the fire, then he said, “I have to rid myself of that idiot. Can I leave you for a minute? I’ll return very soon.”

“Must you go?”

“Yes, I must.”

“I promise I won’t swoon on you, but please don’t dither.”

He patted her on the head, the gesture oddly comforting, as if she were a child being soothed by a doting parent. Then he dashed out, and while it seemed as if he vanished for an eternity, it was only

a short time later that he walked in. His knuckles were red and swollen, and there were splatters of blood on his cravat.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“I had a few words with your assailant and he’s off the property. His friends hauled him away. He won’t be back either so you shouldn’t worry that he might slither in again.”

There was a liquor tray on the dresser, and he poured himself a glass and downed the contents in a hefty swallow. He refilled it and brought it over to her. He dangled it under her nose.

“Drink this,” he commanded, his tone brooking no argument.

The pungent aroma made her eyes water. “I never imbibe of hard spirits.”

“It will calm you faster than any other remedy I could supply.”

She’d already figured out that she couldn’t deny him any request. Where he was concerned, she was a total milksop. She took the glass from him and chugged a huge gulp. The alcohol flowed into her veins immediately, and her body relaxed, some of her alarm easing.

He set the glass on a nearby table, then he seated himself on the sofa and snuggled her onto his lap. He studied her cheek, tracing his finger across the injury where the brute had slapped her.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“It aches a bit, but I’ll survive.”

“It will be puffy, and you might have a bruise for awhile so your lovely face will be marred. It won’t last long though.”

She could have chosen any response, but the one she picked was, “You think I have a lovely face?”

“There’s no doubt about it. You’re incredibly fetching.”

It was the sweetest compliment a man had ever voiced in her presence. Well, except for Charlie Money Penny, but his flattery hadn't been sincere so it didn't count.

"I'm so glad you followed me," she said.

"I am too. If I hadn't, I can't imagine what would have happened."

"He was dragging me into that empty bedchamber."

She started to weep in earnest. She hadn't intended to, and she was certain he wouldn't like to have her bawling all over his coat. She couldn't help it though. Her tears had been bottled up for ages and she couldn't hold them in.

She cried for a thousand lost things: for her deceased mother who hadn't had a chance to raise her, for her horrid father, Colonel Clarkson, who hadn't been her father at all, for the real father she'd never met, for her younger self who'd been seduced by a scoundrel, for her older self who had to support Fog and Eddie when she had so few skills or methods to keep them safe.

She carried on as if her heart was breaking, as if the burdens of the world were balanced on her slender shoulders, and throughout the deluge, he was wonderful. He stroked a hand up and down her back, as he whispered soft endearments she was sure he didn't mean, but she cherished them anyway.

Eventually, she ran out of woe, and she was flopped on his chest, her limbs rubbery, her energy spent.

He produced a kerchief and dried her eyes. "Poor, poor, Rose. It devastates me to see you so sad."

"I'm sorry I'm so distraught. I shouldn't have fallen apart on you, and you're kind to put up with me when I'm in such a wretched condition."

"I don't mind."

He dipped in and kissed her, as she'd been yearning for him to do all evening. It began in a tender, precious way, then it burgeoned into an embrace that was riveting and overwhelming. It stirred promises between them. Wasn't it their destiny to wind up together? It seemed as if the universe was determined that it occur. Was she the only one who felt it? Was he feeling it too? She didn't dare ask him.

She couldn't guess how long they tarried, but it was a sufficient period that the fire dwindled in the grate and the temperature grew chilly. He drew away and she was almost bereft to have stopped. She wished she could lock the door and they'd hide in his suite forever, but that was insane thinking.

How was he viewing their affectionate dalliance? Her own ruminations about it were too embarrassing to mention, but when he finally spoke, she tsked with annoyance. Men and women were such different creatures! It was amazing they ever managed to attach themselves.

"Why were you in Egypt?" he inquired. "Tell me the truth."

Normally, she would have changed the subject with a flippant retort, but her mood was very low, and she'd let down her guard.

"My father sent me there. I was swept up in a scandal."

"What type of scandal?"

"I was enticed by a rogue who convinced me to elope to Scotland with him. My father caught me and dragged me home, then he declared I should vanish until the gossip died down."

"You eloped? For shame, Rose Clark!" His eyes were alight with mischief. "I'm shocked, shocked, to the core of my being!"

"Don't laugh and don't tease me. It ruined my life and I've never recovered."

"Who was your father? What was his position in the world?"

“He was no one you would have known,” she lied. She suspected, with his lengthy army service, he would have at least heard of the Colonel. With her luck, he might even have served under him.

“And who was your devoted swain?” he asked.

As with the Colonel, she’d never utter Charlie’s name aloud. He’d been a soldier so Nathaniel might have crossed paths with him too. “You wouldn’t have known him either, and in my own defense, I was very young so if I made a stupid amorous decision, I should be forgiven.”

“How old were you?”

“A very gullible seventeen. When he began working his wiles on me, he was hoping our marriage would further his situation in my father’s company.”

“Did it?”

She snickered. “Absolutely not. It was rather a bad career choice.”

“How long were you in Egypt?”

“Seven years.”

“If it took such an extended interval for the rumors to die down, they must have been atrocious. There must be more to this story than you’ve admitted.”

“It wasn’t that awful. It really wasn’t. My absence from England simply helped people in our social circle to forget about me. Besides, I loved Egypt and I was in no hurry to return.”

The comment was another lie. She might have enjoyed her sojourn in the foreign land if she hadn’t been terrified every second that the Colonel would cut off her money so they’d be stranded. She also didn’t add that the Colonel wouldn’t allow her to return. He’d

basically washed his hands of her, but with her not actually being his daughter, she couldn't necessarily blame him.

"Your father is deceased?" he asked.

"Yes, and after his debts were paid, there were no assets left for me. To say that I've been battered by life is a gross understatement."

"So you're supporting yourself, but Fog and Eddie too. Eddie is your half-brother, right? Fog is your ... what?"

"She was one of my father's mistresses. He cast her aside when she wound up with child. I've had to take care of her ever since."

"Your father sounds like an amoral fiend."

"He was; I can't deny it."

"I must mention that you're not very proficient at providing for them."

"Ha! I persuaded you to give me a job that furnished lodging for me *and* for them. I have no idea what I'm doing, yet you hired me anyway."

"You're a smooth-talker, Rose Clark."

"I always have been. It's my only skill."

He set her on her feet, then he stood, their private encounter over. She was extremely despondent to have it end, but there was no reason to continue loafing. He had a house filled with guests, and he'd disappeared for such a lengthy period that she was surprised no one had been looking for him.

"Let's get you back to your apartment," he said. "I'll escort you to it."

"You don't have to," she bravely insisted, even though she was relieved that he wouldn't force her to go alone.

“I can’t have you traipsing about on your own. Please don’t be so negligent again, all right? Not while I have such ribald cads on the premises.”

“I hadn’t planned to stroll about this time, but I will humiliate myself by confessing that I missed you. I used my jar of salve as a prop that would supply me with an excuse to visit your room so I might bump into you.”

“You scamp. You have a very devious personality. I better watch myself around you or there’s no predicting what mischief you might stir.”

“I try to behave.”

“You *try*, but you don’t usually succeed.”

He clasped her hand and linked their fingers as if they were adolescent sweethearts. They exited the suite and much too quickly, they arrived at their destination.

“Goodnight,” he said and he bent down and kissed her.

“Goodnight to you too.”

“Lock your door after I leave. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Shall we have breakfast together? Would you like that? It would mean you’d have to climb out of bed at a sensible hour.”

“For you, I might be willing to get up early.”

She decided to press her luck. “How about nine? I’ll meet you in the dining room.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Don’t you dare disappoint me,” she said and he chuckled.

“I’ve disappointed every woman who’s ever known me, but for you, I’ll work hard to come up to snuff.”

“I would appreciate it.”

Their flirtatious banter ebbed and he reached out and touched her reddened cheek.

“I hate that he hit you,” he said. “Nothing like this will ever happen again. I swear it.”

“I will tell myself to believe you.”

“When you go in, be sure to spin the key. I won’t head down the hall until you have.”

“I’ll see you at nine,” she repeated, as if he already needed reminding.

“I won’t forget.”

Was he sincere? If he didn’t appear, she’d try not to be too dismayed.

She slipped in and locked the door and she stood with her palm resting on the wood. He hadn’t tiptoed away, and she pictured him on the other side, his palm on the wood too.

Had that occurred or not? She had a very vivid imagination and she would pretend it had transpired just that way.

She walked into her bedroom and sat on the bed. Her knees were still shaky and her nerves on a fine edge, but the villain’s attack had pushed her relationship with Nathaniel to a new and thrilling level. Where would it lead? How would it conclude?

He was so fond of her, but did it mean anything? Would it change anything?

She went over to the dresser and poured water in a bowl. She washed her face, patting a cool cloth on her bruised cheek, then she donned her nightgown and crawled into bed. She hoped she would dream about Nathaniel and all the happy endings they seemed destined to have. No negative thoughts would be allowed to intrude.

Chapter

10

“WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR face?”

“Nothing.” Rose waved away Fog’s question and said, “I had a little incident last night.”

Fog blanched with dismay. “How little?”

“One of Lord Grenville’s guests was upstairs when he shouldn’t have been. I shoed him away and he took exception to my bossy tone.”

Janet was in the room with them and she squealed with offense. “You were attacked by one of Nathaniel’s guests?”

“Not attacked precisely. Let’s call it a disagreement.”

They were in their family quarters and breakfast had just been delivered. Janet was eating with them. Noah and Eddie were there too, the five of them seated at the table. An awkward silence had descended and they were gaping at her as if she’d grown a second head.

“It’s merely a scratch!” she insisted.

Her cheek was a tad swollen and it only hurt if she touched it. She shot a warning glare at Fog and Janet, visually pleading with them to be silent. She wasn’t keen to be interrogated in front of the two boys.

There was a clock over on the mantle, and she peeked at it, seeing that it was a few minutes before nine. She pushed her chair back and stood.

“Where are you going?” Fog asked. “You haven’t had a single bite.”

“I have an early meeting with Lord Grenville. The new housemaids are arriving today, and he requested that I provide him with information about them.” It was a complete lie, but she spewed it like the expert fabricator she was.

Janet chimed in with, “I can’t believe he had you hire them. He seems so scatterbrained to me. How did you persuade him?”

“I apprised him that I wouldn’t continue working here if the conditions didn’t improve. The downstairs parlors are an embarrassment.”

Janet smirked. “You’re right about that, and I’m delighted that you’ve figured out how to manipulate him. And so quickly too!”

“I’ve found it to be fairly easy,” Rose told her. “He can’t focus on problems or follow through on plans so I do it for him.”

“He’s an adult,” Noah said. “Why can’t he focus?”

Rose wasn’t about to jump into that morass and Fog saved her. “Your father suffered terribly during his recent ordeal. Soldiers often have lingering trauma when they’ve experienced disturbing events.”

“Will he ever heal and be better?”

“Of course he will,” Fog said.

Rose nodded a vigorous concurrence, then she left and proceeded to the main section of the house. At her having the chance to dine with Nathaniel, she was almost skipping. She hoped he’d remember, and if he didn’t, she’d be so disappointed.

When she reached the foyer, she was stunned to discover the five footmen in the front parlor. They were cleaning up the detritus from the previous night’s party.

“What’s gotten into you?” she asked them. “Who cracked the whip and convinced you to busy yourselves at a useful chore?”

They glanced around at her, and one of them said, “Lord Grenville notified us that a group of female servants is about to join us. A housekeeper too! Who is very strict! We can’t have them walk into such a mess.”

“What a marvelous notion,” she said. “Carry on. Don’t let me delay you.”

She flitted down the hall, grinning, and it was a short distance to the dining room. As she neared the door, she was anxious and tiptoeing. Oh, how she wished he’d be present!

She halted and was about to peer in to check, when he called, “Come in, Rose. Cease your dilly-dallying and making me wait.”

“How did you know it was me?” she asked as she entered.

“I’ve explained this before. Where you’re concerned, my senses are always bizarrely alerted. When you’re approaching, I realize it immediately.”

He was seated at the table and about to dig into a plate piled high with eggs and ham. He was dressed in tan trousers and blue coat, and he’d even shaved, which was a minor miracle. For once, he looked like the arrogant, important aristocrat he’d been elevated to be.

“Aren’t you a fine sight this morning!” she said, as she plopped down next to him. “This is practically the crack of dawn for you. I was so sure you wouldn’t appear.”

“I’m turning over a new leaf. Or at least I’m trying to turn one over. I can’t guarantee that I can sustain this burst of energy for more than a few hours.” He gestured to the sideboard. “If you intend to eat, you’ll have to serve yourself. The footmen are toiling away in the front parlor.”

“I saw them and I’m astonished to report that they were acting like normal employees.”

She stood and went over to fill a plate. They were alone, and when she sat back down, he leaned in and kissed her. It was just a brush of his lips to hers, but it rattled and thrilled her.

“Stop that,” she scolded. “We can’t be caught misbehaving.”

“The manor is my castle and I’m king of it. If I want to misbehave, I can.”

“Yes, but *I* am a servant too and I can’t be observed consorting with you. My reputation would be destroyed and the staff would slay me with gossip.”

“You’re much more than a servant,” he said, a comment that elated her.

“Really? How would you describe me?”

“You’re my righthand man. Or should it be my righthand woman?”

She’d expected a more personal remark, but she shouldn’t be greedy. “I’m adept at bossing you. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say I’m your very stern commanding officer. It takes enormous effort to keep you in line.”

He studied her bruised cheek, then traced a finger over it. “It’s not as bad as I feared it would be. Does it hurt?”

“Only if someone touches it.”

He snorted with amusement and eased away. “I’m so sorry it happened. I agonized about it all night.”

She shrugged off his distress. “I survived so you didn’t need to fret.”

“I love to engage in violent brawls. It was satisfying to punch a miscreant who deserved it.”

“How are your knuckles? Are they sore?”

He made a fist and showed them to her. They were a tad red and swollen. “I’m tough as nails,” he said. “There’s no lasting damage.”

“My hero!” she facetiously gushed.

He laughed and motioned for her to start eating and he jumped in too. A pleasant interval passed, where they enjoyed their food and chatted about no topics that mattered. Their chummy interaction was skewing her view of their relationship again. It seemed as if he belonged to her, and even though her sentiments were absurd, she wouldn’t set them aside. Why couldn’t she have him for her very own?

He was an earl, and it was a rule of the world that an aristocrat never married *down*, but he didn’t care about his title. Why should he be bound by societal restrictions that would keep him from being happy? Why should tradition prevent them from being together forever?

She was already envisioning a very pretty destiny that was dangerous to imagine. No doubt it would crash down very fast.

As they finished up, she wanted to suggest they spend the day loafing, but before she could, he reminded her once again of how different men and women were in their thought processes and choices.

“I’ve reached a decision,” he said, her cordial breakfast companion replaced by a firm, serious employer.

“Your expression is so severe that I’m afraid to have you tell me what it is.”

“It’s about your incident with that brute. I’m very disconcerted about it.”

“Would you stop feeling guilty? I was simply roughed up a bit, but I’m fine.”

“Well, I am *not* fine so we have to make some changes.”

Her heart plunged to her slippers. “What types of changes?”

“When you first moved in, you warned me about hosting lewd bacchanals with you and Noah in the house, but I ignored you. Fog, Eddie, and Janet are here now too, so my conduct toward all of you has grown negligent and egregious.”

“Are you about to announce that you’ll quit having parties?”

“No, that’s not it.” He shook his head. “I’m sending all of you to the country, to Grenville Downs.”

She wasn’t certain she’d heard him correctly. “You’re what?”

“I’m sending you to my main estate.” As if she’d argued about it, he hurried to add, “It’s very posh and you’ll be more comfortable there.”

“Are you coming with us?”

“Gad, no. I couldn’t bear the quiet and solitude.”

“Oh.”

She must have appeared crestfallen, for he scowled and said, “You were supposed to be delighted about this. Have I upset you?”

“I’m not upset exactly,” she claimed, skirting on the edge of forbidden subjects. “I’ve relished our becoming acquainted and I will hate to have our friendship end before it’s begun.”

His gaze was filled with pity, which was so embarrassing. Then he leaned over and patted her hand.

“I’m doing this for you,” he said.

“For me?”

“Yes. I have no desire to alter my disgusting habits. In the future, I hope I can control myself a little better, but for the moment, it’s not in the cards.”

“I understand.”

“And I’m doing this for me too.”

That was the most ludicrous comment he’d uttered so far and she said, “How is it benefitting you?”

“We’ve developed an unusual bond.”

Instantly, she was on the defensive. "I'm not sorry about it. Are you?"

"Not *sorry* precisely, but I've been giving you the wrong impression. I've been flirting with you and it's skewing the lines that should exist between us."

"Oh," she murmured again. She deflated, as if the air in her body had drained out. If he kept on, in another minute or two, she'd slide off her chair and be lying on the floor in a stunned heap.

"You're my governess," he continued, "and I brought you into my home to watch over Noah for me."

"And his condition is vastly improved. He's residing with Fog and me in our rooms. He's eating and sleeping with us, but I haven't had a single second where we could commence his lessons. I've been too busy, putting your household in order."

At the news, he grinned. "You've skillfully imposed the kinds of routines for him that I was eager for you to implement."

"I'm glad you approve."

"Don't be sad."

"I'm not sad. I'm disappointed that I'll be parted from you."

He patted her hand again. "That's my fault. I've been leading you on when I shouldn't have. I need to behave myself and this will help both of us."

She couldn't fathom how it would help her in even the slightest way. She'd just been wallowing in such a preposterous fantasy that she'd had them halfway to the altar. She was such an idiot!

"When are we leaving?" she asked.

"Tomorrow. I've sent a message to the staff at Grenville Downs so they'll be expecting you. Janet is going too, so there will be a family member in your entourage to prevent your arrival from being awkward."

"Have you sought Janet's opinion? Maybe she'd rather stay here."

"She can't. It's not safe."

He was about to have some housemaids on the premises, but apparently, he hadn't reflected on the problem. If his ribald associates were dangerous for Rose and his sister, surely they were dangerous for his female servants. Or didn't he consider them to be real people?

Well, it wasn't any of her business. She was just the governess and she was being punished for the liaison that had blossomed. It was over though. If he'd yanked out a knife and cut the cord that bound them, he couldn't have severed it anymore completely.

"Will you ever visit us?" she humiliated herself by inquiring.

"I doubt it. I loathe the country and I'm happy in the city. It's where I belong."

She didn't think he was *happy* in the city. In fact, she thought he was quite miserable, but it wasn't her place to mention it.

"I should return to my room," she said and she stood to march out.

"There's no hurry, is there? How about if you tell me about the servants you've hired?"

"Your butler can fill you in. We're leaving tomorrow so we have to pack. What time will we depart?"

"I arranged the carriage for nine o'clock."

"We'll be ready, and would you do me a favor?"

"If I can. What is it?"

"Keep slathering my salve on your leg. Your open wound has to heal and you'll be more spry once it's closed up."

"I will use the salve and I will remember you whenever I apply it."

At the dear remark, she smiled, but she was surprised to have mustered any aplomb. She'd been totally pole-axed, as if he'd pounded her into the ground with a club. He'd banished her to live in a distant location, and he didn't care enough about her to pretend he might visit someday.

How was she to view such cold disregard? She wanted to grab him by the lapels of his coat and shake him until his teeth rattled. She wanted to scold him for being a fool, for being an ass, for breaking her heart. Is that what he'd done? Was her heart broken?

They were barely acquainted, yet she felt as if they were intimately attached. Her heightened fondness had her recollecting her ridiculous amour with Charlie Money penny.

Since that horrid episode had concluded, she'd struggled to be a more mature person, a shrewder and wiser person. She'd always told herself—should a dashing rogue ever tempt her again—she wouldn't be sucked into a quagmire, but here she was, digging herself into the same old hole.

A handsome bachelor had merely paid her a bit of attention, and she was anxious to pick out a wedding gown. Had she learned nothing from her prior escapade? Obviously not.

She stepped away from the table, but before she could walk off, he clasped her hand and linked their fingers.

"You'll love Grenville Downs," he said.

"I'm certain I will."

"You'll be safe there."

"I know."

They stared for an eternity, and she was practically choking on the comments she didn't dare utter aloud.

Ultimately, he said, "This is for the best."

“I know that too.”

She slipped out of his grasp and rushed away. As usual in her dealings with him, she assumed he'd call her back, but he didn't, and his indifference underscored how absolutely deranged she'd been.

Would she ever grow up and act like an adult? Would she ever be able to control her whims and emotions? The jury was still out on that verdict, and she had to admit that she was more of a disaster than she'd ever been.



“MAY WE SPEAK WITH you?”

“Maybe later.”

“I'm sorry, but we're departing in the morning so it has to be now.”

Eddie watched as Noah wore his father down. They weren't supposed to openly refer to the Earl as Noah's father, but Rose had told Eddie not to have any doubts. Once you observed them together, the proof was clear. They looked exactly alike.

At Noah's request for an audience, Lord Grenville fumed, debated, then waved them into his library. He was seated behind the grand desk, and as they tromped over to him, there was a dreamlike quality to the moment. Ever since Eddie had left Egypt, he'd been off-balance, as if the world was skewed and he couldn't stand up straight. Their landing a spot at the Grenville River House simply added to his disorientation.

They'd only been in residence a few days and they were moving again. Eddie couldn't decide if he was glad or not, but Noah definitely wasn't glad, and he was eager to inform anyone who would listen.

“What is it you boys need?” the Earl asked.

Without preamble, Noah said, “We'd like to know the truth about what happened to Miss Clark last night. Her face is bruised, and she claimed she had an argument with one of your guests. Eddie is worried about her.”

The Earl debated again, then inquired, “How old are you two?”

“Ten,” they responded together.

“You'll soon be men rather than children so I'll tell you what occurred. She was accosted in the hall by a drunken lout.”

“A male lout?” Noah asked the Earl, but Eddie was silent. He was content to have Noah talk for them.

“Yes. He was a stranger who shouldn't have been upstairs. He was very intoxicated, and when she ordered him to head down to the parlor, he slapped her.”

Eddie gasped with dismay, then Noah asked, “Did you make him pay for hurting her?”

“Yes, I thoroughly pummeled him.” Lord Grenville held up his hand, showing them his swollen knuckles. “I punched him over and over, and I kicked him in the ribs, hard enough to break some of them. Then he was whisked off the property, and he won’t ever be allowed to return.”

“Is that why we’re going away? Is it because of how that brute injured Miss Clark?”

The Earl hemmed and hawed, then he said, “That’s partly why. I just don’t think any of you should be here when I have companions popping in to revel.”

“Why don’t you simply stop having parties? Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“I don’t want to stop.”

There was an awkward pause, then Noah spun to Eddie. “Has he answered your questions about your sister? Was there anything else you’d like to know?”

“No, that was plenty.” Eddie said to Lord Grenville, “Thank you for thrashing him. I wish I’d been there to help you.”

“Let this situation be a lesson to you,” Lord Grenville said. “Alcohol can make you behave very stupidly.”

The Earl drank constantly in the evenings. Eddie and Noah spied on him when he was cavorting with his friends. Eddie thought the Earl should watch his own excessive imbibing, but he kept that opinion to himself.

“Will that be all?” Lord Grenville asked them. “Have I calmed your concerns about Miss Clark?”

Noah changed the subject, bluntly apprising him, “I don’t want to be trapped in the country. I don’t want to move away from the river.”

The Earl shrugged. “I’m sorry then, but you’re departing with Fog and Miss Clark. I’m afraid I have to insist.”

Noah had grown up on the river, and he had an insane idea that—if their circumstances became dire—they could steal the skiff that was tied to the dock and sail away to the village where he’d lived previously. But Eddie would never run off. He would never abandon his mother and sister. They were awful at taking care of themselves and they needed him.

“It’s not fair that you boss me like this,” Noah said. “You refuse to admit that we’re kin, yet you always command me. If I’m not your son, how can it matter where I live?”

“I’ve never denied that you’re my son,” Lord Grenville told him. “I’m waiting for my clerk’s report about you.”

“You could have believed me,” Noah hotly stated. “You could have believed my mother.”

The Earl sighed. “No, I couldn’t have, Noah, and we’ve been through this a dozen times. Since my elevation, I’ve had hordes of people crawl out of the woodwork to declare a connection to me. *You* are one of the lucky souls whose story I’ve had investigated. We’ll have your claim verified shortly, then we’ll discuss how our relationship should unfold.”

Eddie was amazed that Noah was so brave. He, Eddie, could never have confronted an adult like this, but Noah had been on his own for ages. Yes, he'd been raised by his mother, but she hadn't been a dedicated parent. He wasn't scared of Lord Grenville.

"Are you sure I have to accompany them?" Noah asked.

"I'm sure," the Earl firmly replied, "and I swear you and Eddie will really like it there. Have you boys been taught how to box? Or ride horses? Or shoot a hunting rifle?" They shook their heads and he said, "I've arranged for you to participate in all of those activities at Grenville Downs. You've been reared around women, which has kept you from receiving the proper training. We'll get you doing some manly things, things that are more useful and it will be fun. I promise."

Noah looked as if he'd argue over Lord Grenville's decision, but Eddie was delighted to discover that they'd ride, hunt, and box. Perhaps their sojourn in the country wouldn't be horrid.

"Thank you again, Lord Grenville," he said politely before Noah could utter a rude comment. "I'm positive we'll enjoy ourselves very much."

He grabbed Noah by the arm and dragged him out of the room. Once they were far away and the Earl couldn't hear them, Eddie said, "For his being a toplofty aristocrat, he's not so bad."

"He can be kind, but he can be terrible too. Just when you imagine he's a marvelous fellow, he'll behave in a manner that's shockingly cruel. I've learned not to expect too much from him. That way, when he's an ass, I'm not surprised."

Eddie was an eternal optimist. "Maybe he'll be different in the future. It could happen."

"How would we know? It's not as if he's traveling with us. He doesn't like any of us enough to come along."

"He likes my sister."

"No, he doesn't," Noah said. "He doesn't like anyone."

Chapter

11

“LORD GRENVILLE! HOW NICE to see you. I thought you’d forgotten us.”

Nathaniel stared at Ambrosia Adair and his expression was carefully blank. He’d scheduled several appointments with her to discuss an engagement to Annette, but he’d kept cancelling. He’d been distracted by his flirtation with Rose Clark and he was distraught over sending her away.

With her gone, the manor seemed so empty. To compensate, he’d been reveling with an extra abandon, expecting that he would cease his ruminating about her, but it hadn’t helped. She was like a gnat that was lodged in his brain. He couldn’t stop pondering her.

It was mid-afternoon and he’d called on Mrs. Adair at her townhouse. They were in the front parlor, seated across from each other on comfortable chairs. Her home was exquisitely decorated, supplying exhaustive evidence of her enormous wealth. Her clothes and jewelry were understated, but nonetheless, she was covered in diamonds.

She was putting on a display for him, apprising him that she was a woman of affluence and consequence, and he shouldn’t underestimate her.

He didn’t really want to wed, and he was in no condition to be a husband so he found the meeting to be terribly fatiguing. Yet his bank accounts were empty, and he was doing his damndest to drive himself even deeper into the red by hosting his lewd parties. He realized he ought to halt his ridiculous antics, but he couldn’t force himself to relent. He was content to drift along on a cloud of inaction.

He needed an infusion of money. That much was painfully clear. Most of his properties were entailed to the title so he couldn’t lose them to creditors, but they would simply continue to decline.

He wasn’t the most loyal man, but he was very British. His ancestors had ruled in England for centuries. They’d accumulated the immense holdings with a steady elevation of their circumstances, and he owed a duty to all of them. He wasn’t so negligent that he would deliberately wreck what so many before him had built.

When a fellow wound up in this sort of fiscal dilemma, he glommed onto an heiress. Could he bear that conclusion?

If he’d been any kind of farmer, if he’d understood crops or animals, he could have retired to the country, tightened his belt, and struggled through as a poverty-stricken

gentleman, but with his being so lacking in the correct skills, that was a route to even more failure.

He couldn't imagine practicing thrift and hardly getting by. His final ordeal in the army had rearranged his thinking. After he'd suffered so egregiously, he felt as if he deserved a reward or prize. It was a petty vanity, but he couldn't set it aside. It wasn't too much to ask that he be allowed to live out his days in easy situations and pleasurable surroundings. For that ending to occur, matrimony was the required path.

"I apologize for the delay," he said, "but I've been busy with personal matters."

"Nothing too dire, I hope."

"No, nothing dire. Since my return to England, I'm moving slower than other people. I dither over my decisions and choices so I can't resolve issues."

"I'm not surprised that you would need a period to adjust. Do you suppose your lethargy will eventually pass?"

He smirked with annoyance. "I make no guarantees so anyone hitching himself or herself to my wagon should be aware of the hazards in advance."

It was as far as he would go in warning her about his deteriorated state. It was part of the package he was offering. She was determined to snag a nobleman for Annette, but there were never many of them available. They all had various problems, and he didn't deem his difficulties to be permanent or impossible to fix.

"Shall I come right to the point?" Mrs. Adair said. "Or would you like to have tea, chat about the weather, and beat around the bush for an hour?"

"I'm not interested in tea or chitchat."

"Good. Here is my proposition: I would like to suggest a betrothal between you and Annette."

"Is Annette amenable?" He paused, then said, "May I call her Annette?"

"Yes, it's fine for you to call her Annette and she's very amenable. However, *I* may take some extensive convincing."

He tamped down a blanché. "Of the two of you, I would have predicted you would be the most enthused."

"I have always planned for her to wed an aristocrat. With the size of her dowry, there's no reason she shouldn't, but I have to protect her. The prospect of her having a noble husband is a marvelous fantasy, but I won't thrust her into a quagmire that's horrid."

"What's worrying you?"

"I'm very fond of her so I insist that she have a spouse who is considerate and respectful. I don't anticipate love or a grand passion, but I do expect companionship and cordiality. I won't shackle her to an aged codger or a drunkard. I won't pick a brute or a gambler. Nor will I select a madman. A bit of insanity would be too much for me."

He chuckled. "Is that a sly query about my mental faculties?"

“Not at all. I was merely listing the sorts of candidates I won’t contemplate. We’re not in any hurry and we can wait for the perfect fellow. Can you persuade me that it might be you?”

“I doubt it and I won’t try.” She’d presumed he would be eager to sell himself to her so he was amused to have flummoxed her with his indifferent attitude.

“You’re confident,” she said. “I’ll give you that much.”

“Your daughter has money and I need some. I have a title and she wants one. We can each furnish the other with what we seek. Is that a fair trade? I have no idea, but if it is, then I shouldn’t have to beg you to let me have her.”

“*Touché*, Grenville. It’s three o’clock. Shall we have a brandy? In my opinion, conversations are more pleasant when alcohol is consumed.”

“A brandy would be fine.”

She rang for a footman and he swiftly appeared. He busied himself with serving them and they sat silently until he finished and departed. She watched Nathaniel the whole time, her concentration so piqued that he suspected it was a negotiating tactic.

Well, the joke was on her. While he’d been a captive, he hadn’t spoken to another person for months so he was a master at enduring a quiet interval. It was no method to coerce him.

“Would you like to wed Annette?” she asked, once they were alone again.

He shrugged. “As she’s mostly a stranger to me, I can’t guess whether I’d like it or not. She’s pretty and vivacious, but I’d be marrying her dowry, wouldn’t I?”

“How is your temper, Grenville? You suffered terribly throughout your ordeal, and most soldiers are immeasurably changed by that type of experience. Are you frequently angry? Are you prone to enraged outbursts?”

“My anger isn’t a concern. My biggest problem is my lack of focus and drive, which are attributes I assume would make me a better husband. I wouldn’t harangue at my wife because I’d be too forgetful to quarrel or nag.”

She laughed. “What a delightful notion: a husband who didn’t nag. I’m sure Annette would view it as a great blessing.”

“Or—if she was anxious to get my attention—she might find it exhausting.”

“She might.” She studied him, sipped her brandy, studied him some more. “I have to raise some delicate topics. I hope you won’t be offended.”

“There isn’t much that offends me these days so ask away, and we’ll see what reaction you stir.”

“I’ve had you investigated.”

He nodded. “I figured you had.”

“If you married Annette, where would you live? At the Grenville River House? At Grenville Downs in the country? Annette is a city girl and she thrives in London. The River

House isn't close enough for her. Would you consider buying a residence in Mayfair so she could be in the thick of things?"

"I'd consider it, but I don't suppose I'd join her in town. It's too loud and hectic for me."

"You'd permit her to carry on by herself?"

"If she didn't engage in embarrassing conduct, I imagine I would. I don't like to bicker, and I would never care to have to berate her with regard to her behavior."

"She's been properly reared so she would always be a credit to you."

"That's good to know."

"Let's talk about the boy who was brought to you. I've heard his name is Noah?"

"Yes, Noah."

She'd caught him off guard. He'd thought they'd debate the usual subjects, such as his and Annette's compatibility. He hadn't been prepared for questions about his mental stability, and he certainly wasn't ready to discuss Noah.

He should have been prepared though, and he wished his father could have been present. A man's parents picked his bride. They were removed from the emotion that clouded the weighty decision, and it would have been simpler for his father to confer over the dilemma. Nathaniel was in no condition to deliberate over any difficult detail.

"Will you accept your paternity?" she inquired without preamble.

"The situation isn't yet resolved so I can't answer you. I sent my clerk to interrogate people in his home village. I should receive a report shortly."

"You don't believe he's your son?"

"I don't believe or disbelieve it. First, I'm humiliated to admit that I don't recall his mother or my encounter with her. Second, since my elevation to the title, I have been besieged by strangers who claim a connection to me so I'm being cautious in assessing any solicitations."

"I understand completely, but this is what's vexing me. Please don't be irked, but if your clerk confirms that Noah is your son, what are your plans for him?"

"At the moment, I don't have any plans."

"Will you keep him by your side as a beloved child or will you ignore him? Will you enroll him in boarding school and wash your hands of him? Will you give him to a tenant farmer to raise? How much or how little will you do for him?"

"As I just mentioned, I haven't thought about it."

He flashed a steely look that warned her to drop it. He grasped why she was pestering him, but it didn't mean he was happy about it.

"Before I abandon the issue," she said, "I must bluntly declare that it wouldn't be fair for Annette to become your wife, but to have a bastard prancing about. It would be a cruel conundrum, and she shouldn't have to begin her married life as a stepmother."

“I agree.”

“I hope we can review this unfortunate circumstance in the future and that you won’t be upset if I harass you about it.”

He scoffed with a grim amusement. “I guess that depends on how intensely and how often you badger me.”

“There’s one other vital matter. May I continue?”

“If you feel you must.”

Again, he wasn’t sure what he was expecting. He’d assumed it would be more of a tirade about Noah. He recognized that Noah’s existence was an insult to Annette, but he liked Noah very much. The boy was smart, tough, and loyal, the kind of child any man would like to have as his son.

If paternity was proved, he supposed he’d be very involved with Noah. He didn’t tell her that though. He simply stared her down, waiting to hear what her topic would be, and when she voiced it, he was a tad startled.

“You hired a governess for him,” she said.

“Is there some reason I shouldn’t have? More importantly, why would you have an opinion about it?”

“The other morning, she was in town, and I stumbled on her by accident. She’s very pretty.” She spoke the word *pretty* as if it were an epithet.

“Yes, she’s pretty. So?”

“A bachelor should never employ a fetching servant. It’s a recipe for disaster.”

He snorted with offense. “Thank you for that wise advice.”

“There are shocking stories about her.” He didn’t react or retort so she added, “Scandalous stories. Have you checked her references?”

“I found her through Mrs. Ford’s Employment Agency. Mrs. Ford checked them, and the snooty woman only sends out the best girls. I trust her judgment.”

“Your governess is a notorious doxy, and she doesn’t have the moral character required to be minding an impressionable child. She shouldn’t be within a hundred yards of him.”

Nathaniel tsked with irritation. “He’s a bit sturdier than you give him credit for being. He’s not impressionable and she couldn’t mold him if she tried.”

“If we are to enter into a betrothal, the governess would have to be fired immediately. If you wished to hire a replacement, that would be fine with me, but she’d have to be much older and much less attractive.”

“You’re being awfully nosy about my home and my family. It’s making me nervous about the type of mother-in-law you would be. I would never permit you to interfere in my habits or choices.”

“I would never lecture you about your private business, but as we commence our negotiations, we must rid ourselves of any potential problems or liabilities. You’d have to terminate your pretty governess. I’m sorry, but I’m demanding it as a condition of the engagement.”

“How soon would I have to accomplish it?” he asked.

“In the next few days? Our agreement can’t become official until we’re shed of her.”

He sat for an eternity, pondering the edict. Ambrosia Adair had more gall than a king, and he yearned to deliver a caustic scolding over her haughty decree. He was very arrogant and descended from a long line of aristocrats. He never liked to be ordered about, but in considering his marriage, he had to be sensible and pragmatic.

He’d been acquainted with Rose Clark for two weeks. He knew nothing about her family, her parents, her ancestry, or history. She’d been in Egypt for years, apparently banished there as a punishment, but for what crime? The explanation she’d provided was most likely false.

He’d flirted with her when he shouldn’t have, then he’d tucked her away in the country so he’d cease being tempted. She was a sassy commoner, with a dodgy background she wouldn’t disclose. Mrs. Adair was insisting he part company with her as the price she’d extract to hand over Annette’s massive pile of assets.

When an inappropriate liaison with quirky Rose Clark was held up against the fortune he’d be given by gorgeous, gracious Annette Adair, was there any question as to which one he should select?

He inhaled a deep breath and, feeling as if he was running toward a high cliff and about to jump over, he said, “If her presence is bothering you so much, I imagine I can let her go.”

“At once?”

“Yes, at once, but she’s at Grenville Downs. It will take some maneuvering, but I’ll deal with it right away.”

“Marvelous. Since you’re willing to resolve it with so little fuss, I am delighted to announce that we can forge ahead. Have you settled on Annette? Or will you still have to reflect?”

“I’m ready to proceed.”

“I’d like to plan a huge celebration so we can’t pick a date yet. Would a Christmas wedding be satisfactory? We’d have several months to prepare.”

“The wedding is the bride’s purview so I’m amenable to whatever you’d like.”

A Christmas ceremony would significantly delay his receipt of the dowry, and his disappointment must have been obvious because she said, “I hate to have you waiting for your money so I can arrange an advance. I’ll call it a show of good faith as to our intentions to follow through. How does that sound?”

“It would be a very welcome gesture.”

“Might I prevail on you to propose to Annette in person? She’s young and a girl remembers it her whole life.”

He’d rather poke his eye out with a sharp stick than propose in person, but he nodded amiably. “I can manage that. How about if I stop by tomorrow afternoon at two?”

“Tomorrow afternoon will be perfect.”



CHRISTOPHER OPENED THE DOOR to the Grenville River House and he peeked into the foyer. There was no footman to greet new arrivals and the front parlor was dark and devoid of revelers.

It was after eleven, and he’d expected the residence to be packed, but no party was in progress. He couldn’t believe Nathaniel would have cancelled it; he was too bent on destruction. Had something happened? There was such a strange perception in the air, almost as if there’d been a death in the family. The atmosphere was that unnerving.

He was anxious to see Janet again. After their stroll in the garden, it appeared they’d rekindled their old romance. As an adolescent boy, he’d developed quite an affection for her, but it hadn’t had a chance to blossom. His regiment had been mustered on the spur of the moment and he’d shipped out.

He hadn’t returned to London for two years, and once he had, he’d discovered that she’d eloped with a man he didn’t know.

Back then, he’d been a dashing army officer who’d had women falling at his feet so he hadn’t exactly mourned the loss of her. He’d moved on to greener pastures, but he’d always fondly recollected their infatuation. With their crossing paths again, they’d instantly recaptured the sweet relationship he’d noticed earlier.

He’d let a few days pass without contacting her. Nathaniel wouldn’t like him to socialize with her so Christopher had to tread cautiously.

He’d written her a note, asking if she’d like to join him for a night at the theater, but she hadn’t replied, and he’d been amazed over how much her snub had hurt. It was odd that she’d ignored his overture, and he’d worried that she was sick or that a dire issue had arisen with Nathaniel.

Was she ill? Was her brother ill? Or might it be some other calamity?

He tiptoed over and peered into the parlor, and there was no indication that any festivities had been held. A door led onto the verandah, and it was ajar, as if someone was sitting outside. He supposed it would be Nathaniel and he walked out to check.

As he’d suspected, Nathaniel was seated at a table, a liquor decanter in the middle, a single candle burning. He was drinking alone, and he might have been the most pitiful man in

the world. He hadn't even allowed a servant to hover in case he required tending.

Nathaniel heard him and scowled. "What are you doing here?"

Christopher blustered over and pulled up a chair. "Where are all your disgusting chums?"

"I'm not hosting a party tonight. I have a footman stationed in the foyer to chase people away. Didn't you see him?"

"He's not there."

Nathaniel smirked with derision. "That's typical. I have no control over anything, not even my servants. They don't fear me."

"Would you like them to fear you?"

"No."

They snorted together and Christopher said, "Why are you lurking out on this dark patio? What's wrong?"

"I just had a bad day and I needed some peace and quiet."

"Are your revels ended for good? Or is this merely a short hiatus?"

"I haven't decided. I sent everyone to Grenville Downs for the summer, and the manor seems so bloody empty with them gone."

"Who went to the country?" Christopher asked.

"Noah and Janet, along with Miss Clark and her family. They were living in the house while she worked for me."

"If I remember correctly, Janet always hated the country. How were you able to convince her?"

"None of them was too keen to oblige me, but I didn't give them a choice."

Christopher sighed with relief. Janet hadn't ignored his invitation to the theater and he'd learned where she was. It meant his whole excursion out to the River House had been worth it.

Nathaniel reached into his coat and withdrew a letter. He handed it to Christopher to read. Christopher leaned toward the candle and skimmed the message that had been penned. It was from Nathaniel's clerk, the one he'd had investigate Noah's paternity. Christopher finished it, then carefully folded it and handed it back.

His friendship with Nathaniel was perched on a sharp edge, and he was determined to repair what he'd wrecked in Spain. If he uttered a stupid comment, their ruined bond would plummet to an even more pathetic level. But what would be appropriate?

"It sounds as if you're definitely Noah's father," he tentatively said. "How do you feel about it?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "I've been asking myself that very question."

“This might bring many changes to your life. Or it might not. If you had to wager over it, which direction will win out?”

“He’s a tough, smart boy. If I had to have a bastard strut up and demand to be recognized, I figure I got lucky with him.”

“I don’t have any idea how these matters are arranged. Will you publicly claim him? Will you pay for his schooling? Will you set up a trust fund to support him later on? If he’s tough and smart, he should probably be a soldier. Will you buy him a commission in the army? The entire debacle could become expensive very fast and you’re not in the best shape financially.”

Nathaniel gaped at him for an eternity, then he said, “Why are you here? There’s no party to attend so would you go away? At the moment, I can’t bear to have any company.”

“Are you sure? You look fairly miserable to me and you’ve had a huge shock. I don’t mind tarrying.”

“I don’t want any company!” he repeated more sternly.

Christopher had been dismissed, and he couldn’t think of a pithy retort that would delay his departure.

Well, he’d tried to be cordial and he’d keep on trying. He was very patient and Nathaniel was in such poor health. He needed Christopher’s understanding and sympathy and Christopher was happy to extend them.

Besides, the trip hadn’t been a complete waste. Janet was at Grenville Downs and he didn’t have a single appointment on his calendar. Would she like to have a visitor from town? He suspected he should find out.

“I’ll see myself out,” he said, “but first, I’ll locate that footman who’s supposed to be guarding the door. I’ll order the lazy dolt to remain at his post so you’re not accosted by anyone else.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Christopher stood to leave and he gazed down at his friend. It killed him to observe Nathaniel in such a wretched state, but with what he’d endured, what had Christopher expected?

There was no way Nathaniel would have arrived in England as the man Christopher had previously known. But he had to hope that the old Nathaniel was hiding somewhere deep inside. Christopher simply had to lure him to the surface.

He spun away and headed off, and when he would have stepped into the house, Nathaniel called to him.

Christopher halted and glanced back. “Yes? What was that?”

“I got engaged today.”

“Engaged ...to be married?”

“Yes. It’s astonishing, isn’t it?”

Christopher was aghast. “Are you in any condition to be a husband?”

“No, but I’m proceeding anyway.”

“Who’s the lucky girl?”

“If I tell you her name, you can’t mention it around town. Her mother will put an announcement in the newspapers. Until then, it’s a secret.”

Christopher whispered a quick prayer that it wasn’t Miss Clark, and his qualms were quickly allayed.

“She’s an heiress,” Nathaniel said. “Annette Adair?”

Christopher sifted through a dozen responses and finally said, “I’ve met her and she’s gorgeous. You’re a sly dog to have snagged her for your very own.”

“I proposed this afternoon and it will be official next week.”

“When is the wedding to be?”

“Christmas.”

“I guess you’ll have a busy autumn.”

“I guess I will.”

Nathaniel turned away and stared toward the river. He refilled his glass and sipped his liquor. Christopher hovered, feeling impotent and out of his depth. Ultimately, he forced himself away and went into the manor.

Nathaniel St. James was in no position to wed. He was grieving, angry, and disoriented. Shouldn’t he be prevented from perpetuating such a folly? And what about Mrs. Adair? What was she thinking in sacrificing her daughter like this? The rumors about Nathaniel were being bandied everywhere. Who could keep him from making this huge mistake?

The information provided Christopher with the perfect excuse to confer with Janet. She was Nathaniel’s only sibling. If she couldn’t stop this pending disaster, who could?

Chapter

12

ROSE WAS STROLLING DOWN the driveway that led to the Grenville Downs manor. She'd been bored and feeling sorry for herself so she'd walked to the nearby village. She was on her way back, but she was in no hurry to arrive.

Apple orchards lined the lane up to the house and she'd been sauntering through them, ruminating over the calamities that were approaching. The trees thinned and she was spit out at the edge of the lawns that circled the building. It was a grand residence, three stories high and constructed from a sand-colored stone mined from a local quarry.

There were seventy rooms, with many bedroom suites and various salons that were used for all sorts of reasons. There was a main section, with a separate wing on either side. The most ancient portion had once been a castle so there was a turret on the west end.

Compared to the Grenville River House in town, the rural mansion was in fairly good condition. The more competent servants had remained at their posts after the prior earl had died, and they completed their chores, despite there not being a family member present to provide supervision.

The grounds were mostly tended, the leaves raked, the grass swathed. The crops had been planted, and the horses and diminished cattle herds were fat and healthy. The barns were clean and the equipment in acceptable repair. In the house, the central parlors were dusted, the hearths swept, the rugs shaken. It was only on the upper floors where evidence of a fiscal catastrophe was visible.

The place had been emptied of much of the furniture and other items such as paintings and statuary to pay off the old earl's debts. There was just a small crew of maids so they didn't bother with the vacant areas. Those spaces were abandoned.

She was settled in and gradually figuring out how to carry on in the posh abode, but she couldn't ignore her mounting sense of dread that her time at Grenville Downs was very limited indeed.

Her task was to mind Noah and start his school lessons, but he wouldn't allow her any authority, and she had no idea how to force him to obey her. Plus, it was the height of summer. The days were warm, long, and wonderful. Noah and Eddie would never agree to sit in a stuffy parlor and practice mathematical equations.

She wasn't foolish enough to tell them they had to study. They'd have laughed in her face, then rushed off to explore more of the estate. They were reveling in their new circumstances. In fact, everyone was delighted by the change—except her.

Somehow, and against all odds, they'd wound up at one of the kingdom's most ostentatious properties. It was a boon Fog couldn't fathom, and she kept gushing to Rose about how lucky they were to be staying in such opulent surroundings. Rose hadn't had the heart to confess that she'd been banished to the country, that she'd misbehaved with Lord Grenville so she was being punished.

Would she ever learn her lesson about men and their motives?

By her idiotic conduct, she'd endangered Fog and Eddie; that much was clear. Lord Grenville had claimed they would spend the summer at Grenville Downs, but then what? She was terribly afraid that he would fire her, and she'd have to plead with Mrs. Ford to be assigned to another post. What if Mrs. Ford wouldn't give her one? What if she declared that Rose had failed at her first chance and didn't deserve a second?

Lord Grenville had coerced her into working for him by permitting Fog and Eddie to live with her. At a future job—if she could find one—she would never stumble on a position where she could drag Fog and Eddie along too. What would she do then?

It was a problem that vexed her. Originally, she'd been cockily confident that she'd landed the perfect situation for them with Lord Grenville. She should have realized the auspicious interval wouldn't last.

She trudged on and she went up to the front door and slipped into the foyer. No footman was there to greet her and it was a relief. She was able to creep up the stairs and head to her room without encountering a single soul.

The housekeeper had opened the countess's suite for Janet and two of the more ordinary suites for Fog and Rose. The boys were up in the nursery on the third floor, but the décor wasn't as frilly as it had been at the River House so they were happy with their accommodations.

If Rose had had her choice, she'd have picked a more isolated suite, one where she could have had more privacy to lick her wounds and ponder her plight, but with the spot being prepared for her, it would have been rude to refuse it. She was just the governess so she was fortunate she hadn't been stuck in the attic with the other servants. She had to quit complaining about every little issue.

She entered her bedchamber and she wasn't paying much attention. She yanked off her bonnet and was hanging it on a hook on the wall when a man spoke from behind her.

"It's about time you showed up," Lord Grenville said. "I was beginning to imagine you'd never return."

She whipped around, her jaw dropping in astonishment. "Why on earth are you at Grenville Downs?"

His eyes were merry, his expression teasing. "Are you my employee or not? Don't you have any chores to keep you busy? Why would you feel free to traipse off to the village in the middle of the afternoon? Have you become a slacker?"

He was over by the window, seated on a chair and sipping on a glass of liquor. Her initial thought was that he drank too much, but it wasn't her place to scold him.

"I repeat, Grenville," she said, her tone irked, "why are you here? And more importantly, why are you in my bedchamber? You can't assume you're welcome."

"I missed you. Did you miss me?"

She wouldn't touch that question with a ten-foot pole. She jerked the door wide and made a shooin' motion with her fingers, as if he was a bad dog that was being kicked out. Of course he didn't move a muscle. He simply grinned and studied her as if she were deranged.

"You should close the door," he said. "I can't be observed lurking in your bedroom. What would people think?"

He was correct that he shouldn't be observed, but he was such a vain oaf that he'd blustered in without considering the consequences of discovery. He could act however he pleased, but she didn't dare be caught with him. The servants would slay her with gossip, then Fog would literally kill her.

She complied with his suggestion by shutting the door, then spinning the key to prevent any visitors from strolling in.

"You locked us in," he said. "Aren't I lucky?"

"No, I locked others out. It would be a disaster to have anyone stumble on you."

She stomped over to him and she wasn't sure what she was planning. He was so large that she couldn't haul him out bodily. He'd go when he was good and ready and not one instant sooner. Before she could skitter out of range, he grabbed her wrist and tugged her onto his lap. In a trice, she was precisely where she shouldn't be, and she glared at him with conflicting emotions.

She was so glad to see him; she hated him. She was overjoyed that he'd arrived; she wished he'd fly off to the moon and vanish.

He pulled her to him and kissed her quite fiercely. For a bizarre moment, she gleefully participated, but she quickly recognized her folly. She leapt to her feet and flitted around the edge of the bed, using the mattress as a barrier so he couldn't reach for her again.

"You can't barge in and maul me," she said. "You're pretending you weren't awful to me in London, but you were a pompous lout and I loathe you."

"You don't loathe me."

"I do. I really, really do."

To her great shame, tears flooded her eyes and a few of them dribbled down her cheeks. As she swiped at them, he watched her, his gaze curious, as if she were a strange scientific experiment.

“Why are you crying?” he asked.

“Because you make me so miserable!”

“I don’t make you miserable. You’re being ridiculous.”

“You banished me as if I was a child who had to be punished. You’d been flirting with me, then you snapped your fingers and decided to stop. You didn’t spend a single second wondering if I might have been hurt by your abrupt change of heart.”

“I was awful, wasn’t I? I admit it.”

She hadn’t expected him to agree so his comment took some of the wind out of her sails. “At least you recognize that you’re horrid,” she grumbled.

“Come over here.” He patted his knee as if she’d waltz over and plop down.

“No, and you need to stay away from me. I’m your governess and I have to remember that fact. You can’t dangle me on this string, where sometimes you’re fond and sometimes you’re not.”

“I was protecting you from my dastardly advances,” he said, “but after you departed, I was so lonely and the house was so quiet.”

“How could it have been quiet? You had your new maids to supervise and your disgusting guests to revel with in the evenings. Weren’t you busy?”

“I think I’m finished with my parties. I doubt I’ll keep on in the future.”

“Well ... good. They were a waste of money and none of those idiots were your friends. You’re an earl these days so you ought to consort with a better class of people.”

“I enthusiastically concur, now *come* over here.”

“No. You can’t toss me aside, then presume you can start in with me again merely because you’re bored.”

He wasn’t a man who liked to be disobeyed. He stood, and in three quick strides, he was around the bed and loomed over her. He lifted her and tumbled them onto the mattress. She landed on her back, and before she could scoot away, he was stretched out atop her. He smiled down at her, his delicious blue eyes poignant and mesmerizing.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I shouldn’t have sent you away and I was so dejected with you gone. Ever since you walked out the door, I’ve been wretched.”

“Are you hoping I’ll believe you? Because I *don’t* believe you. You’re a liar and a fraud.”

“Please forgive me. I can’t bear to see you so sad and to realize I am the cause.”

He dipped down and kissed her. There was a sweetness to it, one that rattled her, one that seduced her. For the past three weeks, she’d exhaustively assessed her doomed relationship with him, and where he was concerned, she’d repeatedly blundered. If left to her own devices, there was no predicting what sins she might have committed.

He assumed they’d rekindle their amour. It would be deranged to involve herself. She simply didn’t have the stamina for such a constant whiplash of emotions. Yet he was so

dashing and captivating. How could she deflect his steady allure? How could any woman?

There was no finer thing in the world than to have Nathaniel St. James's undivided attention, and she couldn't imagine how she could put her foot down and mean it. As she'd proved over and over, she had no spine at all, and apparently, naught had changed in the brief period they'd been separated.

Instantly, she was overwhelmed and thinking she might engage in any conduct to make him happy. How could she save herself? She was standing in a very deep hole, and clearly, she was content to continue digging.



NATHANIEL SMILED AT ROSE and he knew she'd eventually forgive him for being an ass. They'd move their friendship onto the firm romantic foundation where it had been in London.

He should have stayed away from her, should have remained in town where he belonged, but he was feeling particularly unmoored. He'd forged ahead with his betrothal to Annette Adair, and her mother had extracted a promise from him that he'd fire Rose immediately. The minute he followed through, Mrs. Adair would deliver the advance on the dowry.

And he wouldn't really be *firing* Rose, would he? She'd simply return to Mrs. Ford, in possession of a glowing recommendation from him, and they'd both carry on from there. The problem for him though was that it would be wrong to part from her. It seemed as if he was bound to her and, should he oblige Ambrosia Adair, he'd regret it forever.

He truly intended to wed Annette. He'd proposed to her and had signed the nuptial contracts. Once the vows were spoken at Christmas, he would become very wealthy. The rest of his life would be easy and free of fiscal worry. But his excitement couldn't quell his misgivings about Rose. He was convinced he shouldn't let her go, and he thought he could persuade her to be his mistress. Why not find out if she'd agree?

He could purchase a cottage for her on the outskirts of London. Fog and Eddie could reside with her and he'd furnish her with an allowance to support them. The funds would also be to support Noah. Mrs. Adair had been correct in pointing out that Annette shouldn't have to be burdened by Noah's presence so Rose could care for him.

She was minding him already, and Noah and Eddie were best chums. It was perfectly logical to have her in charge of him. It would be a secret he'd have to keep from Mrs. Adair, but he was certain he could manage the subterfuge. If it guaranteed Rose would remain by his side, he might perpetrate any devious behavior.

His only moral qualm was that it would have to be accomplished with the Adair family's money. After the wedding, their money would be *his* money and he could fritter it away however he chose. If he elected to utilize it to pamper a favored paramour, it was no one's business but his own.

Most people would frown on that sort of duplicitous expenditure, and he had to admit that he had reservations, but after he'd sent Rose from London, it had rapidly grown obvious that he'd erred. Like a besotted swain, he'd rushed to be with her. He was that fascinated and obsessed.

He had no idea how she'd view his lewd suggestion, but her personal situation was dire, her finances nonexistent. Why shouldn't she latch onto him? Why not embrace the inevitable? She could attempt to part from him, but he doubted Fate would allow her to slither away so it would be futile to try.

At the moment, she was angry with him so it was too early to mention his plan, but while he tarried with her, he would employ every trick at his disposal to entice and seduce her. By the end of his sojourn at Grenville Downs, she wouldn't have to report to Mrs. Ford. He'd have her settled in her new cottage and they'd live happily ever after.

He began kissing her and he continued for a lengthy interval. She participated with incredible enthusiasm, and after he finally slowed and drew away, he asked, "Isn't this better than fighting?"

"We're not fighting. I dallied with you merely to be polite. You're so vain. If I'd refused to join in, you'd have pouted for months."

"You kissed me for an eternity, but you were just being polite? Is that your story?"

"Yes, and I'm sticking to it. You've been awful to me and I'm weary of you. You're hoping to worm your way into my good graces, but you can't. You've decided we should kick up our nonsense again, but the notion will fade shortly, and you'll toss me over."

"I'm staying in the country for an entire week," he said.

"And after a week passes, what then?"

"I'm expected in town for some meetings."

"So you popped in to flirt with me, then you'll depart soon?"

"Not *soon*. You get to have me all to yourself for seven days."

"Is this where I'm supposed to gush and tell you how thrilled I am?"

"A bit of gushing would stroke my enormous ego."

"Arrogant beast," she muttered and she slid out from under him.

She sat up, her back to him, her feet on the floor. Her shoulders were slumped, the passionate episode not improving her low mood.

"It will be all right, Rose," he said. "I promise."

"How can it be? I don't have the strength of will to deal with you. I only see heartbreak down the road for me."

He pulled her around to face him. She was so forlorn, which was very frustrating. He'd assumed he could easily charm her, but evidently, he'd have to work much harder than he'd realized.

“I won’t break your heart,” he told her. “I swear to you that I never will.”

In the history of cads and illicit amours, it was probably the most untruthful vow ever voiced. She recognized that it was and she snorted with disgust. “I don’t believe you and we’ve been in here too long. We’re lucky no one has knocked. If you were discovered with me, I’d have to kill you, and I’d rather not commit murder on such a lovely summer afternoon.”

She wiggled out of his grasp and went over to a mirror to check her condition. She smoothed a palm down the front of her gown, then she fluffed her curls so they hung appropriately. He loafed on her bed and watched her primping. Every detail about her captivated him. He was smitten as a green boy with his first crush.

“Why did you cut your hair?” he asked. “Why not pin it up in a chignon like every other girl?”

“It was too difficult to keep it styled. It’s been ages since I had the funds for a maid who could help me with it, and I’m completely incompetent to arrange it myself. It’s simpler to brush it and leave it alone.”

He decided, once she agreed to be his mistress, he’d hire *two* personal maids to assist her so she’d always be spoiled rotten.

“I hate to hear that you’ve struggled,” he said.

“It’s in the past so you needn’t concern yourself. I was anxious to change my appearance and chopping off my hair was the perfect method to accomplish it.”

“Why change your appearance? Are you hiding from someone?”

“If I was, I wouldn’t tell you.”

She was such an impertinent snot!

“Why were you in Egypt?” he inquired. “You never told me the whole sorry tale.”

“My father sent me there, remember? If I thought you needed to know more than that, I’d provide more information, but you’ve exhausted my patience.”

“There are shocking rumors circulating about you.”

“I haven’t set foot in England in seven years so I’m a virtual stranger on these shores. Who is there to furnish gossip?”

“Apparently, you are renowned far and wide as a doxy. Is that why you had to alter your looks? Are you concealing a bad reputation?”

She scoffed with derision. “Do I seem like a doxy to you? From the parties you’ve hosted, and the female guests you’ve invited, it’s obvious you’re an expert.”

“A man can’t detect immoral character by staring at a pretty face.”

She glowered at him, then said, “I’ve had enough of you for one afternoon, Grenville. You followed me to the country for no reason I can discern. You’ve barged into my bedchamber when you shouldn’t have. You’ve tempted me to renew our romantic liaison. It’s

a deranged notion, but then, you're a lunatic. To top it off, you've insulted me to the marrow of my bones. Whenever you'd like to beg my pardon, you can find me and offer a sincere apology. In the meantime, I'm busy and I don't have the energy to tolerate you another minute."

She started for the door and he said, "Where are you going?"

"To have a pot of tea with Fog."

"What should I do?"

"You can loiter in here until the cows come home, but I have no intention of loitering with you."

She sauntered out and he listened as her footsteps faded.

"She's wild for me," he murmured to the empty room.

He stood and went over to the wardrobe to snoop through her belongings. She had exactly four gowns and they were either grey or black. He'd order her some ready-made clothes and he'd have them delivered from town. When he glanced in her direction, he wanted to see her colorfully attired and very fetching.

He was at loose ends, with no chores to distract him. He had to talk to Noah about the paternity being verified, but he couldn't deduce the tenor of the conversation they should have. He ought to locate his sister and inform her that he was engaged, but he wasn't keen to apprise her, for he couldn't have Rose learn of his scheme.

In an odd way, he felt that—by betrothing himself to Annette—he was cheating on Rose. It was an insane perception, and his affection for Rose didn't have any bearing on his determination to wed Annette. Rose wouldn't understand it though, so for the moment, it had to remain a secret.

Finally, it occurred to him that he should track down the estate agent. Since becoming earl, he'd visited Grenville Downs on one dreadful occasion. It had been shortly after he'd arrived back from Spain. He'd been ill, emaciated, and confused, and the world had been moving too fast. After tarrying a single day, he'd snuck away, like a thief in the night, and had headed to London.

He received regular reports from the man, reports he never read, but maybe he could mend some fences by having a chat as to how matters were situated.

He walked out, and he didn't pause to check the surrounding area in case anyone was lurking. He blustered out and down the hall, as if he owned the bloody place.

Which he did.

It was all his: the mansion, the land, the servants. It didn't generate sufficient revenue to pay wages or maintain the property in a stellar condition. He'd protect it by marrying Annette Adair, but he'd glom onto Rose Clark too. He'd keep her by his side so he'd be happy.

The women would occupy separate corners of his life and they would never intersect. But of the two of them, Rose would be the one he'd cherish. Beautiful, sophisticated Annette

Adair would be his wife so she'd deserve his respect and courtesy, but Rose would be his heart's desire.

His plan was depraved and wrong, but it would work swimmingly in the end. About that fact, he had no doubt at all.

Chapter

13

JANET EXITED THE MANOR and was proceeding to the stables. The stalls were mostly empty, with the marketable horses being sold to satisfy her grandfather's debts. The elderly nags had been left behind, but she figured a few of them would still be rideable.

She'd never enjoyed the country and tarrying at a rural estate bored her silly. She supposed, in light of the poverty-stricken years she'd spent with her husband, Bertie, she ought to simply be grateful that her brother had provided her with such a pretty place to stay, but she couldn't relax as she ought.

She liked living with Fog and Rose Clark. They'd quickly begun to interact like fond cousins. They furnished a kindness and normality that was swiftly working to make her feel less disoriented by events, but she needed a period alone to take stock of where she was headed. A gallop down numerous deserted lanes would suit her.

She was concerned about Nathaniel and had to devise a method to help him. Could she help him? His deteriorated condition was disturbing, as was his odd conduct. He'd rid himself of them by sending them to Grenville Downs, but then, he'd tagged after them. His bizarre appearance was blatant evidence of his reduced situation.

She didn't think he was well, neither physically nor mentally, and she was anxious to butt her nose into his private business. Wasn't it her job to worry about him?

Yet according to Rose, his temper was short, his patience lacking, and Janet was afraid she'd try to talk to him about his problems, but he wouldn't welcome her intervention. It might wreck any chance she had to become his friend.

Her other vexation was with Christopher Blake. They'd walked together in the garden at the London house and it had been lovely. It had seemed as if Time had magically pitched her back to that day as adolescents when they'd foolishly pledged themselves.

That couldn't be correct though, could it? It was ridiculous to imagine she could bump into an old beau and instantly be smitten again.

She was in a low mood herself, and she was certain she'd misconstrued the emotional tenor of the encounter. She was just starting to recover from her depressing ordeal so she shouldn't be flirting with anyone, particularly Christopher Blake.

He was from a rich family. Not aristocrats, but close enough. His male kin had a lengthy history of serving in the army so they were important and powerful. He would never be

interested in a poor widow. He didn't have to reach so far down society's ladder.

After Nathaniel had announced that she'd be departing from town, she'd considered writing to Christopher to tell him where she'd gone and why. On further reflection, she hadn't contacted him though.

She wouldn't embarrass herself by yearning for a liaison when he likely hadn't intended one. At the moment, she was floating free and not able to pick a direction that would carry her into a secure future. Despite Nathaniel promising she could reside with him forever, she felt as if she was drowning.

She might latch onto the first gentleman who supplied a raft that would whisk her to safety. But it would be selfish to inflict herself on someone else, as she'd done to Bertie. She feared she might attempt the same with Christopher. She might try to rope him to her side, and she'd wind up humiliated by his claiming he merely wanted a cordial association.

She was approaching the stables when she noticed a man riding to the manor. He was obviously wealthy, trotting up on a glorious brown stallion. Initially, she suspected he'd be a neighbor stopping by now that there were some St. James family members on the premises.

He was dressed immaculately, in a blue coat, tan trousers, and knee-high black boots that were polished to a shine. The grass was so green, the summer sun beaming down on him, and she paused to relish the sight.

As he neared, she blanched with surprise. It was Christopher! The scamp! Why was he at Grenville Downs? She might have conjured him just by contemplating him so furiously.

"Christopher Blake!" she called as he reined in at the front door and dismounted. "Is that you?"

He peered about, keen to locate the person who'd hailed him. He saw her and waved. "Janet! There you are!"

"What are you doing here?"

She was a tad astonished to find herself running toward him. He watched her race over, his hands extended, so he could pull her into a tight hug.

"You snuck off without a goodbye," he said.

"Nathaniel shipped me off to the country. I wasn't eager to oblige him, but he insisted. It was easier to comply than argue."

"Well, *I* sent you a note to invite you to the theater and you never replied." He smiled teasingly. "Your lack of regard crushed my ego, so what defense will you offer for such cruel conduct?"

"Oh, I didn't receive it! I bet it's sitting in the mail basket at the River House."

He grinned. "I thought it was incredibly rude of you to ignore me so I spoke to your brother and pried out the details of why I was snubbed. Once I learned where you were, I chased after you immediately."

"How long can you stay?"

Looking cocky and confident, he asked, "How long would you like me to stay?"

In her weakened emotional condition, it was a dangerous question, and she didn't dare answer it truthfully. Instead, she grinned too and said, "You should stay for as long as you can stand me."

"Are you expecting you'll drive me mad? I've assumed it would be the other way around, that *I* would smother you with my exhausting attention."

"There's no chance of that. I'm so glad you came."

A footman walked up and led his horse away. Then Christopher turned and gazed up at the manor.

"I've never been here before," he said. "It's magnificent, isn't it? It's more like a palace than a house. It has me supposing you're much more posh than you like to admit."

"What can I say? My relatives are earls. They're required to be posh."

"More pity you."

"The place appears ostentatious on the outside, but on the inside, it's experienced some wear-and-tear from my grandfather's neglect. It hasn't collapsed though so I guess I should be relieved. Shall we go in?"

"Let's do."

"I should warn you that Nathaniel has slithered in too. He showed up without notice and I can't deduce why. So far, he's simply been an enormous nuisance."

"I just saw him in town. He didn't mention he'd be traveling too."

She shrugged. "I think he's lonely, but who can predict what motivates him?"

"I'm fairly sure he's sweet on Miss Clark, and after she left, he realized how much he missed her."

"Is he sufficiently acquainted with her to be infatuated?" Janet asked with exasperation. "She's the governess, isn't she?"

"Yes, which raises several issues for you and me. We'll probably wind up having to clean up a huge mess after disaster strikes."

"What kind of mess?"

"I'll tell you after I've settled in. *And* we'll discuss Nathaniel's latest antic. I don't imagine he's confessed what he's been up to in London."

"Your comment terrifies me. What's he done? From your wary tone, I'm alarmed over how awful it will grow to be."

"At the moment, we needn't worry about it. We should simply be delighted that I brazenly visited. We'll focus on that and not allow Nathaniel to interfere in our fun."

"I definitely won't let him interfere," she said. "Now come in with me. As opposed to the River House, *this* house actually has a few competent servants. We'll have a bedchamber opened so you can wash and relax, then we'll fritter away the entire afternoon."

“I like the sound of that.” She took his arm, and they headed to the door, but he quickly halted and said, “What if Nathaniel is angry that I arrived? What if he orders me off the premises?”

“Then I shall order *him* to jump off a cliff. This is a big mansion and there’s plenty of space for both of you. If he doesn’t like it, he’s welcome to gallop back to the city.” She smirked and added, “If he departed, I doubt anyone would complain.”

“That’s a sorry statement about his situation.”

“True, but he’s brought on a lot of his problems. I can’t fix them for him. I have too many of my own that have to be addressed.”

He thrilled her by leaning in and kissing her on the cheek. “You have no problems. In my eyes, you’re absolutely perfect.”

She smiled. “You are a flatterer, Christopher Blake, and while I’ve had many ills plaguing me recently, you might be the healthy cure that will mend my woes.”

As they entered the foyer, she was ecstatic to have learned that she hadn’t been misreading their relationship. Apparently, a marvelous connection was forming and she was excited to discover where it would lead.



“WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS for the afternoon?”

“I don’t have any.”

Fog asked Rose the question, but Rose barely glanced up. She had her nose buried in the London newspaper. They were in the dining room, seated at the table and having just finished their midday meal. Noah and Eddie had eaten fast and already dashed off.

The rowdy pair was playing and exploring, engaging in the sort of summer mischief that boys were meant to enjoy.

There were numerous children around the property, and they tagged after Noah as if he were a hero in an ancient legend. He naturally exuded Lord Grenville’s air of command and authority, and she wondered how long the Earl would continue to pretend they weren’t father and son.

“Listen to this strange advertisement,” Rose said. “It’s for a place called, *Mrs. Pettigrew’s Home for Young Ladies*. They provide ‘discreet shelter and excellent medical assistance, in a beautiful coastal setting’. Is it a women’s hospital or what?”

Rose shoved the page over so Fog could peruse it herself. To Fog, who’d been ruined by a cad, then cast aside, the wording was deliberately obscure, but clear as day.

“It’s a facility for unwed mothers,” she said.

“People announce it when they’re in that type of business?”

“Not usually. Usually, when a girl is in trouble, she—or her parents—have to subtly inquire of their friends and family. If they attend a more modern church, their parish might operate one. But it’s all hush-hush, with everyone acting as if there’s no need for such a service.”

“This Mrs. Pettigrew? Why would she be so blatant about it?”

“Obviously, she’s drumming up clients by informing desperate maidens that it’s available. If a woman requires that kind of aid, it can be difficult to find the appropriate spot.”

“It’s such a salacious topic. Should we be scandalized that the newspaper’s publisher printed it?”

Fog scoffed with irritation. “Only a female who’s never been in trouble herself would worry about such a ridiculous notion.”

In many ways, Fog was very conservative. She carefully followed the strictures that bound her to an ethical life. She tried to do the right thing, behave correctly, and always choose the moral path. Her sole lapse had been her doomed amour with Rose’s father, Colonel Clarkson, who’d later claimed he wasn’t Rose’s father after all.

Fog had been naive and foolish, and she’d succumbed to his cunning seduction with nary a ripple in her conscience. She’d believed he’d marry her, a nobody neighbor, a merchant’s daughter, with no dowry or ancestry worth mentioning! That’s how idiotic she’d been.

As she’d leapt into the liaison, she hadn’t considered the consequences, but there had been plenty of them. After her condition had been exposed, her father had beaten her nearly to death, then he’d kicked her out to fend for herself. She’d rushed to the Colonel, assuming he’d help her, but he’d denied their dalliance and had dared her to prove paternity. Of course the fiend had known she couldn’t afford to pursue him in the courts.

When Rose had eloped with Charlie Moneypenny, Eddie had been about to turn three. He and Fog had been living with a distant cousin who’d treated them like lepers. Out of the blue, the Colonel’s adjutant had visited them and had offered her the chance to travel to Egypt as Rose’s companion. By then, Fog had been so beaten down that she hadn’t hesitated.

She often pondered—and was galled by—the unfairness of her having to slink away. The Colonel had been famous in the army, and he’d suffered no penalty for ruining her, for siring a bastard, for tossing her over afterward. All of the shame had fallen on Fog’s slender shoulders.

His conduct had altered her view of men and the world. Women needed laws to protect them. They needed to have their own money. They needed legal representation to collect damages from cads who caused so much harm. And they needed sympathetic allies to guide them through the perils of childbirth.

If Mrs. Pettigrew wanted to start such a necessary enterprise, then advertise it in the newspapers, Fog thought men should keep their opinions about it to themselves.

“Where are the boys?” Rose asked. “We rarely see them. Should we be concerned about what they might be doing?”

“No. They’re having fun.”

“Yes, but technically, I’m supposed to be in charge of Noah.”

Fog snorted. “He doesn’t recognize your authority.”

“I should have implemented some school lessons. What if Lord Grenville asks me about it?”

“Tell him the truth. It’s the height of summer, and when the weather is so balmy, you can’t force a ten-year-old boy to sit down and study.”

“I’m sure he’ll love to hear that excuse.”

Fog leaned in and whispered, “Why is he here anyway? Have you spoken to him? Has he explained himself?”

“It’s his estate,” Rose said. “If he decides he should pop in for a visit, I don’t imagine he has to clarify his actions. Most especially to me.”

“Is he still flirting with you?”

“He hasn’t been flirting!” Rose firmly insisted, but her cheeks heated with embarrassment.

“He’s very handsome,” Fog pointed out. “He could lure you into all sorts of trouble.”

“I realize that and I’m not stupid. I only have to look at you to recollect what can happen to a girl if she’s not cautious.”

“I didn’t have anyone to warn me of the dangers so I’m warning *you* now. Watch out for him. I think he has wicked designs on your person.”

Rose snickered with amusement. “Why would you presume they’d be wicked designs? Why couldn’t they be wonderful designs?”

Fog clucked her tongue with offense. In some ways, Rose was very mature, but in others, she was as gullible as she’d been when Charlie Money Penny had coaxed her into eloping. Fog didn’t blame her for being so naïve. Every female was susceptible to flattery and compliments.

“Are you sweet on him?” Fog asked. “Please swear you’re not.”

Rose reined in some of her attitude. “No, I’m not sweet on him. Actually, he came to apologize for being so mean to me in London, but I told him he could choke on a crow. You know I can’t abide pompous posturing. It reminds me too much of the Colonel.”

Fog was curious as to why Lord Grenville would be sorry for any incident that occurred between him and Rose. Why would he race to the country because of her? He was an aristocrat so he could act however he liked. Rose was a servant and not deserving of any apology, but Fog had noticed their heightened attraction. It was impossible *not* to notice it.

Rose's denials were obvious lies. How dire would the situation become prior to it ending in catastrophe? Why was it that men never behaved better? When they stumbled on a fetching maiden, why were they inclined to carry on like villains?

"If he promises to marry you," Fog said, "will you tell me straight away?"

"Honestly, Fog. He's just lonely and I make him happy."

Fog couldn't tamp down a gasp. "Has he admitted that you make him happy?"

"No! It's merely my sense of our relationship. He's simply tarrying for a week, then he'll head back to London. Don't read more into this than there is."

"I'm not your mother or your chaperone," Fog said, "so I have no power to order you to stay away from him, but would you be careful?"

"I'm always careful," Rose ludicrously claimed.

She was stubborn and impertinent. She didn't heed wise advice, and her cheeky insolence had pitched her into plenty of calamities, starting with her failed elopement and tumbling downhill from there. She never learned any lessons, and Fog might have launched into a tirade about men and their motives, but before she could, Lord Grenville bellowed from down the hall.

"Rose Clark! Where are you? I need you."

Rose rolled her eyes and stood. "I'll see you later."

"We're not finished discussing him. Don't begin to hear wedding bells. He's a nobleman and they never marry their servants. Remember that. Should you resign? Should we leave Grenville Downs? Is that what it would take to protect you from him?"

"You are being an absolute fusspot and I wish you wouldn't fret so much. I'm fine!"

"Miss Clark!" Grenville shouted. "Where are you?"

Rose hurried out, shouting in reply, "I'm here, Grenville. Stop your caterwauling. You'll have the whole house in an uproar."

Fog listened as Rose caught up to him and they wandered off. Their words were indecipherable, but their tone was much too cordial. If mischief was occurring, it was Lord Grenville's fault. Not Rose's. She was the innocent party and he ought to be ashamed. If he'd forgotten the walls that separated them, he should have them pointed out. Should Fog speak to him? Should she scold him?

No. She was in no position to lecture him on any topic, and if she tried, it might imperil her lodging. His affection for Rose was the reason Fog was living in the fancy mansion, and she couldn't ignore that fact. Yet if Grenville pressed his attentions, and Rose succumbed, the situation would collapse no matter what Fog did or didn't do.

She was fond of Rose and grateful for her fiscal support, but she had to keep Eddie safe and out of harm's way. That was her foremost concern.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a letter that had been forwarded from town. Her mother had written to share the news that Fog's father had died. Fog hadn't seen her

parents in over a decade, ever since she'd confessed to them that she was increasing with Colonel Clarkson's child.

Her father had been a violent, petty tyrant, and her mother hadn't had the fortitude to stand up to him. She'd let him drive Fog away, and the end result was that her mother had never met her grandson. It had been her choice, and Fog wasn't sorry about it, but maybe it was time to mend some fences.

With Fog's father having passed away, her mother had invited Fog and Eddie to move home. She'd specifically stated that Rose couldn't join them though. Her mother deemed Rose to be snooty and unlikable, and in their neighborhood, Rose was still considered a notorious doxy.

It wasn't fair, but it was their reality. Should Fog accept her mother's olive branch? Could she stomach residing with the bitter woman again?

She wasn't the girl who'd been kicked out years earlier. She was an adult with her own ideas and temperament. Could they bond as a family? Or was Fog too jaded? Was there too much water under the bridge?

If Rose got herself in a jam with Lord Grenville, she'd be fired and sent away, with her being given barely a minute to pack her belongings. Rose was aware of how the world worked. She'd had a front-row seat to view how her father had treated Fog, how Charlie Money Penny had treated *her*. Lord Grenville wouldn't act any differently from how those two men had acted.

If Rose landed herself in a quagmire, Fog would hate to abandon her, but Rose was risking Fog's security with nary a thought as to the ramifications. At all costs, Fog would have to protect herself and her son. Shouldn't she respond affirmatively to her mother?

On the spur of the moment, when she was sitting in the dining room at magnificent Grenville Downs, she couldn't decide. She couldn't bear to depart so she would watch and listen, would wait and worry. Once it became clear that Rose had set tragedy in motion, Fog would forge ahead.

She folded the letter and slid it into her pocket.

Chapter

14

“HAVE YOU NOTICED I’M not limping anymore?”

Rose frowned at Nathaniel and said, “No. Since when?”

“Since I’ve been using your magical salve. The sore on my leg has healed and I’m feeling much better.”

“That’s marvelous news. Am I brilliant or what?”

He tsked with amusement. “I won’t fan your ego by concurring with your brash boast.”

“You’re distracting me so be silent. I have to tell you something.”

“What is it?” he asked. “From your dour expression, it’s clear I won’t like it, so please don’t annoy me.”

“You won’t like it, so don’t shout and don’t bite my head off. I’m just the messenger.”

They were in the master suite, in the sitting room, and seated at a table by the window. They were having a glass of wine, as if she was a lady of leisure instead of a servant he’d hired to tutor his son.

He was stepping over all sorts of lines that shouldn’t be crossed, and he might have been a condemned man who was rushing toward his date with the executioner. He had a few brief days to wallow in her delightful company before his engagement was announced. Once the news circulated, he doubted she’d ever speak to him again.

He’d hoped to convince her to be his mistress, but after significant deliberation, he’d had to accept that she’d never agree. He wouldn’t stop trying to wear her down, but he had to bind her in other ways, such as paying her to take care of Noah. He wasn’t certain such a scheme would succeed so his time with her might be winding to a close.

He was pretending he was eager to hear about her plans for Noah’s schooling, but it was August so it was ridiculous to suppose a rambunctious boy would be able to focus on any lessons. Nathaniel’s request for a report had simply supplied him with an excuse for them to be alone.

The mansion was huge, and there should have been plenty of spaces for a private encounter, but whenever he turned around, a servant was lurking. With it only being his second visit since he’d become earl, they were anxious to make a good impression. It wasn’t

a secret that the estate was in bad fiscal shape so the members of the staff were worried about the future.

After he received Annette's dowry, he'd have the funds to repair and rebuild, maybe even dole out raises, but thorough investigations would be necessary to determine how many people he should employ.

A large property always had too many workers so he had to meet with land agents, housekeepers, and others to calculate the number required for a smoothly functioning enterprise. At the moment, a detailed assessment, where he'd have to participate in conversations, review ledgers, and dicker over survey results, was simply beyond him. He'd much rather flirt with Rose Clark.

"Before you share your message," he said, "may I tell *you* something I haven't told anybody else?" Well, he'd told Christopher, but that didn't count. "I wanted you to be the first to know."

She batted her lashes. "Aren't I special?"

"You are special. Exotic and unusual too."

"I wish you'd quit spewing flattery. I'm still furious with you so it won't get you anywhere."

"Won't it? You're in my bedchamber, aren't you?"

"For a business discussion! I'm the governess, and from now on, our relationship will remain on a professional level."

He studied her, thinking she was so pretty, and he was so smitten. His obsession was downright scary. He couldn't deduce why, but when he was with her, the day was brighter. He ceased being so surly and gruff. Without her even realizing it, she provided a tonic he desperately needed.

"Fine," he said. "We can have a business discussion—if that's what you desire. Have you prepared any lessons for Noah?"

"No. He doesn't mind me, doesn't respect me, and I have no control over him."

Nathaniel laughed. "Are you admitting that you're a failure at your post?"

"Yes. When you initially interviewed me, I confessed that I had lied about my references. I wasn't joking. I'm inept at dealing with children."

"You have to be the worst governess in the history of governesses."

"I can't exactly deny it."

He shrugged. "It's summer. I don't imagine the world will end if Noah doesn't sit down and practice his penmanship."

"He seems very smart to me," she said. "Has he had any schooling?"

"He claims he has and he can definitely read and write."

"Perhaps it won't be a catastrophe if we delay until autumn."

Nathaniel smirked. “Says the woman who just swore she has no idea how to control him. If you slack off all summer, what pretext will you use in the fall?”

She grinned. “I’ll devise a new rationalization by then.”

“You’re a menace,” he told her, “and I can’t figure out why I put up with you.”

“I can’t figure it out either. I’m chalking it up to your deranged mental state. For some bizarre reason, I’ve charmed you so you’re willing to tolerate my quirky habits and sassy mouth.”

“I believe you’ve pegged my situation correctly.”

They chuckled and clinked their glasses together, and he studied her again. He never grew tired of staring at her and he wondered if he ever would.

“Tell me about your ruination,” he blurted out.

Ambrosia Adair had warned him about her, and it had dawned on him that she might not be all that chaste. If she wasn’t, if she’d previously succumbed to passion, it would clear away some of the obstacles to his misbehaving with her. It would also alleviate some of his ethical qualms.

After all, a gentleman couldn’t blithely fornicate with an innocent maiden. The Church forbade it. Society condemned it and it was a crime to sire a bastard. But if she was no longer a virgin...well...

It swept away many issues he shouldn’t be considering.

She huffed with aggravation. “I wasn’t ruined!”

“What happened to you then?”

She fumed and stewed, then said, “I’ll explain what occurred, but don’t you dare scold me. And you better not judge me. I was seventeen!”

“I won’t judge you. I promise.”

“My father was a colonel in the army and he was a tad infamous. I’m sure you’ll be familiar with him. You might even have served under him so I don’t need any lectures. He and I struggled with many personal matters and your opinion will simply annoy me.”

Nathaniel straightened as if he’d been poked with a pin. “Who was your father?”

“Alfred Clarkson?”

“Oh, my goodness.” He scowled, then said, “Wait a minute. If his surname was Clarkson, why is yours Clark?”

“Why would you suppose? I’m hiding my identity so busybodies like you can’t guess who I am.”

“Is your Christian name Rose?”

“Near enough.”

He leaned in and demanded, “What is it?”

“Rosalie. Rosalie Clarkson.”

“Rosalie . . .” he murmured. “It suits you more than Rose.” He mulled the information, then said, “I think I’ve heard of you.”

She blew out a heavy breath. “Of course you have.”

“You were involved in a huge scandal! The whole army was tittering about you.”

“It wasn’t that big,” she felt compelled to insist. “Soldiers merely found it thrilling to gossip about the Colonel.”

“What are the details? I forgot.”

“It was a tad tawdry. One of the Colonel’s subordinates thought it would be a smart career move to marry me. He asked permission for us to begin courting, but the Colonel refused his request. The fellow was incensed at being denied so he secretly flirted with me until he was able to persuade me to elope.”

Nathaniel raised a hand to stop her from continuing. “It’s all coming back to me. The Colonel chased after you, right? He caught you?”

Her cheeks heated. “That might have been me.”

“Your devoted swain was Charlie Money Penny?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

He gaped at her and struggled to pick an appropriate retort.

Colonel Clarkson had been an ass, and Charlie a scoundrel, so the story had reverberated for months. People had wagered over whether Charlie would succeed, over whether the Colonel might kill them both if they were captured.

“I know Charlie Money Penny,” he said.

“Then I bet you’re aware of what he’s like.”

“Yes, I’m very aware. He’s a cad and a bounder.”

Nathaniel’s debacle in Spain had been set in motion by Money Penny. Nathaniel was convinced of it. He had no evidence to support the assertion, but Money Penny was a conniver and schemer who’d landed himself in a hundred jams. He was also a smooth-talker who constantly slithered out of trouble.

If he’d hurt Rose, it would add to the list of sins for which Nathaniel would eventually extract a penalty.

“I wasn’t ruined,” she repeated. “The Colonel got wind of Charlie’s plans and he intercepted us on the road.”

“But you were punished.”

“Oh, I was definitely punished. It started with the Colonel delivering a sound thrashing, where I couldn’t sit down for a week. Then I was locked in my room for three months while we waited to discover if I was increasing. I insisted I wasn’t, but the Colonel wouldn’t listen.”

“Afterward, he sent you to Egypt,” Nathaniel said, “so the rumors could die down.”

“Yes, and he wouldn’t allow me to return home. I was stranded there.”

“The rumors haven’t died down though, have they? My acquaintance in town told me about you.”

She shrugged. “I don’t understand why the tale has such sturdy legs. In the past seven years, there have been plenty of other army scandals. I wish the gossips would shift their attention to some other unlucky girl.”

“The main characters were the Colonel and Charlie Money Penny and they were generally loathed. It was amusing to have them embroiled in such a quandary.”

“I suppose that could be it.”

She couldn’t hold his gaze, but stared down at her lap. With his learning she was a notorious *femme fatale*, he was even more fascinated by her. She was an impish sprite. How could she have fomented such an enduring controversy?

She was particularly woebegone and he said, “Rose, look at me.”

“I can’t. I’m too mortified. I never discuss the incident and I can’t believe you dragged the whole sorry saga out of me.”

“I’m glad you admitted it and I don’t care about it. It’s ancient history.”

She peeked up at him. “You say that now, but you’re not serious. The minute I irritate you in the future, you’ll throw it in my face.”

“I won’t. I swear and I don’t blame you for what transpired.”

“It’s nice to hear, but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m considered a fallen woman.”

He snorted with disgust. “I don’t intend to fret about it and you shouldn’t either.”

“I would like for it to fade away, but it seems as if I’m carrying it on my back like a heavy weight.”

“Perhaps by confiding in me, you’ll cease feeling so burdened.”

“I doubt that very much. If I didn’t labor under a ton of guilt, I might float off into the sky.”

The most poignant emotion swirled between them and a flood of comments rushed to the tip of his tongue. He was anxious to tell her how much he cherished her company, how ecstatic he was that she’d appeared in his life, but those remarks would compound the misconceptions he was creating with her.

He couldn’t acknowledge his affection. What would be the point? It would bind them more tightly, when they shouldn’t be bound at all.

“May I lighten the grim mood I’ve stirred,” he said, “and give you some happier news? At least I think it’s happy. I’ve had a clerk investigating Noah’s paternity, remember? I finally received his report.”

She gasped, then smiled. “Noah is your son, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he’s mine. I’m still trying to absorb the information.”

“Have you spoken to him yet?”

“No. I can’t figure out how to approach him, but I bet he won’t deem the situation to be that terrific.”

“You won’t be awful to him, will you?” she said. “You won’t shuck him off on a tenant farmer to raise or something horrid like that?”

“He has the temperament to be a soldier so he could have a great career in the army.”

“Did you like being in the army? From how grumpy you can be when you mention it, I’m never sure.”

“It was grand. Mostly. The last year was a tad difficult.”

She snickered at that. “Noah is a leader. The children on the estate trail after him like loyal puppies.”

“I have to talk to him,” he said, “but I’m not certain how. What would you suggest?”

She scoffed. “As if I have any insight into how his mind works. He views me as an annoying nuisance.”

“I predict he views me the same way.”

“You should discuss it with Fog. She’s a mother and she’s spent more time with him than I have. She might have some valuable advice.”

“You’re proving once again that you are completely incompetent at the task for which you’ve been hired.”

“That will be our little secret.”

“Let’s find Fog. Since you’re worthless on this subject, I’ll confer with her instead.”

He stood and drew her to her feet. She wasn’t shy with him and she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tight.

“I’m delighted by this,” she said. “It will be good for you. And for him.”

“I guess I agree, but he doesn’t seem to want a father, especially if it’s me.”

“You are quite irksome in the beginning of a relationship, but you grow on a person. He could start to like you. It would be a miracle, but it could happen.”

The comment made him happy and he dipped down and kissed her. He couldn’t resist and she heartily joined in. For all her protests and complaining, she was just as smitten as he was. She was the first to pull away though and she skittered back so he couldn’t reach for her again.

“I constantly warn myself to keep my distance from you,” she said, “but I never manage it.”

“You shouldn’t keep your distance. It’s impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible and we’re not animals. We can control our worst impulses.”

“Speak for yourself.”

She stuck her pert nose in the air and sauntered out. He followed her, his hot gaze locked on her bottom, and his thoughts were lewd and inappropriate, filled with visions of how she might look without her clothes.

They were at the stairs and about to march down, when she blanched and whipped around, saying, “You had me so distracted with your questions and nonsense that I forgot to deliver my message.”

“What message? What are you talking about?”

She braced, as if for an explosion, then she said, “Your friend, Christopher Blake, has arrived.”

Nathaniel felt as if she’d punched him. “Christopher is here? He’s not my friend and I didn’t invite him.”

“He didn’t come to see you so you needn’t be so incensed.”

“Who did he come to see?”

“Your sister. He brought a packed portmanteau so I assume he’s staying for a bit.”

Nathaniel’s temper soared to such a height that he was surprised the top of his head didn’t blow off. “Is that villain presuming he might court her? Is that his ploy?”

“I have no idea.”

“It will happen over my dead body!”

He pushed by her and stomped down the stairs, taking them two at a time. She called from up above, “Nathaniel! Will you hold on? You shouldn’t be an ass about this. No one is eager to have you spewing and venting, particularly not Janet.”

He halted long enough to glare up at her. “She’s my only sibling, Rose, and I’m sorry, but this isn’t any of your business.”

“I’m trapped in this house with both of you so it certainly is my business, and you can be such an idiot.”

He could have retorted with an awful tirade, but he swallowed it down. She grumbled numerous slurs—that were all deserved—but he deftly ignored her and continued on.



“WHERE IS THAT SCURVY dog?”

Janet heard her brother before she saw him, and he’d bellowed the query so loudly that she cringed.

She was in her bedchamber and about to proceed down to the front parlor. She and Christopher were meeting there, then going for a ride. They'd debated over how and where to tell Nathaniel he was visiting. It was wiser to apprise him immediately and face to face, rather than to have a chance encounter in a hallway.

She hated that she would be caught in the middle of their quarrel, and she wasn't sufficiently acquainted with her brother to act as a referee. Nor did Nathaniel have any right to boss her. She'd endured plenty of nagging when she'd been living under their grandfather's cruel thumb, and she wouldn't tolerate it from him.

She was thinking, if he didn't like having Christopher on the premises, he could return to London. She hadn't asked him to travel to the country, and his presence was simply a nuisance for the servants.

Christopher had been very candid about his despicable behavior during their excursion in Spain, and clearly, Nathaniel was reeling from what had occurred. He couldn't move beyond the incident, but Christopher hadn't weathered the aftermath very successfully either.

He was consumed by tremendous guilt, with the end result being that he'd resigned his commission in the army. He was so disturbed by how his superiors had treated Nathaniel—at her grandfather's behest—that he'd quit.

He was flailing too, trying to cope with what had transpired, but also with how to build a different future that didn't include being a soldier. He and Nathaniel had to shuck off their rift and become friends again. They had to accomplish it for her sake because, if Nathaniel forced her to pick between them, she'd pick Christopher, and she didn't want to be placed in that position.

The door burst open, and as Nathaniel stormed in like a berserker, she calmly asked, "May I help you?"

"Miss Clark just informed me that Christopher Blake is your guest, but he's not welcome at Grenville Downs."

"Your opinion is noted, but he's not leaving."

"I'm ordering you to send him away! If I have to deal with him, I can guarantee you won't like the outcome. I'll throw him out bodily."

"I won't make him go, Nathaniel."

"If you knew how he betrayed me—"

"I know all about it," she evenly said. "He confessed every sin and I like him anyway."

"If that's even remotely true, then you understand why he can't be here. It's an insult to me."

"You won't even realize he's in the house. He and I will avoid you completely."

"Is he courting you?"

"I guess he is."

At her bald admission, his expression was so shocked that it was nearly comical. She'd have laughed if the situation hadn't been so grave.

"Christopher Blake is a lying, untrustworthy monster," he said, struggling to catch his breath. "You can't be serious about him. I won't let you be serious."

"You never thought he was terrible in the past, and it depresses me that prior events have altered your esteem."

"A catastrophe provides a window into a person's genuine character. I have no illusions about him now."

"When he and I were adolescents, we were sweethearts for a brief period. Were you aware of that fact? We discussed marrying when we were older, but circumstances pulled us apart. I'm delighted that he and I have crossed paths again. In light of how dreadfully I've suffered, I deserve a bit of happiness."

"You can't rely on him. You're deranged if you think so."

"Well, you're not the one he fancies so you don't need to worry about it."

He looked stunned, as if she'd punched him. "If you're contemplating marriage, I'd never permit it."

"If things proceed in that direction, I would be thrilled to be his wife, and if you intend to be an ass about it, you won't be consulted."

"I'm your brother!" he furiously said, as if she'd forgotten. "I'm head of this family. It's my job to decide what's best for you, particularly in matrimonial matters."

"On this issue, I don't accede to your authority and I'm busy. Would you excuse me? I don't have the patience to dawdle while you berate me."

"You assume I'm joking, but he's going back to town. Today!"

"No, he's not. If his presence disturbs you so much, why don't *you* go back to town? I can't fathom why you're in the country. Wouldn't you be more content in the city? Besides, you dumped us here so you could be shed of us, and we were getting along just fine without you."

It was a horrid remark and she shouldn't have uttered it. Christopher had explained how soldiers had lingering problems after they were exposed to traumatic experiences. Nathaniel was laboring under an incredible amount of distress, and he might never be totally healed.

She should have been more sympathetic, but she wasn't exactly in a pristine condition herself. She craved the joy and excitement Christopher would deliver. Despite how Nathaniel badgered her, she wouldn't send Christopher away. She wouldn't quarrel about it and she wouldn't relent.

Her curt comment had punctured him like an arrow, and his shoulders slumped with defeat. "Why won't you listen to me? Can't you at least try to comprehend my position?"

"I've listened, but I don't choose to heed you."

She went over to the door, indicating he should depart. He studied her for an eternity, then he said, "It will hurt me very much if he stays. It will crush me if he courts you."

"It will crush *me* if he doesn't."

She motioned for him to leave, and he paused, desperate to devise an argument that would sway her, but he realized she couldn't be swayed. He marched out and she sighed with regret. It appeared their relationship had been ruined before it could begin.



NOAH WAS WALKING BEHIND the barns, searching for Eddie and the other boys with whom they'd been playing. He'd cut his arm on a fence post and he'd rushed inside to wash and bandage it. The injury wasn't bad, but Fog had wrapped it for him, and it was nice to have her fretting.

His own mother hadn't been very attentive so even when she'd still been alive, he'd mostly fended for himself. Fog was very kind and he was lucky she bothered to fuss with him.

Up ahead, he heard angry voices, and he rounded the building and stumbled on the group he'd been seeking. Since he and Eddie had arrived at the estate, they'd amassed a horde of children who followed them everywhere. Noah had quickly become their leader.

As he approached, Eddie was facing off with a huge lout from the village. He was fat, wide, and a foot taller than Eddie. He was also very stupid and Noah loathed him.

Eddie was scolding him. "You can't throw rocks at the Earl's horses."

"You're not my boss," the dunce said. "You can't command me."

"If you upset Lord Grenville, he won't permit you to tarry with us in the future."

The idiot snickered crudely. "Lord Grenville isn't even a real nobleman. He's a fraud. That's what my Pa told me."

The other children gasped. Eddie was generous, smart, and loyal, but he wasn't a fighter. Noah pushed through the crowd and he stomped up to the bully and punched him just as hard as he could.

The dolt fell to a knee, blood spurting from his nose, and he wailed, "You hit me! You hit me! I'll tell my Pa. Then you'll be sorry."

"I've never been sorry about anything in my life," Noah spat. "Haul yourself off this property! Slither on home and don't come back!"

"You're a bastard who's pretending to be the Earl's son. Your mother was such a doxy that she couldn't name your father so she chose Nathaniel St. James in a scheme to get rich off her lie."

“Don’t ever mention my mother!”

Noah punched him again and he collapsed to the ground. A groom in the barn noted the commotion and he shouted, “Are you boys fighting? You better not be!”

Noah kicked the ruffian and said, “I’m sick of you so you should vanish! Fast!”

The pitiful coward scurried off on his hands and knees, as the groom shouted again and shooed them away as if they were stray mutts. The children ran for the woods, while Noah and Eddie strolled off in the other direction.

“You shouldn’t have hit him,” Eddie said once they were alone.

“He shouldn’t have talked about my parents like that.”

“I hope we don’t wind up in trouble.”

“Why would we be in trouble? If he tattles to his Pa, and the man dares to show up and complain, I’ll inform Lord Grenville of how he was insulted. It will put a stop to any nonsense.”

“What shall we do for the rest of the afternoon?” Eddie asked, anxious to change the subject. “Would you like to go fishing? It would be just the two of us, which is much more fun.”

“I don’t feel like fishing. Give me a minute. I’ll think of something else.”

They peered down the path, and to his dismay, Lord Grenville was standing there and watching them. Had he witnessed Noah’s paltry skirmish? He had no idea how his father would view the scuffle. He would hate to have to explain himself and he was in no mood to be scolded.

“Eddie,” Lord Grenville said, “would you excuse us? I have to speak to Noah.”

“Yes, of course, sir.” Eddie was always flawlessly polite. He said to Noah, “I’m hungry so I’ll be in the kitchen. I’ll see if Cook will let me have a snack.”

Lord Grenville butted in with, “Tell her that I said you should have whatever you want and that it should be a double helping.”

Eddie smiled. “I will tell her. Thank you.”

He flashed a wary glance at Noah, then he raced off. In the blink of an eye, Noah was facing his father all by himself.

Lord Grenville nodded toward the spot where the fracas had occurred. “Who was that boy?”

“He’s a bully from the village. He shouldn’t be playing with the other children. Especially the younger ones. He’s very cruel and he picks on them.”

“Why were you fighting?”

“It started because he was throwing rocks at your horses.”

Lord Grenville’s jaw dropped in astonishment. “The little bastard!”

Noah snorted his agreement. “He also disrespected you—and my mother too. I wasn’t about to allow that sort of low gossip.”

“How are your knuckles? Are they swollen?”

Noah didn’t even peek down at them. “They’re fine.”

“Are you a brawler, Noah? Is it a habit of yours?”

“Not usually, but if some prig assumes he can be stupid around me, I like to be sure he knows he should bite his tongue.”

Lord Grenville chuckled. “Are you certain you’re ten and not forty?”

“No, I’m ten.”

“You’re fierce and brave.”

Noah was embarrassed by the compliment and his cheeks heated. “I’ve always had to take care of myself. Is that bravery? I doubt it.”

“I’m glad I stumbled on you,” Lord Grenville said. “I have some news.”

“About what? About me?”

“Yes. I received a report from my clerk.”

Noah braced, as if for a hard blow. Life was difficult and he’d always been on his own. Was he about to be tossed out? If he was, what would he do? Well, he was smart and thrifty, was cunning and capable. He wouldn’t starve or freeze. He’d find a way to survive.

“What have you discovered?” he asked, his disposition very glum.

“He verified your story so you really are my son.”

“Told you,” he grumbled.

At delivering the announcement, Grenville was a tad flummoxed. “I can’t decide how we should handle this. I’m struggling to figure it out and I’m confused about the best direction. You don’t seem to like me very much—”

Noah cut him off. “I like you all right. You’re not a bad fellow.”

“High praise indeed,” Lord Grenville muttered. “We have to settle on a plan and I’m open to suggestions. I need you to ponder our relationship. What should it be like? I’ll ponder it too and we’ll devise a solution.”

“Are you about to order me to call you *Father*? I don’t believe I will. It would be too strange.”

“No, I wasn’t about to request that. How about Nathaniel? Would that work?”

Noah shrugged. “I’ll consider it.”

The Earl—rather Nathaniel—might have voiced some other remarks, but he couldn’t deduce what would be appropriate. Neither could Noah. He was embarrassed again, as if his mother’s sins with Lord Grenville were his fault. The air was so full of anguished comments that he was choking on them. He simply yearned to escape from the awkward encounter.

“I’m hungry too,” he said. “I should locate Eddie and see if he got himself fed.”

“You go on. This is a lot to take in so we can discuss it later.”

Noah dashed away, but he couldn’t resist glancing back once. His father looked very lonely, standing in the large garden, the stables rising behind him. His expression was odd, almost as if he was disappointed that they hadn’t hashed it out, or as if he wished Noah had been more excited.

What had the thick oaf expected?

He’d had months to become friends with Noah, but he hadn’t been interested, and his indifference had cemented Noah’s opinion about what was possible. Lord Grenville was distracted and unbalanced so he probably wasn’t a stellar candidate to step into the role of parent.

Noah would watch and wait. He’d listen and contemplate his choices. He’d give Lord Grenville a few more chances to prove that he’d like to have Noah around, but Noah wouldn’t stay where he wasn’t wanted. It would be easy to run away, and he didn’t necessarily suppose that Lord Grenville would chase after him.

To his great surprise, he suddenly had a father after all. But what would it mean? Where would it lead? It was on Grenville’s shoulders and Noah wouldn’t hold his breath.

He whipped away and headed to the kitchen.

Chapter

15

“I REALIZE YOU’RE INCENSED that I’m here.”

Nathaniel glared at Christopher and said, “You’ve got that right. Don’t even think about courting my sister. She assumes she can defy me on this, but she can’t.”

“I’ve always been fond of her,” Christopher claimed.

“I don’t care. She refuses to recognize the issues that lie between you and me, but you’re aware of what they are. I can’t believe you have the gall to visit her.”

“She’s had some hard years, Nathaniel. Maybe I could be a blessing. Maybe I could make her future easier than the past has been.”

“Yes, and maybe pigs could sprout wings and fly someday.”

They were in the garden behind the house. The sun had set and it was chilly. He was wishing he had a coat to put on.

After his chat with Noah earlier in the afternoon, where he’d declared that Noah was his son—and Noah hadn’t been impressed—he’d been disturbed and bewildered. He’d saddled a horse and had ridden for hours, cantering down the rural byways, using the trip to calm his emotions. Impending darkness had forced him home.

It meant he’d missed supper so he’d been able to avoid a confrontation with Christopher. Yet on arriving at the property, he’d walked toward a rear door, and Christopher had been outside and smoking a cheroot. Nathaniel had immediately bumped into the very man he’d been hoping to avoid.

“I just want Janet to be happy,” Christopher said.

“You think I don’t want that?”

“I don’t know what you want. Anymore, I wouldn’t try to guess.”

“You should leave her alone. Pack your bag and return to London.”

Christopher snorted with regret. “That’s not happening. I’m not ready to depart.”

Nathaniel stood for a bit, pondering the situation, pondering his temper. It raged under the surface and he struggled to keep it tamped down. Would he brawl with Christopher in the garden?

He'd warned Janet that he'd throw Christopher out bodily, but he didn't suppose he would. There was no benefit to fighting. It would anger Janet and Rose. Fog too. Women never liked physical altercations, and he couldn't bear to have all of them furious with him. So what were his options?

During his gallop, his head had started to ache, and it was a nagging hint that he might be getting sick. Once, while stationed in Jamaica, he'd contracted a terrible fever and it recurred occasionally to sap his stamina and vigor. It always began with a headache.

In one grueling bout with the disease, he'd been so ill that he'd wondered if he might die from it. His condition had been that wretched. After what he'd been through in Spain, he deemed it absolutely typical that his final demise might be delivered by a paltry fever.

He wasn't growing worse though so he'd convinced himself that he'd simply been reflecting on too many difficult topics: his inappropriate amour with Rose, Janet and her fixation on Christopher, his engagement and marriage, his new son.

With all that on his plate, who wouldn't have a pounding headache?

Before he'd trotted off on his ride, he'd perused the morning mail, and he'd received a note from Annette and Ambrosia, inviting him to supper the following evening. They were planning to introduce him to some of their relatives.

He wasn't eager to attend. He'd much rather tarry in the country with Rose, but that was a despicable excuse to utilize in order to avoid his obligations in town. If he was truly intending to wed Annette in December, he had to act like a delighted fiancé. He couldn't skip the important fêtes she arranged on his behalf.

His problem was that he had no desire to return to the city. His time with Rose was quickly dwindling to a close, and it was pushing him to a desperate edge. He had to find a method to have his fill of her, then part from her forever.

He gaped at Christopher, yearning to hurl a comment that would bring him down a peg, but he couldn't deduce what it might be. He wished he had a magical wand he could wave so the irksome oaf would disappear, but short of a scuffle, there was no way to make him vanish.

Did Nathaniel have any control in his own home? In his own family?

He didn't have much authority and he didn't really have a family. He was barely acquainted with Janet and he was a stranger to the servants and tenant farmers. Why had he traveled to Grenville Downs?

His sole motivation had been to flirt with Rose on the off chance she'd agree to be his mistress, but she would never consent so it had been an insane notion. He'd like to drag her to London so he could have her all to himself with no one to interrupt, but that was insane too.

Without another word to Christopher, he whipped away and stomped off. He didn't have the energy to bicker and it must have dawned on Christopher that he wasn't about to argue.

"That's it?" Christopher called. "You'll walk away without resolving anything?"

Nathaniel didn't halt or glance around. "I'm not interested in resolving anything with you."

"You're behaving like a child."

"No, I'm behaving like an adult for a change. If I'd exhibited a juvenile response, I'd have pounded you into the ground."

"Nathaniel!" Christopher sighed, as if Nathaniel was a huge burden. "You're being a spoiled brat. Can't we discuss Janet in a rational manner? Please? My feelings for her are genuine."

The entreaty gave Nathaniel pause. Was he being a brat? Perhaps he was, but Christopher's views about any topic were irrelevant.

He peered back at his old friend. "I don't believe your feelings for her are genuine. You're simply using her to wheedle yourself into my life, but I don't want you in it."

He hurried inside, and if Christopher uttered another remark, he didn't hear what it was.



ROSE WAS IN THE dressing room of her suite when the door from the hall opened and shut. It was late and she was exhausted. A housemaid had helped her prepare for bed, but she'd left and there was no reason for her to have returned.

"Fog, is that you?" she asked.

"It's not Fog," Nathaniel said.

Rose peeked into the bedroom and he was standing there, grinning mischievously.

"I'm about to climb into bed," she said, her tone scolding. "You can't be in here."

"I missed you and I had to talk to you."

"Yes, well, I'd like to talk to you too, but any conversation will have to wait until morning and be held down in the front parlor."

"This accursed mansion is my castle and I'm king of it. If I decide to strut in for a visit, I will. Who is there to tell me I can't?"

"I can tell you. Are you merely hoping to annoy me? To try my patience? To scare me? What?"

He scoffed at that. "I don't scare you. Don't be silly."

"You don't scare me, but I'm worried about what you might attempt—or what I might allow."

He smirked. "Now we're getting somewhere. Deep down, are you a bit of a tart? Your past history suggests that you might be."

“I’m not a tart! You’re simply very cunning and you coerce me into conduct I shouldn’t consider.”

“Aren’t I lucky then?”

In three quick strides, he crossed the room. She was putty in his hands, and she’d been serious when she’d admitted to being scared of him. At his instigation, she might land herself in any sort of jam.

He swooped in and kissed her and she couldn’t stop herself from kissing him back. They continued for an eternity, and as they were slowing and she supposed the embrace would end, he lifted her and tumbled them onto her bed.

It happened so fast that she didn’t have time to scoot away. She wound up prone, with him stretched out atop her. Her body reveled in the naughty positioning, but alarm bells were ringing in her head. This was how young ladies got themselves in trouble, and where he was concerned, she didn’t have the sense God gave a gnat.

“I missed you at supper,” he said.

“If you truly missed me, it’s because you didn’t show up for the meal. Your absence sent your poor butler into such a spiral of dismay that he might never recover. You should think about your servants occasionally. They’re so eager to please you. Where were you anyway? We were all debating.”

“I went for a ride and it was too late to join you.”

“You liar. You deliberately stayed away so you wouldn’t have to socialize.”

He snorted. “Maybe.”

“I’m not sure why you’re at Grenville Downs. You loathe Christopher Blake and you’re not all that fond of Noah.”

“Who says I’m not fond of Noah?”

“Me? Why torture yourself? Why tarry in the country?”

“I already told you why I’m here. It was so quiet in London without you. I couldn’t bear it.”

“Don’t invent excuses. It skews my view of you so I start to assume we could have an enduring connection, but you don’t plan on that at all.”

“We could have a connection. You’d just have to agree to it.”

Her pulse raced. She was growing so attached to him that she couldn’t imagine them ever separating. What did he envision? He couldn’t mean matrimony, could he? But what other kind of connection could they have?

He slid off her and rolled onto his side. She rolled too, so they were nose to nose.

“I want to ask you a question,” he said, “and you have to reflect on your answer. Don’t automatically refuse. I probably should have delayed this until you were more amenable, but I guess I’m in a hurry.”

“Let me hear it, then we’ll see where we are.”

“Would you be my mistress?” he blurted out.

She froze, the words crashing into her like a runaway carriage. She’d been braced for a marriage proposal, but instead, he’d delivered a lewd proposal. How was she to assess such a peculiar conundrum?

“No, I wouldn’t be your mistress,” she said, “and I’m insulted that you’d suggest it. What must you think of me?”

“I think you’re wonderful.”

“No, you don’t. You learned the old gossip about me so you believe I’m a doxy.”

“I don’t believe that. I frittered away the entire afternoon, mulling our relationship. It’s obvious to me that you’re in my life for a reason, and I have to take steps to keep you close.”

“If you were sincere, then you’d wed me, but you’ve just made it abundantly clear that you wouldn’t contemplate that conclusion.”

“It’s not that. I’d marry you in an instant if I could.”

“You’re spewing such gibberish this evening. You don’t wish it. You’re an earl, as you like to ceaselessly remind me, so you can act however you please. You could pick me to be your bride—if you really wanted me.”

He sighed, as if he was carrying heavy burdens. “I need money, Rosalie.”

“Don’t call me Rosalie. It’s a despised name for a girl who no longer exists, and why would you need money? You’re an aristocrat who owns vast estates and who revels in his power and authority. *I* have nothing, but in my opinion, *you* have everything.”

“My grandfather was a spendthrift and gambler. My properties have fallen into disrepair, and I don’t have the funds to restore what’s deteriorated. You’ve snooped through the empty rooms in this manor. The chattels were sold to pay his debts.”

“Yes, so?”

“Once I decide to wed—which will be in the far distant future—I have to find an heiress, but you’re not one. It has naught to do with you personally. It’s simply a problem with my depleted bank account.”

She tsked with dismay. “Ah, of course you’d seek an heiress. Isn’t that the plight of every aristocrat in the world?”

“I’m trying to devise a way for us to be together, and the only method that has occurred to me is that you could be my mistress.”

“Don’t mistresses cost a fortune? Don’t you have to purchase a love nest and furnish it with servants, fancy clothes, and a hefty allowance? If you’re as broke as you claim, how could you afford it?”

He studied her, as he furiously debated various responses. Finally, he shrugged. “I’d figure it out.”

“You’re a menace, Lord Grenville. Apparently, you could figure it out in order to make me a kept woman, but you couldn’t figure it out to make me your wife. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Could you stand to part from me someday?”

“No, but you’re being a cruel idiot about this. You constantly flirt with me, but it’s because you have wicked motives.”

Her accusation incensed him and his cheeks flushed. “It’s not that! I’m hoping to move us into a satisfying and lengthy liaison.”

For a moment, she permitted the lascivious proposition to take shape. She pictured herself in a debauched affair with him, where she would be his favorite trollop—until she wasn’t anymore. It was a pathetic story, told throughout history, of the gullible maiden who gave herself to a man without having a ring on her finger first.

The man liked the chase, the hunt. After his prey was captured, he lost interest very fast.

“I can’t do it, Nathaniel,” she said, “and I’m stunned that you asked me.”

“How could I change your mind?”

“You couldn’t change it, and the fact that you posed such a squalid arrangement proves that you don’t know anything about me.”

He shifted away and stared at the ceiling. He rubbed a hand across his eyes and murmured, “I have the worst headache.”

“I have a powder that would help. Shall I fetch it?”

“No, thank you.” He continued to stare at the ceiling, and after a bit, he said, “I have to go to London tomorrow. I have an important supper to attend, but I could come back afterward. Would you like that?”

She scoffed. “I should declare that I wouldn’t like it, but I don’t have the fortitude to deny you.”

“Yes, you do. I just begged you to be my paramour and you refused with little difficulty.”

“Yes, but it was a stupid idea so it was easy to decline.”

“I assumed I could convince you, but my headache has prevented me from thinking clearly.”

“Headache or not, I wouldn’t have accepted. There was no benefit for me.”

“We could have been together forever.”

“No, we would have been together until you grew tired of me. Then where would I have been?”

She snuggled herself to his side, wishing she could cheer him. He was always despondent, but his low mood seemed especially acute, as if her spurning his debauched offer had wounded him, which was ludicrous to consider.

“I should return to my own room,” he said. “I have to rise early to ride to town.”

“May I get up with you? I can be sure you’re fed and tended before you depart.”

“I’d like that.”

To her surprise and consternation, he fell asleep. She shook him over and over, but he’d drifted into such a deep slumber that he didn’t stir.

He couldn’t be caught with her! That would be a disaster. It was late enough that she didn’t suppose anyone else would enter unannounced, but just in case, she slid away from him and went out to lock the door so they’d have no visitors.

She paced for awhile, wondering how long he’d nap. What if he stayed until dawn was breaking? What if a scullery maid arrived to light the fire? What if he was observed slinking out?

The prospects for calamity were extreme, but evidently, she wasn’t very concerned. She crept over and laid down next to him. He was much more weary than usual, and she tugged a quilt over them and nestled close, an arm over his waist as she listened to him breathe.

Eventually, she dozed off too and when she awakened, it was full morning. He was gone and there was no hint that he’d ever been present. Had she dreamed the episode? No. He’d asked her to be his mistress. The pitiful conversation had definitely occurred.

She hadn’t heard him sneak out. Was he still in the house? Or had he already fled?

She reached out mentally and she received the strongest impression that he’d left. He’d told her he had to attend a supper, but that he’d rush back afterward. Had he meant it?

Whether he showed up or didn’t, either scenario was too terrifying to contemplate.



“MUST YOU LEAVE?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not feeling well.”

Nathaniel smiled at Annette Adair. He’d appeared at her mother’s party, but he shouldn’t have. With his head pounding, but no other symptoms bubbling up, he’d persuaded himself that it wasn’t his tropical fever roaring to life, but he’d been mistaken.

It was churning in his body, raising his temperature. His bones were aching, and shortly, he wouldn’t be able to remain upright. He wasn’t keen to have her realize he suffered from the pathetic ailment, and he was anxious to escape so she wouldn’t notice his worsening condition.

“You won’t be gravely ill, will you?” she asked in a teasing manner.

“No. I’m certain it’s merely a cold.”

“I hope you’ll call on me after you’re better.”

“I will. Give me a few days and I promise I’ll be good as new.”

“Mother and I have written a list of the events we’d like to host as we march toward the wedding, but we would hate to overwhelm you. We particularly don’t want to plan a soiree you would deem to be hideous.”

He forced a chuckle, praying he sounded amused rather than miserable. “I’ll be delighted with whatever you choose. Don’t worry about it.”

They arrived in the foyer and they had to dawdle while the butler retrieved his cloak and hat. Each minute was a torment he could barely abide.

“I’m glad you came,” she said, “and I insist we socialize very soon. I refuse to marry a stranger so we have to spend some time becoming acquainted.”

“I’d like that,” he claimed, anxious to exit the house before he collapsed.

The butler sent a footman to summon his carriage so he had to dawdle again. Annette was chattering away, babbling about matters that didn’t interest him in the least, but his ears had begun to ring—another symptom of his fever—so he couldn’t hear her anyway.

Just as he’d donned his cloak and had started for the door, her mother bustled down the hall.

“Are you leaving us, Grenville?” she asked.

“He’s not well, Mother,” Annette replied for him.

“That’s too bad. You’ll visit us again, won’t you?” she said to him.

“I will,” he managed.

Ambrosia nodded to Annette and said, “I’ll walk him out. Why don’t you see to our guests? I’ll be right back.”

Annette hadn’t dropped his arm and Ambrosia slyly wedged herself between them. She escorted him out to the driveway just as his carriage was pulling up. They tarried as an outrider jumped down to set the step.

“Any news on your bastard?” Ambrosia quietly inquired. “Is he your son or not?”

“I’m still waiting for a final report,” Nathaniel lied.

“And how about the governess? Is she gone?”

“Yes, she’s gone,” he lied again.

She beamed with satisfaction. “I’m amazed. I doubted you’d follow through and I’m encouraged that you moved so swiftly.”

The outrider yanked the door open and Nathaniel said to Ambrosia, “Thank you for a lovely evening. We’ll have to try this again in the future, when my situation is improved.”

“Take care of yourself, Grenville. You haven’t been very hale of late so we have to get you on a sturdier footing. You have a wedding approaching, which is always stressful. You need to muster your stamina.”

“It’s my number one goal,” he told her.

He lurched over to the vehicle, and while he yearned to look nimble and alert, he had to grab the outrider’s coat and use it to balance himself as he climbed in.

He whispered, “I’m terribly ill. Please deliver me home as fast as you can.”

An experienced servant, the man showed no sign that he’d received an ominous message. He whispered back, “We’ll have you there in the blink of an eye. Don’t you fret.”

The man helped him in and Nathaniel plopped down on the seat. He probably should have glanced out and waved goodbye to Ambrosia, but he didn’t. He could feel her watching him though, wondering as to his true condition, and plotting the ways she and her daughter could manipulate him.

The outrider leapt into the box and the driver cracked the whip. The horses bolted with such force that Nathaniel was nearly tossed to the floor. He struggled for purchase, then relaxed and crossed his fingers that there would be no traffic to block their route.

He hunkered down and counted the minutes until he could crawl into bed and stay there.

Chapter

16

FOG WAS WALKING TOWARD the dining room, eager to eat breakfast. As she neared the door, Christopher Blake was speaking to Janet. She halted and listened when she shouldn't have.

"Nathaniel ordered me to keep it a secret," Mr. Blake said, "but he's engaged to a rich heiress."

"My brother is engaged? To be married? Tell me you're joking." Janet sounded aghast.

"I'm not joking. The bride's mother will be placing an official announcement in the newspapers, and until it appears, he can't have gossip spreading."

"But he's in no condition to be a husband! He can barely drag himself out of bed in the morning."

"It's insane; I know. I'd like to dissuade him, but he won't heed me. Maybe you could try."

Janet scoffed. "I have no more sway with him than you do."

Fog was anxious to hear more, but a servant was approaching, and she couldn't be caught eavesdropping. She hurried forward and bustled in to join them.

"Hello!" she cheerily said.

They smiled and shared their own greetings, as Fog went to the sideboard and filled up a plate. She'd just seated herself at the table when the butler entered and marched over to Janet. He was holding a letter.

"Mail so early?" she inquired.

He looked glum and a tad distraught. "It's a note from the housekeeper at the River House in London. His lordship is ill and she thought we should be apprised."

"Ill with what ailment?" Janet asked him.

"Apparently, it's a jungle fever he contracted in the tropics."

The butler gave the letter to Janet, and as she perused it, Mr. Blake said to her, "Is he terribly sick?"

"She doesn't clarify his actual situation," Janet replied. "She simply wanted us to be informed."

Janet didn't seem concerned, but Fog was extremely rattled. She'd lived in Egypt for seven years and foreign fevers could be deadly. It was widely accepted that British citizens didn't have the stamina required to survive in the tropics or to weather the diseases that were rampant there. If Lord Grenville had an exotic malady flaring, it could be very dangerous.

She decided to toss out an opinion. "I'm betting it's worse than she's admitted. It might be problematic for someone with Lord Grenville's reduced constitution."

"He has the resilience of a war horse," Mr. Blake said. "I'm sure he'll be fine."

"I'm sure he will be too," Janet agreed, and she set the letter aside and didn't peek at it again.

"Should we travel to London to check on him?" Mr. Blake asked her. "What if he's in more of a decline than she's indicated?"

"What could we do for him? I'm not a nurse." Janet peered at Fog and said, "Are you aware of any restorative regimens that could be implemented?"

"Not really. A person simply has to hunker down and wait for it to pass."

"Would an English doctor have any idea how to treat him?"

Fog was stunned by Janet's blasé attitude, but then, Janet repeatedly stated that she and her brother were practically strangers. Perhaps, for her, it was like receiving a report about a distant neighbor so she was having trouble mustering the appropriate amount of sympathy.

Fog shrugged. "An English doctor probably wouldn't possess much relevant knowledge, but if you're acquainted with a competent physician, it couldn't hurt to have him visit Lord Grenville. If nothing else, your brother might like to have some medical advice."

Janet snickered. "I've never met a competent physician, but I'll respond to the housekeeper. I'll urge her to have a man stop by." With that, discussion of the issue had ended. She spun to Mr. Blake and said, "Are you finished?"

"Yes, and I'm stuffed too."

He and Janet stood and started out, with Janet saying to Fog, "I'm sorry to abandon you, but we're going riding and our horses are ready. We'll return in a few hours."

"I promise I won't feel neglected," Fog told them. "Have fun."

They departed, and she was irked that they hadn't dawdled and continued to chat. She'd have liked to have their conversation wind around to Lord Grenville's engagement. A public announcement was coming shortly, but Lord Grenville had just spent several days with them in the country, and he hadn't breathed a word about any betrothal. Why hadn't he?

Well, there was only one reason he hadn't: He didn't want Rose to learn of it.

Fog sighed with regret. She liked residing at Grenville Downs, liked being pampered and spoiled, but it was like a fairytale where they were operating under a magic spell.

If Rose allowed herself to be seduced by Grenville, he would cease dallying with her after he was married. A wife always discovered that sort of mischief, and Fog had no doubt

his bride would demand he sever all ties with Rose. As a newlywed, Grenville wouldn't be able to refuse.

Or what if it went in the other direction? When reality slapped Rose in the face that he was a lying, cheating roué, wouldn't she be the one to sever ties? Fog had to hope Rose still had that much of a moral center.

No matter how it concluded, there were huge changes winging toward them. Currently, they were in a kind of imaginary castle, where life was slow and easy, but the walls were about to crumble. Shouldn't she escape to her mother's before she and Eddie were buried in the rubble?

She picked up the letter from the housekeeper and studied what she'd penned. On the surface, the message wasn't especially alarming, but Fog perceived a hint of apprehension beneath the comments. The woman had only recently been hired, and when catastrophe arose, servants were always blamed. By notifying Janet, she'd been protecting herself. Except that Janet didn't care about her brother's illness.

Was this quagmire any of Fog's business? She was merely a guest and she owed no duty to the Earl. It should have been his sister's dilemma, but Janet had barely focused on it, then she'd traipsed off with Mr. Blake. If she wasn't worried, should Fog be?

As she debated, Rose hustled in. She dished up some food, then plopped down and began eating as if she was in a great hurry. But then, Rose blustered through the world like a bull in a china shop.

"You're very chipper this morning," Fog said.

"I'm happy for once. Everything seems perfect."

"We've had a run of good luck, haven't we? In light of our long banishment, it's nice to have some positive developments occur."

"It's due to Lord Grenville being so fond of me."

"Yes, he's definitely grown fond." Fog's tone was even and nonconfrontational.

"If Mrs. Ford hadn't sent me to interview with him, I can't predict where we'd be. Probably camping in a ditch somewhere."

"I have to admit that it's been a blessing."

"He told me he'd return immediately," Rose said, "so I'm expecting him today."

"Is that why you're so happy?"

Rose chuckled. "I won't humiliate myself by confessing it."

Fog's mental debate commenced again. Should she tell Rose that Grenville was sick? Or should she keep her mouth shut? Rose was so besotted. She was desperately besotted, dangerously besotted. How might she react to the news?

Yet Fog couldn't hide the truth. If she didn't mention it, Janet or the servants would.

"I don't believe Lord Grenville will be back," Fog said.

Rose scowled. "What do you mean? He was only in town to attend a supper."

Fog gave her the letter. "He's very ill. The housekeeper was sufficiently concerned to write to Janet. He'd previously contracted a tropical fever and you're aware of how deadly they can be."

Rose leapt to her feet. "I have to head to London to be with him!"

Rose's response was precisely the sort that Fog had been scared to observe. Struggling for calm, she said, "I'm not sure you should. His own sister isn't fretting so you shouldn't be either."

"He has no family or friends to step up in an emergency. If Janet is this nonchalant, it proves he doesn't, and I can't let him suffer by himself. He'd like me to show up and nurse him."

"Rose, sit!" Fog sternly said. To Fog's amazement, Rose eased down onto her chair and Fog repeated, "You shouldn't butt your nose into the middle of this. It's not your place."

"I'm making it my place. I have my box of medicinals that I brought from Egypt. I can help him feel better."

"You shouldn't interfere. Those fevers burn out without any assistance; you know that. He had you hire a bevy of female servants for that house and they'll watch over him. He doesn't need you."

"He shouldn't be *watched over* by strangers. I should be there; it should be me." The butler was standing over in the corner and pretending to be invisible. Rose said to him, "Would you have a bag packed for me? And have a carriage prepared? I have to rush to London to tend the Earl."

"I'll have you ready in an instant," he replied, "and thank you for offering."

He flashed a condemning glower at Fog, then he dashed out, relieved that someone was taking charge. It certainly hadn't been Janet Darnell!

Once his strides faded, Fog quietly said, "You're too attached to Lord Grenville, Rose."

"I'm not *too* attached. I'm just attached enough and he can't maneuver through this alone."

"If you race to his side, if you insert yourself into his sickroom, it will alter your connection. It will put you on a more intimate footing."

Rose smirked. "I wouldn't view that as being awful."

"I would. You can't ruin yourself for him."

"Honestly, Fog! Who's planning a ruination? I'll be nursing him! That's it."

"Is it?"

Fog's question hung in the air between them and Rose's cheeks heated with shame. They both understood that an inappropriate relationship had bubbled up. Fog wasn't Rose's mother, so she couldn't force her to behave, but she thought firm counsel was urgently required.

Unfortunately, Rose was in no mood to heed wise advice.

“You worry too much,” Rose said, but she couldn’t hold Fog’s gaze.

“No, I don’t. After he’s had you a few times, he’ll toss you over. It’s how every torrid amour concludes. Then where will you be?”

“You talk as if I’m involved in a grand passion. It’s merely a dear friendship. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I’m afraid, on your end, you’re starting to imagine it could be a grand passion, but it’s obvious he has an entirely different opinion of what’s transpiring.”

“He’s not a scoundrel,” Rose insisted.

“Isn’t he? When I first came down to breakfast, I accidentally eavesdropped on Janet and Mr. Blake. They were gossiping about her brother and guess what I discovered?”

“From your dour expression, I’m not sure I want to hear what it was.”

“Lord Grenville is betrothed.”

Rose froze, then stammered, “Betrothed ...as in about to marry?”

“Yes. It’s still a secret though. He can’t openly mention the arrangement until his fiancée has an announcement printed in the newspapers.”

Rose vigorously shook her head. “You’re mistaken. I just spoke with him about this very topic. He intends to wed an heiress someday—in the very far, distant future.”

“He told you that?”

“Yes, right before he departed for London.”

“Why were the two of you discussing his marital plans? It’s not a suitable subject for him to be addressing with you.”

Rose’s cheeks heated even further. “He pointed out that his wastrel grandfather spent their money, so eventually, he’ll have to repair his fiscal condition by glomming onto an heiress. At the moment, he’s too disoriented to be a husband so it won’t happen for ages. He specifically said that to me!”

“He’s already found a stellar candidate so he was lying to you.”

“And I am positive Mr. Blake was confused. Lord Grenville’s comments about matrimony were directly from him. Out of his own mouth!”

They glared for an eternity, and Fog supposed they might have quarreled, but they never bickered. It would have been out of character for them to fight.

Instead, Rose jumped up and hurried for the door, hurling over her shoulder, “I’ll send a note as soon as I’ve arrived and have had a chance to assess the situation. I’ll keep you posted.”

“If this is what you think is best,” Fog snidely said, “it’s fine with me. It’s not as if I know much about this sort of sordid liaison.”

Rose ignored her sarcasm and flitted off.

Fog dawdled in the silence and finished her tea. By the time she'd emptied the cup, she'd reached numerous decisions.

Rose was on the road to ruin, which meant she'd lose her job, her income, and her housing. Fog and Eddie would lose their stable circumstances too, and while she was very fond of Rose, she couldn't permit her to imperil them.

She stood and went out to the front parlor where there was a writing desk in the corner. She pulled a sheet of paper from the drawer, dipped a quill in the ink jar, and she wrote to her mother, accepting the invitation to move home.

Fog had been a vagabond for an entire decade. She'd been poor and disowned, with only Rose to care about her and her son. She'd cast her lot with Rose, having always expected that Rose would support her, but Rose was about to destroy every bit of their security.

Fog had to protect Eddie, had to protect herself and, if it killed her, she would save herself and Eddie from Rose's folly.



NATHANIEL COULD FEEL CONSCIOUSNESS out on the fringe of his mind, and he struggled toward it, ordering himself to awaken. His brain was foggy, his thoughts muddled, but he was sufficiently cognizant to remember that he'd been gravely ill. Had he been out for days? Or had it been weeks? He had no idea.

He'd floated out onto such a steep ledge that he'd seen his mother waving to him from down a serene garden path. She'd been dead since he was a boy, and it was a great regret of his life that he didn't recall what she'd looked like, but he'd had no doubt it was her.

She'd been standing in a halo of golden light and she'd urged him to walk over to her. He'd tried his best, but before he could catch up to her, she'd vanished. Somehow, he'd realized that he couldn't leave yet, that he still had things to do.

Gradually, he focused on his surroundings and he sensed someone sitting by the bed. He peered over and smiled.

"Rose? Is that really you? You're not an apparition?"

"No. I'm very, very real." She slipped her hand into his and squeezed tight.

"Am I alive?" he asked. "I haven't died and gone to Heaven, have I?"

"No, you ridiculous man. You're not deceased, although you gave us quite a scare."

"Have you been here the whole time?"

"I arrived the second evening. Your housekeeper contacted us and I came immediately."

“I always accuse you of being completely incompetent, but you must have some nursing skills.”

“Maybe,” she said and she glanced away.

She had tears in her eyes. Had she been that afraid for him? Had she worried he wouldn’t survive?

Well, that was just silly. He was like a cat—but luckier. Cats had nine lives and he had a thousand. A fever could never slay him. He was too tough, too stubborn.

“How long have I been sick?” he asked her.

“It’s been a week, but if we include your last day in the country, when you had such a terrible headache, it’s been ten days.”

“Ten days . . .” he mumbled. It was the longest episode he’d ever endured. Was it an indication that his malady was worsening? He mentioned, when he probably shouldn’t have, “I saw my mother. She waved at me.”

Rose blanched. “Didn’t she pass away when you were a child?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m dismayed to report that you traveled all the way to death’s door.”

“I think I must be better,” he said, “because I’m absolutely starving.”

She sputtered out a laugh. “Are you? I guess I have to declare you cured.”

She went over to where a housemaid was hovering in the corner. They had a whispered conversation, then the girl tiptoed out. Rose walked back to the bed.

“I’m having the cook prepare a tray for you,” she said. “We’ll have some food delivered shortly.”

“I hope you requested steak and eggs.”

“No, I requested broth and tea.”

“Broth and tea? I should have a manly meal.”

“You’re not getting one.”

“Have you forgotten that I’m an earl? I’m supposed to receive whatever I want.”

“Yes, but *I* am a dictator so don’t nag. It won’t work.”

“Tyrant.”

“Now that your condition has improved, will you become a very bad patient?”

“I’m certain of it.”

She leaned over and awkwardly wrapped her arms around him. She hugged him, then said, “Don’t ever frighten me like that again.”

“I’m glad you were here. I’m glad you were brave enough to tend me.”

“Who else would have? There was no one but me and I will never let you down.”



“NOAH, WOULD YOU EXCUSE us? I have to talk to Eddie for a minute.”

Noah frowned at Fog and asked, “Are we in trouble?”

“No. He and I need to have a private chat. He can tell you about it after we’re finished.”

Noah liked her very much. She was kind and attentive, as his own mother had never been. She was constantly asking him about his day, making sure he had clothes that fit, and that he’d eaten his dinner. He was scrupulously polite to her so he didn’t hesitate to obey her. But he and Eddie were inseparable and he never liked for them to be apart.

She and Eddie were in a rear parlor and seated very close to an open window. He dashed outside and crouched in the bushes so he could eavesdrop on their discussion.

“What sort of surprise?” Eddie was saying as Noah hunkered down to listen.

“We’re going to live with my mother.”

Noah bit down a gasp of astonishment, the news hitting him like a hard blow. There was a pause, as if Eddie didn’t understand who the person might be, so Fog added, “She’s your grandmother.”

“Are we leaving Grenville Downs?”

“Yes.”

“For a visit, right? We’ll be back soon?”

“No, I’m afraid not. We’ll reside with her from now on.”

“Why? Aren’t you happy here?”

Eddie sounded bewildered and his mother’s tone was very gentle. “We don’t belong in this fancy mansion. The Earl has been very generous, but this situation is temporary, and we’ve overstayed our welcome.”

“Lord Grenville doesn’t mind.”

“I mind,” Fog said. “We can’t be a burden.”

“What about Rose?” he asked. “She’s in town. Will she join us there or what?”

“No. She’ll remain with Lord Grenville.”

“You can’t be serious! Rose and I are a team! I’m her partner in crime! She always says so. We can’t go without her. What are you thinking?”

“Lord Grenville needs her more than we do.”

There was another pause, then Eddie posed the best question Noah had ever heard: “Can Noah come with us?”

“I’m sorry, Eddie, but no. He’s Lord Grenville’s son so we couldn’t take him. Nor would Lord Grenville allow it.”

“We could ask him!”

“He wouldn’t agree.”

It was the response Noah had expected, but still, it was devastating. Eddie couldn’t move away! How could his mother imagine it?

“Will I ever be able to visit him?” Eddie asked.

“I doubt we could arrange it. We’ll have to see how the future unfolds.”

“This is a bad idea,” Eddie said. “I’ve never even met my grandmother.”

“You’ll like her. I promise.” Fog’s comment wasn’t very enthusiastic.

Their conversation continued for a bit. Eddie was dismayed and Fog was trying to console him. Finally, Eddie said, “I should find Noah and tell him about this.”

“He may be distressed. If he is, bring him to me. I’ll explain what’s occurring.”

“You couldn’t explain it to me so how could you explain it to him?”

Eddie was never rude to his mother so it was a shocking remark. His footsteps echoed as he stomped out of the room, and he’d be searching for Noah. They had a secret fort in the woods, and Noah headed there, knowing Eddie would be there shortly.

After a few minutes, Eddie arrived. He was visibly upset and might have been crying. Noah pretended not to notice and said, “I was outside the window. I heard everything.”

“I can’t figure out why she dislikes Grenville Downs so much.” Eddie was almost wailing. “It’s so perfect. And we’re leaving Rose behind! Why would we?”

Noah shrugged. He’d observed Rose with his father often enough to recognize that a romance had flared between them. He was still a boy, but he wasn’t naïve. He’d been born due to his father’s amour with his mother. Noah hoped Rose would be smarter than his mother had been, but where rich, posh men were concerned, women could be very stupid.

Eddie wouldn’t like Noah to gossip about Rose being sweet on the Earl so he changed the subject. “When are you going?”

“On Wednesday.” It was Monday so their departure was two days away.

“Why so soon?” Noah asked. “What’s the hurry?”

“My mother has been putting it off because she thought Rose would return from nursing the Earl, but she’s tired of waiting for her.”

Noah sighed. His life had been a lonely one, filled with loss and chores. He never grew attached to other people because they ended up vanishing or dying. With Eddie, he’d forgotten that rule.

He’d assumed they’d be chums forever. He’d pictured them in boarding school together, then in the army and serving in the same regiment around the globe. He’d pictured them later,

sharing a home, like brothers, only better than that. Clearly, those dreams had been childish yearnings. He shouldn't have engaged in fantasy.

"If it's horrid at your grandmother's," he said, "you can come back here. Just sneak off and I'll hide you."

"If I did that, my mother would be so worried."

"Yes, but if it's awful there, why should you obey your mother? You'd be safe with me, and if the adults separate us again, we'll run away and join the navy. Then they'll be sorry."

At the notion of running away, Eddie looked particularly glum, but he realized Noah's scheme was for the best. He nodded and said, "We should lock ourselves in the Earl's library and pull out his book of maps. I'll have to memorize the roads so I know the route to Grenville Downs."

"You should learn the directions to the River House in London too, in case my father forces me to town."

"That's a good idea," Eddie said. "Let's start making plans."



"ROSE CLAIMS HE'S ON the mend."

Janet was in a rear parlor with Christopher, seated on a small sofa in front of the fire. She showed him the most recent letter from Rose. Since Rose had traveled to the city, she'd been prompt about apprising Janet of Nathaniel's condition.

"It's marvelous news," Christopher said.

"Was I selfish not to rush to London to tend him myself? Please convince me that it was all right to ignore him when he was so desperately ill."

"I suppose you could have tarried by his side. After all, you're his only sibling. On the other hand, he can be so cantankerous. He might have shouted at you and sent you back to the country."

"I constantly wish he and I were closer. If I'd nursed him, it might have helped our relationship."

"It might have or, if he'd been grouchy and rude, it might have pushed you farther apart."

"I'm glad Rose went," she said.

"She's smitten so she probably couldn't bear to have him suffering. She's so accursedly fond that, when she's with him, sparks practically ignite."

"She seems so sensible to me," Janet said, "so he can't have confided his betrothal to her. If he had, I don't expect she'd stick around. Would she?"

“I’m afraid he has wicked intentions, but she’s hearing wedding bells. She was in charge at his sickbed and that sort of experience can erase many lines that ought not to be crossed.”

“I hate to sound like a snob,” Janet said, even as she sounded like one, “but Nathaniel is an earl and she’s a commoner. He would never marry her, and she’s not a gullible female, so what can she be thinking?”

“She’s not thinking; that’s the problem. It’s a story as old as Time. An illicit amour can skew a woman’s view of the world and her place in it.”

“Is my brother a cad?” she asked. “Don’t lie to me. Would he break her heart?”

“In the past, he wouldn’t have. But now? I can’t predict how he might act.”

“Should we mention this to Fog? Might she intervene?”

“I suspect Fog already knows. It’s likely why she’s leaving.”

Fog had surprised them at supper by announcing her departure. It explained why Eddie and Noah were whispering and plotting. The rambunctious pair had grown thick as thieves, and she couldn’t imagine how they’d deal with the pending changes. Noah had benefited substantially from Fog and Eddie being in residence, and she couldn’t fathom what would happen to Noah after they left.

Nathaniel would never be nominated for a fatherhood award, and Janet had no maternal tendencies. She liked Noah, but she didn’t deem him to be her responsibility.

As with her decision *not* to nurse Nathaniel, she was trying to deduce what her attitude toward Noah indicated about her character. Was she naturally selfish? Or had her years of marriage to Bertie ground her down so she’d become unlikable and unreliable?

She was certain she’d previously been a better person, and she figured that, after she had more of an interval to calm down and regroup, her more agreeable traits would gradually resurface.

“Nathaniel can’t stir a scandal with Rose,” she said, “just as he publicly declares himself to be engaged. It would be so embarrassing.”

“I wouldn’t bet on what will occur. If it blows up into a huge mess, maybe it would scuttle his betrothal. It might be the best conclusion.”

“I’ll cross my fingers. If there’s one bachelor in the kingdom who shouldn’t be a husband, it’s definitely Nathaniel St. James.” Janet smirked with grim amusement. “I’m feeling guilty. Should I slither off to London? Perhaps I could yank Nathaniel to his senses. Or perhaps I could yank Rose to hers.”

“I doubt you have that much strength.”

They were drinking wine and he took their glasses and set them aside. He clasped her hands and said, “I’m tired of talking about your deranged brother. I’d like to discuss a more joyous topic.”

“How joyous?”

He paused for dramatic effect, then, out of the blue, he said, “Would you marry me?”

She cocked her head and studied him. "I could swear you asked me to marry you."

"I did. Will you?"

She froze, her mind awchirl with questions and dilemmas. Mostly, she was inclined to claim that a match between them was impossible, but why would it be?

She'd been halfway in love with him since she was an adolescent girl, but circumstances had pulled them apart. She was finally home, but the Grenville estates had never been a haven for her, and she had no relationship with Nathaniel that was worth touting. She'd assumed she could wedge herself into his life, but he was about to wed so he'd have a bride on the premises, and she'd be in charge of every detail.

Where would that leave Janet? What if she couldn't stand his wife? Or what if his wife couldn't stand her? What if his wife demanded Nathaniel send Janet away? Where would she go? She couldn't bear to suppose Nathaniel would behave horridly toward her, but at the moment, he seemed capable of any ludicrous choice or conduct so she couldn't count on him.

"This is very sudden," she said, stalling.

"I realize it is, but I've been reflecting on how Fate brought us together. I let you escape once. I don't believe I should let you escape twice."

"Yes, but I'm lazy and spoiled, and I jump into absurd situations that lead me to idiocy. I've never succeeded at any endeavor. Why would you want a wife who is such a ridiculous failure?"

"My only request is that you make me happy forever."

The sweet comment had her pulse racing. Why not wed him? He wasn't an aristocrat, but he had money and a fine property. She'd be safe and protected, would be watched over and cherished. She wouldn't have to rely on her scatterbrained, miserable brother. Why not say *yes*? Why not bind herself?

The words burst out of her. "Yes, Christopher, I would be delighted to marry you."

At her quick consent, he was startled and he laughed. "I convinced you? Really? I'm shocked that it was so easy. I figured you'd bury me with a thousand reasons as to why it's an insane idea."

"It is insane, but we should proceed anyway."

He kissed her and she kissed him back with a great deal of enthusiasm. It wasn't their first embrace, but it was definitely the most precious one so far.

He drew away and chuckled. "Nathaniel will kill us when he finds out."

"Should we elope?"

Christopher raised a brow. "What a perfectly scandalous notion. I'm stunned to discover you're possessed of such a wicked character."

"I warned you about me. I might turn out to be much more of a handful than you expected."

“That, my dear Janet, is exactly what I’m hoping.”

Chapter

17

NATHANIEL OPENED HIS EYES and stared at the ceiling, taking stock of his condition. His stamina was quickly returning, and soon, he'd be good as new.

He was in his bedroom in London. The night was dark, the house quiet, and Rose—his devoted nurse—was napping next to him on the bed. They might have been the last two people in the world. It was completely inappropriate for her to be located where she was, but with her tending him throughout his ordeal, the usual rules had been swept away.

She was draped across his chest, her shapely body nestled to his all the way down. He could smell the soap with which she'd washed, the hint of a perfume she'd applied after her bath. As always, there was a deeper, more subtle aroma, one he was sure only he could detect.

It called to him on a feral level, prodding him to misbehave, and he viewed his increased sexual craving as an indication of his improving health. He yearned to fornicate with her in a manner that was almost scary in its intensity.

He avidly pondered their relationship. He shouldn't press her into a physical amour, but after surviving his recent bout of illness, he was eager to engage in wild conduct. It would demonstrate that he was still alive and even a tad omnipotent. Why not proceed to folly?

He'd asked her to be his mistress, and she'd declined the dubious honor, but if they performed a few reckless acts, it would bind them more tightly together. She'd realize she couldn't ever leave him. Or was that merely the lust talking? Was he rationalizing unhinged notions? He was terribly afraid he might be.

From the moment they'd met, he'd desired her. Why deny himself? Why pretend he wasn't mad for her? It was simply too difficult to fend off the urges she stirred.

He chuckled with disgust, ashamed of his lewd thoughts, and the noise roused her. She popped up on an elbow, asking, "Are you all right? I could swear you were laughing. Or was I dreaming?"

"I was laughing at myself so it wasn't a dream."

"What was so funny?"

"I'm a total disaster. My life has unraveled and I can't seem to fix it."

“You’re fine and you’re much too hard on yourself. You’re in much better shape than you were when I first arrived to work for you.”

He sighed with contentment. “You’re correct, but you can’t conceal the fact that I exhaust you and try your patience.”

“You just exhaust me a little and I’m very patient. I can tolerate you. At least for now.” She sat up on the mattress. “What time do you suppose it is?”

“Late. Two? Three?”

“I shouldn’t have fallen asleep. Why did you let me?”

He smirked with amusement. “As if I could stop you from any antic that tickled your fancy. You’re the most stubborn female in the kingdom.”

“I’m not stubborn. I’m determined.”

“No, you’re stubborn, and I didn’t stop you because I liked having you snuggled next to me.”

“I should head to my own room,” she said, but she didn’t move. “Can I get you anything before I go?”

The candle had burned out, but the last embers from the fire were smoldering in the hearth. There was a bright moon in the sky too, and it was shining in the window so he could see her clearly. She was so pretty, and whenever he gazed at her, his heart flip-flopped under his ribs.

Obviously, he was besotted beyond any sane limit, and he ought to quell his burgeoning fascination, but why would he?

He eased her onto her back and stretched out atop her. Her feminine areas were crushed to his anatomy in thrilling ways, and she couldn’t depart until a negligently wonderful event occurred.

He kissed her for an eternity and the embrace was poignant and dear. He was showing her how much she meant to him, how much he cared. When she’d heard he was sick, she’d raced to town to be with him. Who else would have? He’d always be grateful.

“Please don’t return to your room,” he murmured once he finally drew away.

“I can’t stay in here with you. It was deranged of me to doze off.”

“I need you to tarry. I’m *begging* you to tarry.”

“Don’t you dare beg,” she scolded. “You know you can pressure me and I can’t refuse any request.”

“You shouldn’t refuse me. You should constantly try to make me happy.”

“You’re being a bully.”

“Yes. Am I succeeding?”

“Not yet, but you will shortly. I can’t erect any walls to keep you at bay.”

“I’m lowering your defenses so I can work my wicked wiles on you.”

She laughed. “Do men have wicked wiles? I thought that was just women.”

“No, men have them too and mine are especially debauched.”

He started kissing her again, and this time, it was more desperate. He didn’t feel as if he was ever truly connected to her. He was anxious to drink her in, to hold her so close that they were one person rather than two.

Was he being awful? Was he boxing her in so she’d permit him to commit the sins he was hoping to perpetrate? He didn’t believe that he was. He wanted her to be part of his life for as long as they could manage it. Why not proceed to illicit acts? Why not take the steps that would shift their liaison into a newer, better phase?

He was touching her everywhere, stroking his palms over her shoulders and arms. Gradually, he began massaging her breasts, learning their shape and size. She allowed the intimacy and she didn’t shy away.

It had him assuming she’d had more amorous experience than she’d admitted. In describing her failed elopement, she’d claimed she’d been dragged home as a chaste virgin, but a girl could be taught many naughty tricks before she surrendered her virtue.

She was touching him too, caressing him all over. Each glide of her palms across his torso was riveting. His desire was escalating too rapidly, and he had to slow down, had to patiently coerce her into the conduct he was eager to attempt.

He nibbled a trail down her neck, over her bosom, to her pert breasts. She was still dressed, but she wasn’t wearing a corset so the bulky garment was no impediment. He was able to revel with just the fabric of her gown as a barrier. He pinched her nipples, causing her to purr and pull him nearer, which left him ecstatic. Maybe she’d be more amenable to his suggestions than he’d imagined.

He drew back on his haunches and he tugged off his shirt and tossed it away. She glared up at him, appearing exasperated and annoyed.

“We’re not disrobing,” she said. “I can agree to a few passionate kisses, but that’s it. We’re not having a full-on dalliance.”

“Aren’t we? You just mentioned that you should head to your room, but I notice you haven’t departed.”

“I might leave,” she said, sounding grouchy. “I should leave.”

“But then I’d be here by myself and I’d be so lonely without you.”

“You’re too weary to misbehave. I should tuck you in and tell you goodnight. You’d thank me in the morning.”

“I’m not worried about the morning. I’m focused on what’s happening right now.”

He clasped her hands and laid them on his bare chest, and the feel of her skin on his was so exhilarating that he was surprised he didn’t collapse with delight. He dipped down and

kissed her yet again, and he was fussing with her clothes, unbuttoning buttons and untying laces.

Quickly, he had the top of her gown loosened, and he yanked down the fabric to expose her breasts. He sucked on them, first one, then the other, and he went back and forth, back and forth. He was on fire and he wanted her to be on fire too.

For a bit, she participated, but when he began hauling up the hem of her skirt, she came to her senses. Apparently, he was moving too fast and he could have kicked himself for rushing things.

“That’s enough, Nathaniel,” she said and she wiggled out from under him. “I can’t do this with you. I’m sorry.”

“It will be marvelous, Rosalie. I promise.”

“You would believe that, you bounder. I will humiliate myself by confessing that I’m dying to continue too, but I can’t be so negligent. If I relented, where would I be when we were through?”

She shifted away from him and straightened her dress, jerking up the bodice to conceal her bosom. She slid off the mattress and stood on the floor, the hem of her skirt dropping down to cover what ought to be covered.

He was typically so adept with paramours, and initially, she’d been willing, but he’d bungled it. Why hadn’t he paid attention to her rising alarm? Why had he mucked up the perfect moment?

She rounded the bed, saying, “I wish I could give you what you’re yearning to have from me. I’d like to be the woman you’re seeking, but I’m just not.”

She looked so forlorn, and he was about to apologize for distressing her, but before he could, she delivered a passionate kiss of her own. Then she jumped away and ran out.

He flopped down onto the pillow. He was such a vain ass, and he’d pushed too hard, had expected too much, too soon. Well, there would be other opportunities, would be other encounters. There had been no discussion of her returning to the country so he’d make sure she had plenty of chances to doze off in his bed again.

He would take smaller steps so she’d be lured to his way of thinking. He was certain he would wear her down without much effort.

The bedchamber was cold and quiet without her in it. He tugged on the quilts and patted his poor, untended phallus. It ached with what might have been.

He rolled over and stared out the window at the moon that was creeping across the sky. It would be a very long night.



ROSE TIPTOED INTO HER bedroom and began to pace.

She was a virgin, but she wasn't an innocent. All those years ago, Charlie had taught her many immoral deeds so she wasn't a novice at physical amour. What Charlie hadn't demonstrated, Fog had meticulously explained so Rose would have no illusions or questions if another roué started in on her.

Nathaniel St. James was virile and dashing, and he definitely knew how to tantalize a woman. In a few swift minutes, he'd had her so overwhelmed that she'd nearly let him strip off her gown. As it was, he'd removed his shirt so she could view his chest.

She thought some men were extremely beautiful, and she suffered from an embarrassing amount of interest in their masculine attributes. His torso had been splendid, his shoulders wide, his waist narrow. There had been a smattering of hair on the top of his chest, and it had tapered down his belly and disappeared into his trousers.

The sight of that hair had set off a wild round of titillation. She'd been pitched to such a level of anticipation that she might have engaged in any crazed conduct. She hadn't been able to quell the raucous urges he'd ignited so she'd run out like a frightened rabbit. She'd needed a silent interval to reflect on what she'd like to receive from him. What did she want? What didn't she want?

The answers were easy: She wanted to remain by his side forever, but not as his mistress. She wanted to marry him and be his wife so she could take care of him for the rest of their lives. It was obvious he was awful at taking care of himself, and she had the stamina and patience to do it for him. She had the fondness and devotion too.

The sole obstacle that appeared to her was that he was an aristocrat and she wasn't. Such a prominent fellow was supposed to shackle himself to his own kind, a girl with the appropriate ancestry and lineage, but a frivolous debutante could never possess the resilience and maturity he required. She, on the other hand, had the fortitude and experiences to be the perfect partner.

She could see the road they should walk so clearly, but he couldn't—because he was a male and a very obtuse one at that. They were destined to be together, and he frequently alluded to it, so it wouldn't be too difficult to nudge him in the direction she was anxious for him to travel. If they wed, they'd be happy until their dying day. She was convinced of it, and he simply had to be coaxed into the correct frame of mind.

Charlie Moneypenny, for all his deviousness and faults, had provided her with one valuable lesson: If an ardent couple committed acts they shouldn't attempt, they had to marry. It was the only accepted solution and they didn't have a choice.

The Law demanded it. The Church insisted on it. Society expected it.

Charlie's error had been that he hadn't ruined her before they'd left for Scotland. If he'd forced the issue, the Colonel would have had to allow their marriage, and Charlie would have been her husband for the past seven years. Luckily for her, she'd escaped that noose, but how could she use it successfully to ensnare Nathaniel?

A wicked idea was forming. She was aware that she ought to ignore it and behave herself, but now that she'd picked her path, she couldn't be sensible.

She hurried into her dressing room and stripped off her clothes. Then she donned her prettiest nightgown, the white one with the roses embroidered on the bodice and the tiny straps that displayed too much of her bosom and all of her arms. She pulled on the matching robe, yanked a brush through her hair, then she snuck out of her room and headed to his.

If he was sleeping, she wouldn't bother him. She would view it as a sign that she shouldn't implement her plan. But if he was awake...?

She would decide that it was meant to be.

She entered his suite and peeked into his bedchamber. The moon was shining in the window so she could see him staring at her. His gorgeous blue eyes glimmered like diamonds.

For a fraught moment, they were frozen in place, then he said, "I thought you went to bed."

"I missed you so I couldn't stay away."

"You shouldn't have come back." He paused, then said, "Actually, it's dangerous for you to have come back."

"I realize that, but I had to ask you a question and you have to tell me the truth."

"If I can, I will."

She took a deep breath, feeling as if she was barreling toward a very high cliff and about to leap over.

"Are you betrothed?" she inquired.

He frowned as if she were mad. "Who told you that?"

"Fog. She claimed she heard Janet talking about it to Mr. Blake."

He waved a disparaging hand, as if the prospect was ridiculous. "I barely know my sister and she barely knows me. You shouldn't necessarily believe our comments about each other."

As a reply, it wasn't much of a denial, and she should have pressed for a clarification, but she was too disconcerted. She had a bigger topic to address and she said, "Would you ever consider marrying *me*? Instead of my being your mistress, I could be your wife. You could select a bride for affection rather than money. Would you like that?"

"I think about it every second."

His response had her weak in the knees. "I understand that you're an aristocrat, so if you chose me, you'd be marrying down, but I swear I'd make you so happy."

“I’m certain you would too.”

“Tell me you’ll marry me. Tell me you will and we can have our wedding night right now.”

“Oh, Rose, you don’t really wish for that to be your ending.”

“I do, Nathaniel. I really, really do.”

“I’m such a bad bet.”

“I disagree, and this way, we’ll both be bound. We can’t get cold feet and change our minds.”

He studied her, his probing gaze starting at the top of her head and wandering down. His assessment was erotically charged, and wherever it landed, it set off sparks of desire. She felt as if she was already undressed, and she was so excited that—if he ordered her away—she couldn’t imagine how she’d bear it.

Just when she figured he’d decline her debauched offer, he smirked and said, “What the heck? Why not?”

He extended a hand to her. She whooped with joy, then she raced over to the bed. He yanked her onto the mattress, and she fell onto him with a hard crash that had them chortling with glee. He rolled them and began kissing her quite fervidly. She joined in with an equal amount of passion and fondness.

He’d promised to marry her, hadn’t he? Yes! It had been an odd sort of vow, but he’d definitely voiced it.

They’d proceed to folly, then they’d wed. He’d be hers forever, and if some people assumed she’d trapped him with illicit conduct, that was their problem. As to herself, she’d never regret her actions, and *he* would never be sorry he’d picked her. She’d work every minute to be sure he was always glad.

Chapter

18

NATHANIEL KISSED ROSE WITH an insatiable hunger, certain he had to be in the middle of a salacious dream. It couldn't be true that she'd returned and was planning sexual mischief. He should have refused to let her tarry, but he hadn't had the fortitude to send her away. What man would have had the fortitude?

They'd finally arrived precisely where they belonged, as if Fate had been leading them to this conclusion. They had to stop fighting the inevitable.

He'd removed his shirt and she was stroking her palms across his shoulders and back. Each touch delivered a jolt of lightning to his loins, leaving him so aroused he couldn't think straight. He was perched on a perilous ledge, needing to race forward with a yearning that was feral and dangerous.

She was attired in her nightgown and robe, and he was suffering from the most powerful urge to rip them off, to forge ahead with no regard for her maidenly condition. He felt like an ancient berserker, as if he had every right to carry on in a rough, even violent way, but he was intent that this, her initial carnal experience, be precious and wonderful.

When they were through, his goal was for her to like it sufficiently that she'd be eager to continue their lusty interactions. Their relationship would become stronger merely because they were so compatible in the bedchamber.

He forced himself to moderate his pace and he drew away to smile down at her. She was so pretty, and he had no idea how to handle the emotions that were swirling. It didn't seem possible for an amorous couple to generate so much excitement.

"I'm glad you came back," he murmured.

"I couldn't stay away."

"After you left, I couldn't bear to be alone so I almost came to you instead."

"I scared myself," she said. "When I was here awhile ago? I was so afraid of what I might do with you, and I had to figure out where I was headed."

"And what have you decided, my dear Rosalie?"

"I want to be with you forever."

"I want that too," he agreed.

Unfortunately, they had very different notions about what *forever* would entail. She was hoping they'd marry, but it wasn't a choice he could supply. He'd explained it to her previously, and she'd either forgotten or she presumed she could change his mind, but she couldn't change it.

He was behaving very badly. He couldn't deny it. Nor could he defend his conduct. He'd always been adept at justification, and he was already rationalizing the situation, melding her opinion with his so they aligned.

She craved the chance to have a ring on her finger, but they didn't have to repeat vows in front of a minister in order to be tightly bound. Their fondness would bind them. Her devotion and his affection would bind them. They would have a much happier connection than the tepid, detached one he would have with Annette Adair.

He was beginning to think he might even be a bit in love with her. Was that likely? He'd never believed *love* was a genuine sentiment, but if it was festering, did it alter anything for them?

For a fleeting instant, he pondered the question. It was simply an elemental fact that he would wed Annette for her money. He would proceed without hesitation and Rose had no place in that equation. Was he being dreadful? Was he being selfish? Was he being cruel? Yes, on all counts, but that realization wouldn't deter or dissuade him.

Rose had come to him. *She* had offered herself. *She* had begged to be ruined and he was delighted to oblige her. He wouldn't view it as a ruination though. They were destined to be together and their dalliance would help bring it to fruition.

"Do you know what happens between a man and woman?" he asked. "Has anyone apprised you?"

"Yes, Fog shared the details with me. She was very blunt too."

Considering her elopement escapade, he hadn't been totally sure if she was still a virgin or not, and tentatively, he inquired, "Have you ever gone all the way to the end?"

"No! I told you I hadn't."

He kissed her tenderly. "I don't mean to distress you. A female's first time can be unnerving and I had to be positive."

"Please don't assume I'm dissolute in my habits."

He chuckled. "I would never assume that."

"I'm anxious for you to be the one and I'll always be glad it was you."

"I'll always be glad too."

He started in again, kissing her, caressing her. He was keen to spur them along so he wouldn't note any ethical lines as he stepped over them. He couldn't slow down because moral qualms might take root and grow, and he definitely couldn't have her getting cold feet. If that occurred, he couldn't imagine how he'd react.

His kisses became more passionate, and gradually, he was pushing her robe off her shoulders, untying the belt, the lapels falling open. Then he worked on her nightgown, sliding down the straps and tugging on the fabric to reveal her gorgeous breasts.

He nibbled a trail down her neck, across her bosom, so he could suck a nipple into his mouth. She moaned and drew him closer, urging him on, but he didn't require much coaxing.

As he feasted, he was pulling the hem of her nightgown up her legs, past her shins, her knees, her thighs. He slipped a finger into her sheath. A second one was added and he glided them in and out, in and out. With his thumb, he flicked at the sensitive spot at the vee of her thighs, and with no more effort than that, she was pitched into a wild orgasm.

It went on and on, until finally, she reached the peak and floated down, landing safely in his arms. He was laughing, proud of himself and the agitation he'd wrought.

"You are such a gem," he said.

"I'd like to claim that I'm embarrassed to have allowed such an intimacy, but my lie would be evident. Despite my protests to the contrary, I might be a tart deep down."

"Aren't I lucky?"

"I like what we just did. Does that make me loose?"

"If it does, I must admit that I enjoy loose women. The looser the better."

He laughed again and rolled onto his back, and he snuggled her to his chest so her ear was directly over his heart. He stared at the ceiling, calming his pounding pulse. He was so titillated that he could barely tamp down his ardor, and he was worried he might jump on her like an untamed beast.

"We aren't stopping, are we?" she asked.

"No. I simply need to catch my breath."

"You poor old codger," she teased. "We've hardly begun to misbehave. Have I worn you out already?"

"No, but you've aroused me beyond my limit."

She popped up on an elbow, and she smiled, appearing impish and dangerous to his equilibrium. "Since I'm a novice at this sort of endeavor, I have no idea what I'm doing, so how could I manage to goad you anywhere?"

"Would you quit looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like an angelic nuisance. You have the most innocent expression, but lurking behind it, there's the soul of a trollop. How am I supposed to control myself around you?"

"Have I asked you to control yourself? If I remember correctly, I begged you to ruin me. We shouldn't debate or delay."

"Heaven, have mercy!" he muttered to himself.

He stared at the ceiling again, praying for strength, praying that some common sense would lodge itself in his depraved brain, but lucid reasoning had flown. She was like a magical vixen sent by the fairies to ensnare him. How was he to resist her?

He rolled them again so he was stretched out atop her, his hands stroking her body. Slowly, carefully—so she wouldn't panic—he was tugging her nightgown past her knees, her hips. Eventually, he was able to jerk it away and toss it on the floor.

She was naked and he was thrilled to find that she wasn't shy or embarrassed. He abandoned her mouth to toy with her breasts, and he bit and pinched, caressed and suckled. He was still wearing his trousers and he unbuttoned them casually so she wouldn't notice.

He'd intended to take his time, to revel in the moment, but he simply couldn't. With her undressed, his anatomy was demanding he rush to the end.

He drew back onto his haunches to yank his trousers down his flanks. She watched him with a gaze that seemed ancient and wise, and he suspected it was similar to the one that the seductress, Eve, had flashed at Adam in the Garden of Eden. He might have been on a raft and careening down a raging river. He couldn't steer himself to shore. He could only hold on and hope he arrived there in one piece.

“Are we going to ...to ...?” She started the sentence, but couldn't finish it.

“Yes. I can't wait another second.”

“Fog claimed it will hurt.”

He shook his head. “Just a little and just for a minute.”

Suddenly, she looked very young, much too young for him to be using her so badly. “I think I'm scared,” she said. “I didn't imagine I would be, but I am. I understand what's about to happen, but I don't really understand.”

“You trust me, don't you?” he asked.

“No, not at all.”

“Which is very smart, but when we're together like this, you can always count on me.”

It was probably the biggest lie he'd ever told. Who could guess how their relationship would unfold? Who could predict what their conclusion would be? He definitely couldn't and he wouldn't try.

He began arousing and distracting her, massaging her breasts as he employed his devious thumb to touch her at the vee of her thighs. All the while, he was dropping his torso between her legs, his cock at her sheath and eager to enter. He was pushing with his hips, wedging himself in a bit, then a bit more.

Her ardor was spiraling, and as another orgasm swept her away, he gave a firm thrust and was quickly buried inside her. They froze, the monumental occasion rocking them both.

“Is that it?” she said when she could speak again. “Are we done?”

“No, there's a tad more. Hold me tight and it will be over very soon.”

She hugged him close, as he flexed once, twice, but a third time was all he could manage. She'd spurred him to lusty heights he'd never realized were possible, and before he could muster any restraint, he spilled himself against her womb.

Over the years, he'd proved he couldn't sire a child—except for Noah—so he hadn't been all that negligent, but he should have pulled out. Caution had been beyond him though and he'd been too overwhelmed.

He relaxed, his weight crushing her. He should have moved off her, but he'd expended every ounce of his energy. Ultimately, he was able to ease away and roll onto his side. She rolled too, so they were nose to nose.

“What did you think?” he asked. “I was in such a hurry. It wasn't very romantic, was it?”

“It was perfect. I like that you were so overcome. I'm quite arrogantly proud over how I've used my feminine wiles to torment you.”

He chuckled. “Before you're through with me, you might kill me with desire.”

“You can't die on me. I plan to enjoy your delightful company for many decades.”

He sighed with gladness and shifted onto his back. She was draped across his chest, and he thought she belonged just there and nowhere else in the world. She laid a hand over his heart, and she rubbed it in circles, as if she could wipe away the pain and dismay he harbored.

It was a tender gesture, a loving gesture, and to his astonishment, tears flooded his eyes. He felt safe, mortified, and very content.

“What now?” she asked.

“Now, we rest for awhile, then we try it again. If you're not too sore?”

She stretched her legs, as if testing her womanly parts. “I'm not sore. Not in the least.”

“It will get better with repetition.”

“It was wonderful this time. I can't imagine how we could improve on it.”

He exhaled a drowsy breath. “You're too good for me, Rosalie.”

“Of course I am and don't you ever forget it.”

He wasn't recovered from his illness. His vitality was low, his stamina barely restored, and the encounter had exhausted him. Without meaning to, he dozed off and fell into a deep, hard slumber.

When he awoke, it was full morning. He didn't have to glance around to deduce that she'd snuck out. Someone had been in to light the fire though, to open the drapes, but he'd been so fatigued that he hadn't stirred.

There was a tray on the table by the bed, with a pot of tea and muffins on it. He sat against the pillows and poured himself a cup of tea, mulling what he'd coerced her into surrendering, and debating over how he'd ever make it right. It had been extremely reckless, but he wasn't sorry. He wouldn't allow her to be sorry either.

A footman peeked in the door and said, “Are you up, my lord? The staff was worried so I was sent to check on you.”

“I’m up and I’m feeling unusually spry.”

The boy smiled. “That’s very grand news indeed.”

“I’d like a bath brought up. Can people begin working on that request?”

“I’ll see to it immediately.”

“And I want a real breakfast, with steak, eggs, ham, bacon, and slices of toast that are so thick I have to cut them with a knife. No more broth and tea.”

The boy’s smile widened. “I’ll inform the cook.”

“But don’t tell Miss Clark I’m eating solid food. Let her think she’s still in charge.”

“I suppose I’m being impertinent, my lord, but we all believe she might have saved your life.”

“I believe it too, but we won’t mention it to her. She’s entirely too bossy and we shouldn’t swell her ego any further.”

They shared a smirk of male complicity, then the boy left to carry out his orders. Nathaniel eased down and pondered Rose again. Where was she? What was she doing? How would he ever explain his dastardly conduct so she’d understand and forgive him?

Was she pondering him too? She had to be, and when he saw her, he’d ensure she was glad about what they’d perpetrated. He wouldn’t permit any other conclusion.



ROSE AWAKENED, AND FOR the briefest instant, she was confused about where she was, but recognition swiftly settled in: She was in Nathaniel’s bedroom, on his bed, and wrapped in his arms. He was sleeping, their sexual antics having exhausted him.

She shouldn’t have succumbed to passion until she’d dragged him to the altar to speak the vows, but he’d promised to marry her, and she didn’t regret that they hadn’t waited.

She’d like to hold the ceremony in a nearby church so she could walk down the aisle in a beautiful gown, but that would require having a vicar call the banns. Since her return to England, she hadn’t had a chance to join a church, so what vicar would agree to assist her? Even if she could find an amenable preacher, the whole process might take months, and with their engaging in the marital act, they couldn’t delay.

The best plan would be for Nathaniel to apply for a Special License, and they could forge ahead at once. He was an earl so he could certainly arrange it, but would he like that?

He was a British hero and aristocrat so he deserved to have a very fancy wedding, probably at the cathedral in London, with the kingdom's poshest citizens in attendance. He shouldn't have to accept a slapdash event where just the servants and his sister would be present.

He wasn't overly concerned about his position or status, and she suspected he'd like to accomplish it as quickly and quietly as possible. She'd like that too, but mainly so he could be *hers* without wasting an extra second for the situation to become a reality.

She peeked out the window, and the sky was growing brighter so dawn was about to break. The servants would be up soon and she couldn't be caught with him. Until she was his wife, she couldn't have them realize how she'd misbehaved.

She loafed as long as she dared, hoping he might rouse to say goodbye. He didn't stir though and she had to get moving. She slid off the bed and tiptoed about, tugging on her nightgown and robe. Her nudity underscored how reckless they'd been and was a damning indictment of how far she'd tumbled off the moral path. But he was worth every indecent moment she'd allowed.

She stood by the mattress, watching him, and she was so happy that she worried her heart might simply quit beating. Her joy was that intense.

I love you, she mouthed, then she yanked away and departed, and she was practically skipping all the way to her own bedchamber.



ROSE WAS IN THE dining room, having a late breakfast and generally being lazy. She was contemplating how the house had changed since she'd initially staggered in. The new housekeeper and maids had whipped the decrepit place into shape, and there were few remaining signs of the mess Rose had encountered when she'd first arrived.

She'd asked a footman about Nathaniel and had been informed that he was still asleep. She wondered when he'd awaken, what his mood would be, what his physical state would be, and if he might send for her immediately. She was anxious to rush up to his suite, to bustle about as she had when he'd been so ill, but he'd convalesced to the point where she didn't suppose she should barge in unannounced.

Plus, she couldn't foment more gossip among the staff. She'd already seized control of the manor, but technically, she was the governess. When the servants thought she didn't notice, they studied her with probing glances, their curiosity piqued as to her true role in Nathaniel's life. She couldn't exhibit conduct that would have them assuming she was a trollop.

She was so nervous! She couldn't wait to talk to him, and she had no idea how an amorous couple stumbled through the following morning without dying of embarrassment.

She'd reveled in the deeds he'd shown her and she was eager to try them again at the earliest opportunity. How hard would it be to convince him?

Men were lusty creatures so she predicted it would be easy. The trick would be for them to evade the prying eyes and eavesdropping of the servants.

Footsteps sounded out in the hall and he marched in. Although he'd lost some weight, so his face was thinner, he looked amazing. For once, he was dressed like a nobleman: blue coat, tan trousers, knee-high black boots. He'd been shaved and had had his hair trimmed so he no longer appeared to be a nomadic barbarian.

He'd even donned some expensive jewelry. His fingers were covered with rings, the pin on his cravat sporting a fat sapphire stone with a circle of sparkling gems around it that had to be diamonds.

"Why are you up?" she asked. "A footman told me you were still sleeping."

"Thanks to your dedicated efforts, I'm much better. I couldn't bear to linger in my sickroom another minute. I was suffocating."

She gestured to her plate. "I just finished eating, but are you hungry? Shall I order you some food?"

"Ha! You were having a very ordinary breakfast down here, and I was feasting on a dozen delicacies up in my suite. I stuffed myself too, so no, I'm not hungry."

"You ate a heavy meal? What is wrong with you? You're recuperating so you have to be careful. You've disobeyed my every medical command."

"I relished flouting you too."

"I gave the staff clear instructions to ignore any idiotic requests from you. Obviously, I managed to exercise some authority when you were unconscious with your fever, but it's vanished already."

He grinned. "I'm an earl, remember? I wanted steak and eggs and the cook couldn't refuse me."

He sauntered over and he pulled out a chair and plopped down next to her. She yearned to hug him, or maybe to snuggle herself onto his lap, but a footman was over in the corner so Nathaniel couldn't greet her as she'd like to be greeted.

"I will fan your massive ego," she said, "and admit that you look magnificent."

"Don't I though?"

"But appearances can be deceiving. You were so ill and you shouldn't be wandering about. At the moment, you might feel grand, but your stamina will wax and wane. You could rapidly find yourself flagging when you least expect it."

"I won't flag; I swear."

"I hope you mean it. You're a very large man. If you collapse, we don't have enough footmen to carry you up to your bed."

She was a tad startled to hear herself using the word *we* with regard to the footmen. She was talking as if she and Nathaniel were wed and his servants were her servants. She had to watch out, lest she spill the beans before he made an official announcement.

“What are your plans for the day?” he asked.

“I have none except to check on you constantly and let you run me ragged. Have I mentioned that you’re a very bad patient?”

“I believe you might have, but your opinion is irrelevant. My carriage has been harnessed and I’d like you to ride into London with me.”

She tsked with offense. “You’re in no condition to gad about in the city.”

“I won’t overtax myself. I simply have to purchase a few things.”

“What things?”

“I’ll tell you after we’re there.”

“Tell me now.”

“No,” he said, like the bully he could definitely be, and he stood and extended a hand to her. “Let’s go. I’m dying to escape this dreary house.”

“I repeat: You are in no condition to be out of bed.”

“I’ve suffered this bout of fever on many desperate occasions, Miss Clark. It comes on fast and fades fast. If I grow weary, we’ll stop immediately.”

“Promise me we will.”

“Would I lie to you?” His expression was innocent as an angel painted on a church ceiling.

“You lie to me all the time.” He lifted her to her feet, and she spun to the footman and said, “The Earl and I will be shopping in town. In case he faints on me, and we have to rush back, please be prepared to help me haul him upstairs.”

The boy’s cheeks heated. “I will be prepared, Miss Clark.”

Nathaniel waved away her comment. “She’s a worrywart and you shouldn’t listen to her. She has no idea what might happen or what I need.”

Then he motioned to the door. For a second, she glared up at him, apprising him that he was being a nuisance, and he shouldn’t expect to always boss her. Just because he was about to be her husband, he shouldn’t presume that he could order her about or that she would heed him when he was being ridiculous. He snorted with amusement, apprising her in return that he deemed her to be silly and exasperating.

She tromped out of the room, and there were several pithy remarks she’d like to utter about his domineering manner, but there were servants everywhere. It was so frustrating! When she’d initially arrived to work for him, the place had been empty as a tomb. Now she couldn’t find a secluded alcove anywhere.

She continued on to the front door. As she reached it, the butler was there with her cloak and bonnet so she didn't have to fetch them. Nathaniel had been that organized so he was certainly feeling better. In fact, he was much more spry than she could have predicted so they'd be able to quickly finalize their wedding plans. The notion had her so giddy she could barely walk out to the carriage.

She had to write to Fog to inform her of what had transpired. The last time she and Fog had spoken, Fog had been extremely disparaging about Nathaniel's motives. Well, Rose's folly hadn't concluded as Fog had feared.

She and Nathaniel were about to marry and she wanted Fog to be the first to know.

Chapter

19

ROSE WAS WALKING DOWN the street to Nathaniel's carriage. He was waiting for her in it, having grown weary during their excursion—as she'd warned him he would. Not that the petty despot ever listened. What did she know?

He'd conveyed her to a dressmaker's shop to buy her some clothes. She'd tried to refuse, but she'd lost the battle. Normally, it wouldn't be appropriate to accept a gift from him, especially one that was so personal, but they'd be wed soon so it wasn't all that improper.

He'd joined in the outing for a bit, but he'd become too tired to stay on his feet. He'd returned to the carriage, but he'd demanded she tarry until the ladies in the shop were finished with her.

To her great consternation, he'd chosen the most expensive modiste in the city. The establishment was owned by Madame LaFarge whose team of seamstresses sewed for the richest, most elegant women in the kingdom. Despite Rose's objections that he couldn't afford to be so extravagant, he'd dragged her inside.

It had been an eternity since she'd had the funds to purchase anything new so she was delighted that he'd insisted. In the end, she'd ordered three gowns, when he'd advised her to pick seven, and she'd requested some undergarments too, which she'd desperately needed, so she felt she'd been thrifty.

While riding into town, she'd pushed him to select a wedding date, but he'd claimed he was too fatigued to focus on the topic so she was still in the dark about what would transpire and when. Well, they'd eventually arrange it so she didn't have to fret. She understood that he could be frustratingly scattered in this thinking and ideas so she would have to gently prod him toward some decisions.

“Rosalie Clarkson! Is that you?”

A man shouted the question from behind her and she cringed with dismay. On her prior jaunt into London, she'd been accosted, and she wasn't keen to have it occur a second time. What were the odds that she'd be recognized twice?

It wasn't Nathaniel so it had to be someone from her past. She wasn't about to stop and chat, and when she hurried on, he shouted again.

“Rosalie! Wait!”

The obnoxious dolt rushed after her, and he had the temerity to reach out and grab her arm. He would have yanked her around to face him, but she whirled about first, her expression enraged.

“May I help you?” she asked, and when she realized who it was, she bristled with alarm.

“I thought it was you,” Charlie Money Penny said and he grinned as if he’d just played a trick on her. “My sister, Maude, told me you were in England, but I didn’t believe her.”

“How have you mustered the gall to speak to me?”

He ignored her comment. “You look good. In fact, you look marvelous. Maude described you as bedraggled and decrepit, but I called her a liar. The plucky Rosalie Clarkson I knew would never have let her condition be reduced for any reason.”

She was so incensed she was shaking from head to toe. “Don’t ever talk to me. Don’t ever act as if we’re acquainted.”

“I heard the Colonel had passed away, and I was wondering what would happen to you after he was put in the ground. How was Egypt? It was typical of him that he’d discipline you by sending you so far away, but then, he was such an ass.”

“How dare you mention my father to me!”

“After he forced you home from Scotland, did he beat you? It’s the gossip that spread. I would have intervened, but I figured any assistance from me would simply have made matters worse for you.”

Her anatomy rippled at the memory of the punishment the Colonel had delivered. He’d used his fists and a whip too, and she’d been bruised all over her body.

Throughout the episode, and the terrible weeks afterward—where they’d waited to discover if she was increasing—she’d naively expected Charlie to rescue her. She’d expected him to confront the Colonel over their being deeply in love, that he’d prove how wrong it was for the Colonel to keep them apart. Or, in the alternative, she’d expected him to kidnap her in the dead of night and whisk her away to safety.

She’d been so foolish! She’d truly assumed he would come for her, and she hadn’t reconsidered until she’d learned that he’d been shipped overseas and wouldn’t return to England for two years.

Before he’d departed, he hadn’t attempted to contact her, and the Colonel had bluntly clarified the situation. He’d brought four soldiers to their home to apprise her of how Charlie had publicly bragged about their doomed adventure, how he’d collected on bets, how he’d been toasted in taverns for being so brazen.

He was ten years older than she was, so he was thirty-five, but he still looked very much the same: slender, blond, blue-eyed. His hair wasn’t quite as golden and it was thinning on the top.

He’d always visited her in his uniform, so in her adolescent mind, he’d appeared very dashing. For this encounter, he was dressed in civilian clothes, and she had to admit he was very dapper, his coat exquisitely tailored, his trousers expertly cut to enhance his muscular

thighs and calves. If she'd cared enough to be curious, she'd suspect he'd resigned from the army, but she wasn't curious.

She recalled him being very tall and his larger size had seemed erotic and thrilling. Yet in reality, he was just a few inches taller than she was. There was nothing erotic or thrilling about him, and she was struggling to deduce what had spurred her to ruin her life over him.

She chalked it up to her being young and gullible, and he'd been adept at manipulating her worst impulses.

"Goodbye," she curtly said, "and if I ever have the dubious luck to bump into you in the future, I would appreciate it if you would pretend we've never met. Tell your sister to pretend too. I especially don't need any of her harassment."

He studied her, his assessment acute and annoying. "Are you angry with me? With most of a decade having sped by, why would you be? Our elopement was a lark! We tried to run away, but we didn't succeed. We were little more than children and we made a stupid decision. Our ancient history shouldn't cloud the present. There's no reason we can't be cordial."

It was futile to debate with him. He had no shame and couldn't be cowed into exhibiting any embarrassment, so she should have bitten her tongue, but she couldn't remain silent.

"What penalty did you suffer?" she asked. "As far as I'm aware, you continued on with your career as a soldier, and you never once pondered my fate. You preyed on my trusting nature, and all the burdens of our pathetic escapade landed on my shoulders."

He laughed, as if she'd shared a humorous joke. "I didn't have a violent parent to beat some sense into me so how could I have been reprimanded? It's not my fault that you were disciplined in such a brutal manner. You can't blame me for the Colonel's vicious tendencies."

"You're innocent as an angel, aren't you?"

Rather than respond to the charge, he blithely changed the subject. "Where are you living? Maude told me you were working as a governess. I hope your fortunes haven't fallen that low. Didn't the Colonel provide for you at his death?"

The query had her so enraged that, if she'd been holding a pistol, she'd have shot him right in the middle of his cold, black heart. She was about to burst into tears. Not because she was sad, but because she was livid. She could barely keep from wrapping her fingers around his lying throat and strangling him until he was dead at her feet.

She couldn't let him note how distressed she was though, and she would have flitted off, but Nathaniel took that moment to arrive.

He strolled up behind her and said, "Rose, there you are. I was just coming to fetch you. I'm tired and I'd like to depart. Have you ordered your items? May we go?"

"Yes, Nathaniel, we can go."

He hadn't noticed that she'd been ambushed by a scoundrel, and as she replied to him, he peered over at Charlie. Charlie saw him too and they both blanched.

“Nathaniel St. James!” Charlie said with feigned jocularly. “Fancy meeting you here. I didn’t realize you were back in England.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t and it’s Lord Grenville now.” Without glancing at her, Nathaniel asked, “Is this villain bothering you?”

“He was bothering me, but he and I aren’t conversing so you needn’t worry about him.”

She couldn’t have predicted what Nathaniel intended, but suddenly and without warning, he stepped to Charlie and punched him just as hard as he could. Charlie hadn’t anticipated an assault, and the clout was so ferocious that he was lifted into the air. He flew back and crashed onto the sidewalk in a stunned heap.

It was a busy spot, with people rushing to-and-fro. Several females shrieked with dismay and a man shouted, “No brawling you two! This is a public street!”

There was no one to intervene though. Rose certainly wasn’t about to, not when Nathaniel was so furious. She was frozen in place, watching as he marched over to Charlie and inflicted a flurry of blows that left Charlie battered and bewildered.

Blood gushed from his nose and mouth, but he managed to wheeze, “Have mercy, Grenville! Please!”

Nathaniel hovered over Charlie, irately fuming, “That was for Rosalie and the damage you wreaked on her with your ridiculous elopement stunt. It didn’t square your debt to me at all. I’ll collect later.”

“I have no beef with you,” Charlie insisted, as he groaned and sank down to the cobbles.

Nathaniel kicked him in the ribs with sufficient force to break a few, and Rose shucked off her stupor and staggered over. She was about to yank him away when a pair of burly teamsters lumbered up. They grabbed Nathaniel and pulled him off, one of them saying, “That’s enough, gov’nor. He’s done for. You’ve made your point.”

Nathaniel shook them off, then said to Charlie, “You need to leave London. Immediately. Rosalie shouldn’t have to cross paths with you ever again, and if *I* stumble on you, you’re a dead man. I’ll kill you and you shouldn’t think I won’t.”

A crowd had gathered, and on his voicing the threat, spectators gasped. He stared them down, appearing determined and dangerous, a fiend who might engage in any insane behavior.

“I am Nathaniel St. James, Lord Grenville,” he declared, and bystanders lurched away. Apparently, his reputation as a lunatic had circulated. He tossed a dismissive thumb in Charlie’s direction. “I served in the army with this coward. He betrayed me and my men so we wound up captured and imprisoned by the Crown’s enemies. If you ever hear that he’s met with a bad end, it will likely be by my hand and I won’t be sorry.”

Rose was shocked that he’d uttered such a damning statement. Before she could drag him away, he spun toward her and calmly said, “We’re finished here.”

He gave her his arm and she clasped hold. They sauntered off, as if no incident had occurred, but her mind was whirring over what she’d witnessed. What should her opinion be

about it?

For years, she'd wished she could have had the opportunity to thrash Charlie Money Penny. She'd fantasized about running into him, being tougher and stronger than she was, and administering the beating he deserved. It had been a delightful daydream, but she hadn't believed it could ever actually transpire.

She'd never seen a man being pummeled, and the attack had been extremely brutal, but she wasn't concerned about it or Charlie's condition. She was quite gleeful and her blasé attitude was disturbing. What did it indicate about her genuine character? Deep down, was she a violent person?

She was more worried about Nathaniel. He didn't have extra energy to waste on a fistfight, but she peeked up at him and he seemed unperturbed by events. If she hadn't observed the encounter with her own two eyes, she wouldn't have imagined he'd just been in a scuffle.

"You once mentioned that you knew Charlie," she said, "but I'm guessing I didn't comprehend the entire scope of your acquaintance."

"I'm convinced he's the reason I was captured by those brigands in Spain. I've been waiting for a chance to pound him into the ground."

"That explains your burst of rage back there."

"You have no idea, Rose, and you probably shouldn't ask me about him. We shouldn't dredge up memories that ought not be addressed in your presence."

"Are you injured? Have you hurt your knuckles?"

He glanced down at them. They were cut and bloody, but he hardly noticed. "I feel terrific and I'm starving. Let's head home and eat a big meal."

She chuckled, but miserably. "Is that all you can say? You're hungry?"

"Well, I haven't eaten much recently and I just unloaded a ton of fury I've been carrying around forever. Why wouldn't I be hungry?"

"Why indeed?" she murmured. "When you told him you'd kill him, did you mean it?"

"Yes. I wouldn't have threatened him unless I was serious."

"I will admit that I enjoyed having you batter him, but would you please not commit murder? I plan to spend many decades of my life with you and I can't have you hanged for a homicide."

He scoffed with derision. "Trust me, Rose. If I kill him, I won't be caught. And if I am caught, no consequences will flow. I'm an earl and a national hero. I can behave however I like."

It was a deranged remark, but it would be futile to point out that it was. She simply resolved to watch him more closely in the future. It would be to everyone's benefit if the two men never bumped into each other again, and she would work to guarantee that it never happened.



AMBROSIA ADAIR PEERED OUT the window of her carriage, and the sight that greeted her was galling. It had her wondering if it might be wise to cease her afternoon shopping excursions. The prospects for disaster in London were too aggravating.

Nathaniel St. James was strolling down the street with his governess. She was glued to his side so tightly that they might have been stitched together.

Since the evening he'd declared himself indisposed at their supper, Annette hadn't heard from him. They'd expected to receive a note of apology, or maybe a request that Annette accompany him to the theater or some other venue, but none had arrived.

They'd debated endlessly over what it indicated. At their party, he'd announced himself to be sick, but was his health worse than they'd understood? They weren't acquainted with his family or any servants who might have provided information so they'd been uncertain of how to deal with the situation.

They'd argued over whether they should send *him* a note, whether they should invite him to an event instead, but they hadn't. It was up to him to pursue his courtship of Annette—and to set the rules for it. If he wanted to become more intimately bonded prior to the wedding, it was his prerogative. If he *didn't* want it, that was his prerogative too, and Annette had to tolerate his indifference.

Ambrosia didn't usually flaunt her snobbish inclinations, but she was ready to confer an obscene amount of money on him. In exchange, he'd sworn that the governess had been fired. Yet here the little strumpet was, waltzing along like a pampered princess.

Clearly, he wasn't avoiding Annette because he was ill, and just as clearly, he hadn't rid them of his pesky, fetching servant. It had Ambrosia recollecting too that there had been no word about the paternity of the bastard son. Where were they positioned with that fiasco?

Ambrosia had to take charge of the quagmire. She wouldn't be tricked or deceived, and she wouldn't allow Annette to be publicly insulted. The governess had to vanish, the bastard too, and both things had to occur immediately or the betrothal would be cancelled.

Annette was eager to be a countess, but Grenville couldn't betray her and assume there would be no ramifications. If they had to cry off because he'd violated the terms of their agreement, they would sue him for breach of promise. How would he like that?

He was broke and couldn't afford to be sued. He'd land himself in an even deeper financial hole and Ambrosia retained very good lawyers.



ROSE WAS SEATED ON a sofa in the front parlor at the River House, reading the newspaper, but unable to focus on the articles. After their encounter with Charlie, they'd come straight home, and although Nathaniel had claimed he was fine, the ordeal had exhausted him. Once they'd arrived, she'd had the footmen help him up to bed.

Because he'd complained that he was starving, she'd had the cook prepare a food tray for him, but by the time it had been delivered, he'd fallen asleep. He'd been that weary.

She yearned to sneak into his bedroom and rest with him on his bed, but with so many servants walking about, she didn't dare be that reckless. She hated that he was in a low condition and she wasn't watching over him. It had her incredibly anxious.

Out in the foyer, the front door opened and shut, and a footman greeted someone with, "The Earl is napping, but Miss Clark is in the parlor."

Rose glanced over, not sure who it might be. They didn't exactly have a horde of visitors, and when she saw who it was, her jaw dropped in surprise.

"Noah?" she said. "What are you doing in London?"

"My Aunt Janet sent me to town."

"Why? You weren't awful to her, were you? I hope you didn't misbehave."

He seemed shocked by the suggestion. "No, I didn't misbehave. She left with Mr. Blake. They're getting married."

Rose gasped. "What? Your father won't like to hear that."

"They didn't care if he was upset. Mr. Blake owns a property and they traveled there to plan their wedding. She wouldn't permit me to stay at Grenville Downs by myself."

"Fog and Eddie were there with you."

"They left too. Fog wrote you a letter to explain why." He trudged over and handed it to her and she fussed with the seal. Appearing particularly forlorn, he asked, "Is my father really here? Is he napping?"

"Yes. He's very rundown from his battle with that tropical fever. We went shopping and it fatigued him."

"Will he be angry that I came back?"

Rose scowled. "Of course not. Don't be silly. This is your home. You're always welcome."

He stood quietly, stoically, and she waved to the chair across. "Would you sit? You look as if you might fall down."

“I won’t fall down,” he insisted, but he plopped down anyway.

She read the letter and she had to peruse it over and over to truly grasp the import. She and Fog had lived together for seven years. Because of the Colonel’s many cruelties, they’d suffered untold miseries and slights, but they’d persevered. They were like shipwreck survivors who were linked by their tragedy. Fog couldn’t pick up and leave!

Fog was blunt in stating her motive: Rose would ruin herself with Nathaniel, then she’d be cast aside once he tired of her. Fog’s mother had invited Fog to move home with Eddie and, in light of Rose’s foolishness with Nathaniel, Fog couldn’t refuse the offer of a different sanctuary.

Rose was incensed! Fog loathed her mother, so what was she thinking? The horrid shrew had disowned Fog after her affair with the Colonel had been revealed. Fog had been tossed out with no money and no place to go. Her name had been scratched out of the family Bible! That was Fog’s history with the judgmental harpy.

How could Fog take Eddie—whom she always conveniently forgot was Rose’s brother—and blithely slither off to her mother’s? After all Rose had done for her! After how fervidly Rose had worked to support her, to keep her safe!

To top it off, Fog had felt compelled to twist the knife by mentioning that Rose couldn’t join them. She was still considered a brazen doxy by their old neighbors, with Fog’s mother being Rose’s biggest detractor.

Fog was behaving in a deranged manner, her drastic action carried out for no reason. Nathaniel was about to wed Rose! They would be married shortly!

She would have liked to fume and vent, to maybe throw a vase at the hearth to discover if it would shatter with a satisfying crash, but Noah was watching her, and it was obvious he was waiting to observe her reaction to Fog’s letter.

“I can’t believe this,” Rose said, struggling to display no emotion. “Grenville Downs is so beautiful. I’m stunned that she wasn’t happy there.”

“I miss Eddie. I tried to convince Fog they shouldn’t leave, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“I’m sorry.” She was embarrassed, as if Eddie’s abandoning Noah had been her fault, arranged deliberately to hurt Noah.

They stared, an awkward silence festering, then he pushed himself to his feet. “I should go up to the nursery and unpack. I brought a satchel of my clothes. I’ll put them away.”

“We have housemaids now. Would you like them to help you?”

“No, thank you. I’m used to taking care of myself.”

“But you don’t have to. There are plenty of people who would be delighted to assist you.”

“I doubt that very much.”

“Are you hungry?” she asked, desperately aware that he needed things she couldn’t possibly supply.

“I know where the kitchen is. I’ll head down there after I’m through.”

He started out and she called to him. “You’ll see Eddie again. He didn’t fly off to the moon. We’ll visit him to check on how he’s faring.”

“I wouldn’t like that,” he said. “It would be too hard to pretend we’re still friends. In my opinion, when a person leaves, he vanishes forever.”

“I hate that you’re so sad about this.”

“I’ll get over it. When Lord Grenville awakens, would you tell him about me? I wouldn’t like to bump into him in the hall and have him be furious that I arrived.”

He kept on and trudged up the stairs. His footsteps faded, and when a footman peeked in, she said, “Noah is back, I guess for good. Would you have a housemaid help him settle in? Then inform the cook that he’ll be coming down to have his dinner. He had a long journey and I’m sure he’s starving.”

The footman hurried off to handle the chores she’d assigned and she relaxed onto the sofa. She was wondering if Noah’s appearance might have provided her with an excuse to creep up to Nathaniel’s bedchamber to speak with him, but before she could decide, he strolled in.

His nap had restored much of his vigor, and she wished he’d walk over and kiss her, but they couldn’t exhibit amorous affection in the public areas of the manor.

“I just ran into a footman,” he said, “and he told me Noah is here.”

“Yes, he’s here. He went up to the nursery to put his clothes away.”

“What happened at Grenville Downs? What’s wrong?”

“First, Fog and Eddie departed and he’s very distraught over it. Fog’s mother invited her to move home and she was tired of imposing on you.”

He scowled. “They weren’t imposing.”

She lowered her voice and added, “She was afraid you and I were growing too fond, and if we ever quarreled, it would jeopardize our housing. She felt she had to protect Eddie by finding a more secure situation.”

“She assumed her mother’s home was more secure than mine? My relatives have owned Grenville Downs for four centuries, and it’s entailed to the title so I can never lose it. No matter how poor I am, it will always be mine. It’s silly for her to fret.”

“She’s a worrier. She always has been.”

Rose paused so he’d have a chance to insist that they would never quarrel, that she could never jeopardize her housing, but he didn’t jump in to offer the proper assurances.

“Why couldn’t he have stayed in the country with Janet?” he asked. “He’s not a burden. Why would she send him to me?”

This was the tricky part, and she didn’t want to be the one to deliver the news. But if she didn’t, who would?

“Janet left too,” she said.

“Where did she go?”

“You remember that Mr. Blake was there with her.”

He froze, suddenly looking like a hawk about to swoop down on its prey. “I’ve been so sick that I forgot.”

“They ... ah ... took a trip together.”

“What kind of trip?”

She cringed. “Noah could explain it better than I.”

“What kind of trip, Rose?” he repeated more sternly.

“Apparently, they’re marrying.”

He gasped with offense. “They eloped?”

“It didn’t sound like it. They’ve traveled to Mr. Blake’s estate. I have no idea if they intend to call the banns at his local church or what.”

“Are they at his estate now?”

“Noah only shared the briefest details with me so you should ask him.”

Nathaniel was livid and he began to pace. “I warned them that I would never allow the match so they delayed until I was too ill to stop them. How dare they hurt me like this!”

“I’m certain, when they made their decision, they weren’t thinking about you at all.”

He whipped away and marched out, and she dashed after him, catching up as he was climbing the stairs.

“What are you planning?” she asked.

“I have to pry the facts out of Noah, then I have to ride after them.”

She scoffed with disgust. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re in no condition to gallop across the countryside and your sister is an adult. If she’s chosen to wed a perfectly acceptable gentleman, you ought to be glad.”

“Christopher Blake is not joining my family. They’re doing it to wound me, to insult me.”

“Would you calm down?” she said.

“I’m very, very calm!”

He continued on, being his typical obnoxious self, and she grumbled with exasperation. “Fine. Be an ass. Strut about, smash things, and shout invectives. I’m not your nanny and I have no obligation to keep you from behaving like a lunatic.”

She spun away and returned to the parlor. She nestled down and picked up the newspaper again, but she couldn’t focus enough to read it. She was leaned toward the hall, trying to hear if he was rampaging on the upper floors, but all was silent so she couldn’t guess what was happening.

Noah was very mature, but he shouldn't have to witness his father in such a deplorable mood. She was debating whether she should follow Nathaniel up to the nursery, if she shouldn't act as a bulwark against any inappropriate outbursts, but she was forestalled by someone banging the knocker on the front door.

The prospect of having visitors, when they were in the middle of a crisis, was so maddening that she groaned with frustration. Who would it be? If she was lucky, perhaps it would be Janet, and Janet could argue with her brother on her own behalf. Rose wasn't keen to stand in the line of fire.

A footman answered the door, and a woman murmured indecipherably with him. Shortly, he entered the room and said, "I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Clark, but you have guests."

She blanched. "*I have guests? Who is it?*"

"It's Mrs. Ambrosia Adair and her daughter, Miss Annette Adair. They wanted to speak with the Earl, but I informed them he was busy so they're willing to speak with you instead."

"I suppose I can meet with them for him. Show them in."

She stood to greet them, and before he could retrieve them from the foyer, they promenaded in as if they owned the place. He cast a curious glance at Rose, as if to ask, *Can you believe these two?* And Rose definitely fathomed why they'd disconcert him.

They were blond goddesses—voluptuous, lithe, gorgeous—and their wealth was obvious. They were amazingly chic, covered in jewels and wearing what had to be Parisian gowns. In their presence, she felt dowdy, underdressed, and even a tad unkempt.

"Hello, Miss Clark," the older one said. "I am Ambrosia Adair, and this is my daughter, Annette. She is Lord Grenville's fiancée and we'd like to talk to you about that situation. May we sit?"

At the curt announcement, Rose was so shocked that she collapsed onto the sofa, and she was fortunate the piece of furniture had been behind her. Otherwise, she'd have fallen to the rug in a stunned heap.

Her confusion acute, she gaped at Miss Adair and inquired, "Who are you? I could swear your mother just declared you to be the Earl's fiancée."

"Yes, I am," Miss Adair replied, "and it's clear there are many details about Nathaniel's life that he hasn't bothered to share with you. Since he hasn't exactly been candid, we figured you deserved to know the truth."

Mrs. Adair waved to the footman and said, "Miss Clark is quite indisposed. Please pour her a brandy, then you'll have to excuse us. We will be having a rather delicate, but very important discussion, and we would appreciate it if we could have some privacy."

Chapter

20

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“SHOULD I HAVE STOPPED them?” Noah asked about Janet and Christopher. “I wasn’t sure, and besides, I didn’t know how.”

Nathaniel shook his head. “It wasn’t up to you to rein in Janet’s worst impulses. I’m simply glad she sent you to town before she abandoned you.”

“What will you do about it?”

“I’ll ride to Mr. Blake’s estate and talk to her.”

“I doubt she’ll listen,” Noah said. “She and Mr. Blake seemed very happy.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “I have to try. Mr. Blake and I used to be friends, but we were soldiers in Spain, and afterwards, we weren’t friends anymore.”

“He betrayed you?”

Noah might be ten, but he had a wisdom far beyond his years, and Nathaniel said, “Yes, he betrayed me and I won’t have him join our family. I don’t trust him, and if he becomes Janet’s husband, I will worry about her constantly.”

“Maybe he’s changed. Maybe he likes her so much that he’ll be kind to her.”

“Or maybe he won’t be kind. I can’t risk it.”

“If you interfere, won’t you wind up fighting with them?”

Nathaniel sighed. “Probably.”

“Should you chase after her then? Or should you permit her to make her own mistakes? That’s the sort of advice my mother would have given to me.”

Nathaniel wished he could be that rational. His health was poor, and his temper was a problem, so he recognized he ought to ignore the whole situation, but he couldn’t allow Janet to proceed without attempting to dissuade her.

He’d like to be close to her, but if that meant he had to include Christopher in his life, he couldn’t be that accepting. He couldn’t let bygones be bygones, and he wouldn’t pretend there weren’t vital issues separating them.

Was he being petty? Was he behaving like a child? Yes, but nevertheless, he would attempt to discourage her. If he didn’t, he’d never forgive himself. If she refused to heed him,

he'd return home and the chips would have to fall where they would.

Then the onus would be on Janet to figure out how they should move forward. It was a callous attitude to have, but he couldn't set aside his disappointment. He'd only ever asked her for one favor: Please don't marry Christopher Blake. But she was planning to marry him anyway.

Why remain fond? She didn't value his opinion or guidance. So too, if she would shackle herself to Christopher, when Nathaniel was so vehemently opposed, she didn't comprehend the torment he'd endured, a torment in which Christopher had been front and center.

Her marital choice would leave him even more bewildered and distressed. Why would she want that?

"Why did Fog and Eddie depart?" he asked Noah. "Rose told me they went to live with Eddie's grandmother. Is that the truth?"

"Yes, it's the truth. Fog felt they were imposing."

"They weren't imposing," Nathaniel insisted, "and I can't believe she yanked Eddie away like that. I thought he would be your best friend forever."

Noah glanced away, and he was struggling to appear nonchalant, but he couldn't manage it. He was a lonely boy and Nathaniel had never been particularly attentive. They were in the nursery, with Nathaniel standing in the doorway like a stranger. Noah trudged over to the window and gazed out at the garden so Nathaniel was staring at his back.

"Eddie was anxious to stay with me at Grenville Downs," Noah said, "but his mother demanded he accompany her. He couldn't disobey her."

"I was thinking the two of you could go to school together in September. Would you have liked that?"

Noah feigned indifference. "I might have."

"I had a marvelous time during my years in school. You and Eddie would have fun there too. You could share a room in the dormitory and play on the same sports teams. It's quite a grand experience."

"It's better that he went with his mother. If he'd tarried with me, sooner or later he'd have grown tired of me."

It was such a sad comment and Nathaniel tsked with exasperation. "That's the most ridiculous remark you've ever uttered in my presence and you're not usually ridiculous. You and Eddie will always be chums. In fact, I'd like to enroll you in a military academy. You'd learn to sail and fight, and eventually, I'll buy you commissions in the army so you can serve in the same regiment."

"It's a thrilling idea, but I doubt I'll ever see him again."

Noah's shoulders sagged with defeat and he looked so glum that Nathaniel tsked again. "You are being incredibly morose when there's no reason to despair. We should talk to Rose

about Eddie. He's Fog's son, but he's her brother. Why shouldn't he reside with us? Perhaps I could write to Fog and request it."

"Would you really do that for me?"

"Of course I would. I can't have you rambling around this drafty house all by yourself. You were so much happier after Eddie arrived."

"I suppose I might have been," he mumbled.

Nathaniel waved into the hall. "Let's find Rose. She'll have some good suggestions about how to proceed."

Noah started toward Nathaniel and Nathaniel gestured about. The space was decorated in shades of pink and was filled with toys a girl would relish. He couldn't imagine who had last used it. Had it been Janet? She didn't seem overly interested in feminine trappings.

As Noah walked by him, Nathaniel said, "Don't these pink colors and dolls give you the willies?"

"A little."

"This mansion has too many bedrooms to count. You can move to another room. You don't have to sleep up here and I'd like it if you were closer to me."

Noah glared up at him as if he were a lunatic, then he said, "I don't mind the nursery. Eddie lived in it with me and it helps me to remember him."

"You should remember him and we'll get him back. Trust me on this."

They strolled to the stairs, and as they descended, Nathaniel was focused on problems and plans. He had to pack and ride after Janet. That was at the top of his list. It would be a futile trip, but he'd ride after her anyway. Then he needed to hound Fog about Eddie. He also needed to befriend Noah. Now that paternity had been confirmed, they had to establish a workable relationship.

He had so many topics to address, and in light of his reduced stamina, they were too overwhelming.

They reached the landing and were about to continue on down, when suddenly, Rose tromped up the steps toward them.

"Rose!" he said, smiling. "We have to speak with you about Fog and Eddie. Would you join us in the front parlor?"

As she neared, he realized she was distraught and might even have been crying. Her beautiful green eyes were awash with tears, her color high, her fury evident.

"We can't confer, Lord Grenville," she replied. "You have guests waiting to meet with you."

Nathaniel frowned. "Who is it?"

"It's your fiancée, Annette Adair, and her mother, Mrs. Adair."

The news flummoxed him. During his bout of tropical fever, he hadn't pondered Annette a single second. She'd visited him without an invitation? Her mother too? Rose had been introduced to them? He couldn't deduce how to handle the debacle. What man would know how?

He said the very stupidest thing he could possibly have said: "Annette is here with her mother?"

At his voicing the name *Annette* in such a familiar manner, Rose blanched as if he'd slapped her.

"Yes, Miss Adair is here," she said. "I asked the butler to have refreshments delivered, and I'm sorry, but I can't serve as your hostess. You'll have to entertain them by yourself."

Noah glowered up at him. "You have a fiancée? Doesn't that mean you're about to be married?"

Nathaniel couldn't respond to the simple question. Time had stood still, unable to tick beyond the terrible moment. Noah and Rose gaped at him, expecting him to offer an explanation, but he couldn't supply one.

For the past few weeks, as he'd flirted with Rose, he'd felt as if they were locked in a bubble, that they could dally forever. He'd especially convinced himself that his agreement with Annette had no bearing on his liaison with Rose.

But that was a very childish way to view it. He was an adult, an army veteran, a hero of the Crown, an aristocrat from a lengthy line of aristocrats who had ruled in England for centuries. It was contemptible to behave so deceitfully, but he was so fond of Rose that he couldn't desist.

He'd decided to wed Annette so he could receive her huge dowry. In return, her mother had extracted two promises he had to honor prior to her handing over the money: He had to get rid of Rose and Noah. He'd sworn he would, but they were both standing beside him, providing stark proof that he was an unreliable ass.

Rose had learned of his perfidy and his son had too. How deeply had he shocked them? How completely had he destroyed their esteem?

He'd persuaded himself that Rose and Annette occupied different spheres in his life, that they didn't intersect so they didn't impact each other. He'd genuinely assumed it to be true, but with Rose studying him as if he were a monster, he couldn't recollect why he'd believed such a preposterous notion.

"Would you excuse me?" she asked, breaking the awkward silence. "I have an awful headache and I have to lie down."

She pushed by them as Noah said, "Rose, did you know he was engaged?"

"No, I definitely didn't know."

She dashed up the stairs before Nathaniel could stop her, and he called, "Rose! Hold on a minute! We have to talk about this."

She paused, appearing aghast. “We have to *talk*? You think we should? I’ve often wondered if you weren’t mad and you’ve just proved that you are.”

She kept on, and he was frozen in place, torn between his options. He had to chase after her and calm her down, but he also had to hurry to the parlor and find out why Ambrosia and Annette had shown up uninvited. Since Annette was his fiancée, it was ludicrous to suppose she’d required an invitation, but she and Ambrosia had crashed into the middle of his fantasy world and his temper was flaring.

He wanted them out of his home. Immediately.

He peered up the stairs, then down them, and gravity pulled him toward Annette and Ambrosia. He would deal with them first, then he’d sit down with Rose, and they’d have a long chat about the future. She could be very stubborn, and it would be just like her to declare that she was leaving him, but he’d ruined her so she couldn’t skip off and vanish. The experience had bonded them in new ways so it furnished the perfect incentive for her to become his mistress.

He trekked downward and Noah said, “Where are you going?”

“I have to speak to Annette and her mother.”

“What about Rose? Shouldn’t you speak to her before them?”

“The other conversation is more pressing.”

“I thought Rose was the girl you fancied,” Noah said. “I thought you would wed her.”

“My grandfather died bankrupt. Have you heard any of that gossip? I need a huge infusion of funds to begin rebuilding my properties.”

“You’re marrying for money?”

“I’m an earl, Noah, and men in my position always marry for money. It can’t be a surprise to you. Rose is poor as a church mouse so I would never have picked her.” At his bluntly revealing his opinion, his cheeks heated with embarrassment.

“I’m quite sure Rose was counting on it,” Noah said, “so I doubt she’ll ever forgive you.”

Nathaniel scoffed. “Of course she’ll forgive me. She’s wild about me! This is naught but a little bump in the road.”

“If that’s what you imagine, then I agree with her: You’re mad as a hatter.”

Nathaniel wouldn’t argue the point, for he was in the wrong and couldn’t defend himself. He whipped away and continued on, yearning to appear relaxed and in control, but he was miserable and ashamed. He reached the parlor door and hesitated, as if to brace for battle. He took a deep breath, took another one, then he went inside to face the music.



“HELLO, GRENVILLE,” AMBROSIA SAID. “Thank you for coming down so quickly.”

“Ambrosia. Annette.” He nodded and slithered in like the dog he was.

She and Annette were seated on chairs, and they watched him approach, their focus intense and wary. He eased down onto the chair across from them, and there was an awkward interval where they couldn't figure out an opening comment. Annette, especially, wasn't about to start the discussion.

She was livid over his conduct, livid over his rudeness and disregard, and Ambrosia couldn't blame her. The dear girl had been excited to wed an aristocrat, but Grenville was doing his darndest to quash her enthusiasm.

He wasn't necessarily a bad choice. He was a handsome devil so he would give Annette gorgeous children. There were no stories of him being a violent drunkard or reckless spendthrift as his despicable grandfather had been. He was generally kind to women, respectful of women, but positive traits could only carry a man so far.

When Ambrosia had contacted him about an engagement, he'd willingly latched onto the notion. They hadn't twisted his arm. They hadn't forced him into it. He'd freely signed the contracts so she couldn't deduce how to resolve the dilemma.

They could cancel the betrothal, but then, Annette would have to wait until the Marriage Season the following year to find a suitable candidate. Even then, there was no guarantee that she'd stumble on someone worthwhile.

Should Ambrosia demand he honor his promises and proceed to the wedding? Or should they declare the arrangement a mistake and renege? The answers to those questions were up to him. What did the bloody oaf want?

“We heard you've been terribly ill,” she said as her opening salvo.

“Yes. Ages ago, I caught a tropical fever. It recurs occasionally, without much warning, and lays me low.”

“You're looking hale enough. A bit thinner, but healthy.”

“It's why I left your party. I could feel it stirring in my bones. It swept over me very fast and I barely made it home before I collapsed.”

He flashed such a placating smile that she was eager to slap him. A fraught silence ensued and she recognized that polite dialogue would be impossible.

“There's a matter I'd like to address,” she said, “and I'll simply delve to the heart of it.”

“I would appreciate it, but first, allow me to apologize for leaving you in the dark about my condition. I should have sent a note, but I was too sick to remember.”

It was a paltry excuse, but she wouldn't bicker over it. Annette was bristling though, struggling not to utter the caustic remarks that were begging to spill out.

“When we entered into the engagement,” Ambrosia said, “I had two requests. I presume you remember what they were.”

“Yes, I remember them, but I was stymied by my fever and more desperately ill than I’ve admitted. I’m just getting back on my feet.”

“Are you?”

Her tone was much too snide, but she couldn’t help it. Earlier that afternoon, when she’d observed him strolling down the street with his governess, he’d seemed fully recuperated.

He was growing impatient and he said, “Why don’t we cut to the chase? What is it you’re dying to tell me, Ambrosia? And don’t imagine you can scold me. I won’t let you.”

“All right, here it is: I am stunned to discover that your governess is still in residence. Annette and I had a lengthy chat with her and she’s quite attached to you. Might I even blatantly suggest that you have been leading her on?”

“No, you may not suggest that and I won’t discuss her with you.”

“That’s certainly your prerogative, but I have to inquire as to your plans to be shed of her. If you apprise me that you have no plans, that you will keep her by your side, then you have violated the terms of our contract, and I will end it prior to its even beginning.”

He cringed with chagrin. “Could we have Annette step out into the foyer? You and I should have a private conversation.”

“No, she won’t step out. She needs to listen to your responses. If she is to be your wife—and I’m not convinced she will be—she has to be clear as to what type of scoundrel she’ll have as her husband. *I* am not the one who will have to put up with your philandering. *She* will be the one who’s constantly shamed so she has many decisions to make with regard to you. I can’t make them for her.”

He sighed heavily, as if Ambrosia was being a nuisance, and he had the gall to claim, “I’m not a philanderer.”

“You’re not? You’re dabbling with a servant, which is always a very risky idea. It’s unfortunate that you don’t have a parent who could advise you of your folly. I’m not your mother, so it’s not my place to harangue at you about it, but you’re being very reckless.”

His cheeks reddened. “I don’t have to sit in my own parlor and be chastised by you. I didn’t invite you to visit me, and I shouldn’t have to be disparaged because you don’t like the situation you encountered after you arrived.”

“You swore you would send her away! Yet you’re more involved with her than ever. How am I to assess this impasse?”

He shrugged. “I don’t care how you assess it. I simply require more time to address some of the issues that are plaguing me.”

“Fine. You haven’t replied to any of our questions, but it’s obvious we have our answers. You should be aware that, if you force me to cancel, we will seek damages in the courts for breach of promise.”

He scowled ferociously. “What damages have you incurred?”

“We haven’t published an official announcement in the newspapers, but we’ve shared the glad tidings with our large family and our many friends. If we don’t proceed, Annette’s reputation will be shredded. Despite what story we spread, people will assume she failed to please you somehow so you tossed her over. The woman is always blamed.”

“I don’t wish to renege,” he insisted, but he didn’t sound very sure.

“Don’t you? It seems to me your governess has you so discombobulated that you can’t think straight, but you probably ought to focus a little more urgently. Will you wed her instead of Annette? Or will you continue your dalliance and expect Annette to ignore it?”

He winced. “I told you I won’t discuss Miss Clark and I was serious.”

“Yes, but your relationship with her is the only topic on the table. She believed you were about to marry her. Will you? How long have you known her? A few weeks? A few months? Is she a good bet? Will you relinquish Annette’s dowry for a servant? It’s rumored that, after your ordeal in Spain, you’ve been suffering from numerous mental deficiencies, but I would hope they haven’t left you that deranged.”

“I just need more time,” he firmly repeated.

Annette finally chimed in. “More time for what? What is it you must resolve? Will you marry me or not? Will you be my husband or not? It should be easy to choose. Will you cast me aside for a servant? Why would you treat me so hideously?”

He sighed again. “I’m sorry, Annette, but at the moment, I’m totally bewildered. I don’t mean to distress you, and yes, I would still like to wed you.”

“Then why don’t you start acting like it?” Annette said to Ambrosia, “Let’s go, Mother. I can’t abide much more of his nonsense.”

They shifted about as if they’d rise and stomp out and he waved them to their seats. Annette hesitated and Ambrosia thought she might march out anyway. Ultimately, she sat too.

“What is it, Grenville?” Ambrosia said. “I agree that we shouldn’t have stopped by uninvited and we’ve put you in a horrid spot. I understand that we have. We don’t deserve your rude attitude though and I won’t tolerate Annette being harmed or disgraced.”

He rubbed his temples as if his head was aching and she figured he wasn’t entirely recuperated. It had her supposing that he’d been much sicker than she’d recognized.

“Since I returned from Spain,” he said, “the world has been spinning too fast. I haven’t completely regrouped. It requires effort and stamina I don’t possess.” He gazed directly at Annette. “If I’ve upset you, I apologize. I don’t intend to be awful and I’m embarrassed by my lapses of courtesy.”

Annette glared scathingly. “Words are cheap, Grenville, and deeds reveal genuine character, so it’s not enough for you to apologize. You’ll have to show me that you’re worth having. From the minute your name was first mentioned to me as a possible spouse, I’ve had my doubts and they haven’t waned.”

“Recently,” he said, “I’ve been disconcerted and out of sorts, but my condition is gradually improving. I will remedy the two problems that are vexing you, but I can’t do it

today or even this week. I have a family emergency in the country and I must ride there to deal with it immediately. I will be away for a brief period, but once I'm back, I will work on the promises I have made to your mother."

Ambrosia snickered nastily. "You'll rid us of the governess? Will you swear it?"

"Yes, I swear." He stood and gestured to the door. "May I see you out? I have to pack for my trip."

Ambrosia never liked to be ordered about or dismissed and she demanded, "What about the bastard? We haven't even talked about him. Has paternity been established or not?"

"Yes, I'm his father," Grenville said.

"Is he on the premises?"

"Yes, he is."

"What are your plans for *him*? Have you any?"

"I'll enroll him in boarding school this fall. I've already inquired about suitable campuses. In a few years, I will buy him an officer's commission in the army."

"A commission? Well! That's quite an expense."

"Yes, it is, and from your sour expression, it's obvious you'd be opposed. You should realize that, whatever I decide about his future, you won't be consulted."

Ambrosia wondered if he would really send the boy to school, then to the army. He was very good at promising things, but he never followed through. Had he always been so scatterbrained? Or was it a new malaise, fostered by the tragedy in Spain?

She suspected it was new. He'd been a soldier for most of two decades and he'd been decorated for valor over and over. A mentally muddled man could never have performed the feats in which he'd engaged.

She and Annette rose together, and Annette started out without speaking another word to him. Ambrosia stared him down, then said, "I'll return one week from today. I will come alone so Annette doesn't have to listen to more of your drivel. When I arrive, I will expect to find that the matter with the governess has been resolved. If it hasn't been, we will cancel the betrothal. We won't argue; we won't debate. We'll cancel."

Regal as any queen, she swept by him and walked out to the foyer. The butler was hovered by the door, waiting to assist them as they departed, but there was a boy lurking off to the side too. He was a handsome child, and the spitting image of Grenville, so he had to be the bastard.

It was an outrage that Annette would have to cross paths with him, but then, it was growing clearer by the minute that Grenville's home was an asylum filled with lunatics.

Annette noticed the boy too and she pulled up short and asked him, "Are you Grenville's son?"

"Yes." The boy was very bold and looked her straight in the eye.

“I may wed your father,” Annette said. “Were you aware of that fact? If I proceed with him, I will be your mother. What is your opinion of that situation?”

“I had a mother of my own,” the cheeky brat stated. “I don’t need another one.”

Behind them, Grenville snapped, “Noah! Don’t be smart.”

If the little monster uttered a retort, Ambrosia didn’t hear it. She and Annette marched out. Their carriage was parked in the driveway and her outriders helped them in. Ambrosia begged them to hurry their exit so they were quickly heading toward the road. She had no idea if Grenville had escorted them out and she didn’t peek out the window to check.

“Well, that was interesting,” Annette facetiously said, after they’d calmed down. “What do you think? Will the exasperating libertine marry me or not?”

“I suppose he will. I’ll meet with him privately to point out the assets in the dowry. At the moment, he’s lusting after his governess, but desire fades, then he’ll be broke and have nothing left to glom onto except a stain on his immoral conscience. He has to be reminded of the perils of an illegitimate amour, but he doesn’t have a parent to shake some sense into him. I guess I will have to step in.”

“The governess was very fetching,” Annette pointed out. “Are you sure he’ll part with her for me?”

“She’s a servant so I’m positive he will—once he’s pondered the consequences more carefully. But what is your view of this fiasco? Would you still like to wed him? You know men have affairs, but could you bear for him to be such a scoundrel right at the beginning of your marriage? Usually, a new husband will delay a bit before he misbehaves, yet he’s prepared to race to ruin immediately.”

Annette shrugged. “I can’t decide about him. You gave him an ultimatum so he has a week to be shed of his doxy. Ask me then.”

“She’ll be gone,” Ambrosia said. “I guarantee it.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“You saw how astonished she was to learn that he was engaged. He hadn’t told her about you and she isn’t the type to tarry after she found out.”

“And if she doesn’t take the hint and leave? What then?”

Ambrosia smirked. “Then I’ll shove her out. She has to vanish forever. There’s really no other choice.”

Chapter

21

ROSE HEARD HIM COMING long before he walked into her bedchamber. She would have locked her door, but he was such an arrogant beast. He'd have simply kicked it in, like a berserker bent on destruction.

She'd known he'd feel compelled to explain himself so she'd been waiting for him. She was seated on the bed, her hips balanced on the mattress, her feet on the floor. In light of how he'd deceived her, she should have been brimming with fury, but to her great surprise, she was amazingly calm.

He'd been engaged to Miss Adair for several weeks. The agreement had been reached prior to his traveling to Grenville Downs. He'd claimed he'd rushed to the country because he'd missed her and she'd stupidly believed him.

Fog had warned her that he was betrothed, but Rose had denied the truth. Due to Rose's idiocy, Fog had thrown up her hands and abandoned Rose to her own devices. Rose was floating free, cut loose from everyone who mattered, and she had no allies positioned underneath her to catch her as she fell.

She was ruined! She'd been tricked by a scoundrel, one who'd deluded her into imagining that wedding bells were about to chime. It was a story as old as Time: the gullible maiden seduced by the lord of the manor. As an adolescent, she'd learned plenty of lessons about charming rogues, but over the intervening years, she'd persuaded herself that she was too astute to ever be duped again.

She was smarter, shrewder, and she should have been wary, but she'd been so foolishly besotted. She'd convinced herself that he loved her, that they would live happily ever after. What had he thought?

To her monumental regret, he'd already provided the answer to that question. He'd once asked her to be his mistress and she'd refused the lewd honor. Later, she'd assumed she'd extracted a marriage proposal from him, but he hadn't really proposed. He'd babbled some halfhearted comments about them being together *forever*, and she'd glommed onto them like a drowning woman requiring rescue.

He popped up in the doorway, and she studied him dispassionately, struggling to deduce how he'd lured her to such folly. Yes, he was handsome and magnetic, and on occasion, he could be kind and generous, but he could also be cruel and callous, petty and vindictive. He

couldn't focus on details, didn't prepare for eventualities, didn't follow through on plans. He obsessed over the past, cast people aside, and he wasn't prone to forgive or forget.

Why had she grown fascinated?

He'd inherited a bankrupt title, where the estate coffers were so depleted that furniture and rugs had been sold to pay debts, yet he spent lavishly, as if he were a rich king. Of course he'd need Miss Adair's dowry. Of course he'd be desperate to receive it.

Where did the pathetic situation leave poor Rosalie Clarkson? Nowhere she was eager to be, that was for sure. How was she to extricate herself from the humiliating debacle? She had no idea. She was certain—if she fled—he'd track her down and drag her back. He was that deranged.

A fraught silence festered, but she wasn't about to break it. She had no opinions to share about his betrayal, and she wasn't interested in listening to his excuses. He'd presume she had a duty to allow him to clarify his perfidy, and it would never occur to him that she couldn't care less.

"I'm sorry," he finally said, as he slithered over to stand in front of her.

"For what transgression?" she asked. "For flirting with me? For seducing me? For promising to wed me when you weren't serious? Or is it for getting caught?"

"I'm sorry for all of it. I've been dying to confess my engagement, but I couldn't figure out how."

She didn't like how he towered over her, how he blocked her view of the room so she could see naught but him. She felt small, insignificant, and completely irrelevant for any vital purpose.

"I can definitely comprehend your dilemma," she sarcastically said. "I'm such a naïve creature and it had to be amusing to deceive me. What man would be anxious to admit to such treachery?"

"It wasn't treachery! It was a method where I could keep you by my side without hurting you in the process."

It was a bizarre statement and she scoffed with disdain. "You ruined me so you wouldn't hurt me? Is that how you're rationalizing your actions?"

"That didn't come out right. I apologize."

He flushed with chagrin, then he paused, as if she'd jump in with a pertinent remark, but she simply gaped at him as if he were a stranger. A terrible silence blossomed again, and she was totally frozen, as if she'd been turned to stone. He'd pounded out her swirling emotions. Even her bones ached, as if she'd been pummeled with clubs, but then, Ambrosia Adair had been extremely adept at doling out punishment too. Her every word had impacted Rose like a vicious blow.

"Don't just glare at me," he said. "Shout or call me names or weep. Don't gaze at me as if I'm a monster."

She deliberated on numerous replies and the one she picked was, "What are we supposed to do now?"

"We don't have to *do* anything. We're happy, aren't we? We're so fond of each other and we're so compatible. There's no reason to make any changes."

Could he truly believe that? Her impression that he was a bit mad was becoming more and more likely.

"You'd like to continue our affair," she said, as if testing how the notion would sound as it rolled off her tongue. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes. Our situation needn't be altered. I hate that Ambrosia visited us. If I could have prevented your conversation with her, I would have."

Rose cocked her head and scrutinized him. "Let me be clear about this. You think the problem is my finding out about your betrothal. It's not the actual betrothal itself?"

"I was planning to apprise you," he said.

"When? I've been right here so you've had plenty of opportunities for candor."

He sighed dramatically. "I can't marry you, Rosalie. I'd like to, but I can't."

"Why is that precisely? Aren't you the obnoxious fellow who loves to wax on about how you're an earl so you can carry on however you please? You can wed any woman in the world so don't insult my intelligence by pretending you ever considered me in a sincere way."

"I offered you what I could. I asked you to be my mistress."

"No, you *asked* me to be your wife, but your proposal was so cunningly tendered that you couldn't be held to account for it."

"I didn't propose to you, Rose. I'm already bound so I couldn't have. If that's what you heard, it was what you wanted to hear."

At his audacity, she gasped with outrage. "That's your excuse? I *heard* incorrectly?"

Fury surged through her and she leapt to her feet. He hadn't expected her to jump up so she was able to push him away. He staggered slightly, and as he straightened, she slapped him as hard as she could. It was a violent act that stunned them both.

They glowered, animosity flaring, then she stepped away. She wasn't the sort of female who slapped people, but he'd driven her to a desperate edge. Her outburst was embarrassing, but she wouldn't apologize for it. She eased her hips onto the mattress, watching as he rubbed his cheek where her handprint was visible.

"I guess I deserved that," he muttered.

"Yes, you did."

He snorted with what appeared to be dismay. "What can I say that won't seem awful? I need Annette's dowry, and after what I suffered during my captivity in Spain, I feel that I earned it."

“I must admit, Lord Grenville, that I’m tired of you using your ordeal as a justification to behave like an ass. I wish you’d grow up and behave like the adult you are.”

It was a dreadful taunt, but he merely responded with, “Don’t call me Lord Grenville. I won’t have you pretending we’re not on familiar terms.”

“Fine. Let’s pretend we’re cordial. How do you anticipate this farce will conclude? What is it you want from me?”

“I’d like you to be my mistress and I still hope you’ll agree. I’ll buy you a house and you can have your own carriage and servants. Fog and Eddie can live there too, if you’d like that. You’ll have an allowance, for clothes and whatnot. You’ll never have to worry about your security again. I’ll always take care of you.”

She caustically demanded, “With what money will you provide these boons? You’ve frequently bemoaned the fact that you’re penniless—even though you revel like a king. Where will you locate the funds to furnish this grand life?”

“Once I’m a husband, I’ll be rich. It’s why I’m shackling myself. The dowry money will be *my* money and I can spend it as I choose.”

She tsked with offense. “Listen to yourself, Nathaniel! Listen to how you’re talking to me. What is wrong with you?”

“I’m offering you what I can. Why can’t it be enough?”

“You’re offering me nothing at all and we could be speaking in different languages. Would you go away? I’m incredibly weary and I can’t bear to converse with you another minute.”

She wasn’t certain how the tense episode might have resolved, but a footman poked his nose in the door and said, “Lord Grenville? Your horse is saddled and waiting out in the driveway. I thought you should know.”

“I’ll be right there,” he replied and the footman slunk away.

Grenville didn’t budge and she said, “You should get downstairs to your horse.”

“We’re not finished discussing this.”

“Yes, we are. You’re marrying Annette Adair. What else is there to say?”

He was totally bewildered. “I never meant to distress you. I’m trying to arrange a suitable ending for everyone.”

“The ending is eminently suitable. For everyone but *me*, that is. Miss Adair was positively delighted to describe your wedding plans. She’s so excited to be your countess.”

“She shouldn’t have mentioned it to you. It was needlessly cruel.”

Rose bristled. “I can’t chat about her with you. It makes me ill to have her name spew from your lips.”

He changed the subject so fast she was dizzy. “I have to ride to the country. I have to tell my sister why she can’t marry Christopher Blake.”

“She’s aware of the reasons you’re opposed. Why inflict yourself on her?”

He rubbed his temples, as if he had a headache. “Her decision is killing me, but I can’t explain the situation to you so I give up.”

“You don’t have to explain it to me. It’s a St. James family matter so it’s none of my business.”

She was balanced on tenterhooks, foolishly assuming he’d claim she’d become a member of the family through her dedicated efforts on his behalf, that Janet’s antics were her business, but instead, he was intent on beating the matrimony issue to death.

“I’d wed you if I could,” he said.

“You constantly insist you would if you could so I accept. Before you begin your ludicrous trip, swing by Miss Adair’s residence and inform her that you’re crying off so you can marry your governess. I’m sure the announcement will supply her with weeks of laughs.”

“I can’t cry off.”

She smirked with derision. “Of course you can’t.”

“The day is waning,” he said, “so I have to get moving, but I won’t leave until you swear you’ll be here when I return.”

“With your perfidy revealed, you think I’d stay?”

“I’m asking you to stay. I’m *begging* you to stay. Please?”

“What would be the purpose of my tarrying?”

“How about that I can’t imagine living without you? If I didn’t have you in my life, what would I have?”

It was a pretty remark and it prodded at the lonely places in her heart that she’d once thought he’d fill. Would she succumb to the flattering compliment? Would she swallow his deceits one more time? No! She was simply eager for him to depart on his pointless jaunt to harass his sister.

Rose wouldn’t loaf in his home, which would provide him with renewed chances to coerce her. Where he was concerned, she could never make a rational choice, and she had to put as much space as possible between them.

“I’ll stay,” she lied.

“Swear it to me.”

“If I fled, where would I go? I’ve relinquished everything for you. I’ve even lost Fog who was my dearest friend. She abandoned me because she was convinced you’d wind up treating me badly.”

“Would you listen to me? I’m not treating you badly! I’m helping you. I’m finding the best ending for you and we’ll persuade Fog and Eddie to join you. I don’t like that they left you or Noah. The instant I’m back, I’ll deal with that dilemma.”

He never followed through on his promises, so after he returned, he probably wouldn't even remember that he'd been willing to retrieve Fog and Eddie. Rose couldn't bear to see Fog anyway. Fog's condescending letter had hurt her, and she was humiliated to discover that Fog had been correct about each of her warnings.

"I'll be here," she lied again. "I swear it on my deceased mother's grave."

"Good."

On hearing her vow, he was vastly relieved, and he reached for her, as if he'd hug her. She skittered off the bed and scurried around the mattress, using it as a barricade to keep him at a distance.

He sighed with regret, as if she was failing to behave as she ought.

"At the moment, I can't debate this," he said. "Nor can I work to cheer you. I wish I could, but I have to locate Janet, and that problem is most pressing to me. If I delay my journey, I'm afraid she'll elope before I can stop her."

His focus on Janet was startling proof of how unhinged he could be, but she wouldn't mention it. It would merely prolong their quarrel, and she was anxious for him to cease his harangue. Whatever she could do to encourage his speedy exit, she would do it.

"Swear to me again that you won't leave," he said.

"I promised I wouldn't."

"Would you like to head to Grenville Downs with Noah? You don't have to remain at the River House. Wouldn't you be more content in the country?"

"Would you like us to head to Grenville Downs? Are you ordering it?"

"No, but you and Noah were happier there. I could meet you there when I'm finished with Janet."

"All right. Noah and I will travel there tomorrow. We'll be waiting for you."

The blatant lies were rolling off her tongue, and he seemed to be buying them, but then, he could be very obtuse. He hadn't noted her sarcasm or false composure.

He stared forever, and she stared too, being quite certain she'd never see him again. She catalogued every detail, tucking them away so she'd never forget how handsome he'd been, how dashing. It was an alluring disguise that masked the corrupt soul buried beneath the surface.

"Don't hate me, Rosalie," he said and he looked pathetically morose.

"I don't hate you." She was too flabbergasted to feel any emotion.

"We'll fix this! We'll figure it out. You can count on me."

"I know I can." She nodded to the door. "Your horse is saddled so you can't continue to dawdle."

"Am I forgiven?" he absurdly asked. "Of if I haven't been, might you forgive me someday in the future? You have to tell me there's a chance for me to receive your pardon."

“You’re not forgiven yet. You have to repair what you’ve wrecked.”

“I will repair it. You shouldn’t doubt me!”

With that, he spun on his heel and hurried off. She sagged with defeat and balanced her hips on the mattress again.

He was such a peculiar man, such a deranged man. Could he actually suppose she’d tarry because he’d begged her to? He was so pompous that he’d never imagine she’d disobey him. He was positive she’d be thrilled to linger on the fringes as he marched toward his wedding, that she’d agree to be the *other* woman as he settled into married life with his bride.

How could he have learned so little about the kind of person she was? Again, he was so pompous. Why would he have bothered to learn anything about her?

It was the quietest part of the afternoon, and she was very still, listening for sounds drifting up the stairs. From down in the foyer, she heard muffled voices, then the front door opened and shut. A few minutes later, his horse’s hooves crunched on the gravel in the driveway as he galloped off to badger Janet.

Well, Janet was a tough female who wouldn’t be intimidated by her overbearing sibling. And she had Mr. Blake to defend her and chase her brother away after they’d had enough of his arrogant posturing. She’d be fine.

Rose loafed for a bit, then a bit more, then she went to the wardrobe, pulled out her portmanteau, and began to pack her belongings.



ROSE STOOD IN THE parlor, watching for Noah. She’d planned to sneak out without a word to him, but she couldn’t be that cruel. He’d never exhibited any cordial feelings for her, but she liked him anyway. He’d been a good friend to Eddie and she’d like him to know she was grateful for it.

It was morning and she’d spent a last night at the River House. By the time Lord Grenville had ridden away, evening had been approaching, and she hadn’t been keen to traipse about London, hunting for a rental room in the dark. When a bizarre notion lodged in his mad brain, such as his scheme to race after Janet, he could be so doggedly determined. Rose hadn’t worried that he’d suddenly reappear to waylay her.

She’d frittered away the dreary hours, writing lists and debating ideas. For the past seven years, she’d pretty much been on her own, and she was on her own once more. On this occasion though, she didn’t have to fret about supporting Fog or Eddie so she felt unusually free and unburdened.

Footsteps echoed in the foyer and she assumed it would be Noah. She’d sent for him, and she forced a smile, only to see that the glamorous witch, Ambrosia Adair, had crept in

uninvited. Hadn't the shrew caused enough trouble for Rose?

"How dare you inflict yourself on me again!" Rose said to her, her tone brusque and dismissive. "I can't think of a single reason why you'd have to harass me further."

Mrs. Adair wasn't easily cowed and she sauntered in. "I finally managed to bribe a servant in this asylum of lunatics so I have been apprised that Lord Grenville left for the country. Since he's away from the property, I decided you and I could chat without his interrupting."

"I have no desire to chat with you and I'm busy."

"Oh, Miss Clark, you are such a humorous nuisance." She strutted up until they were toe to toe. "I have a wager with my daughter that you'd have fled already so I guess I lost the bet. You're a sensible young lady. You won't tarry and be a thorn in our side, will you? Not when Grenville's true character has been exposed. I must confess, Rose . . ." She paused and inquired, "May I call you Rose?"

"No, you may not."

Mrs. Adair tsked, as if Rose was being a brat. "I'm shocked to discover you're still on the premises. Please tell me that I haven't misjudged you. Please tell me you're departing."

Rose pointed to her portmanteau. "I'm about to leave. I have to speak to someone first."

"Wonderful." Mrs. Adair beamed with delight. She retrieved a pouch of coins from her reticule and offered it to Rose.

"What's this for?" Rose asked.

"It's a goodwill gesture to spur you on your way. I realize you were fond of Nathaniel and I greatly appreciate your swift exit."

If Rose had had any pride at all, she'd have tossed the coins back to the horrid harpy, but she had no pride, and London was very expensive. She grabbed the pouch, and Mrs. Adair smirked, as if Rose was just as greedy as she'd expected.

"Nathaniel is very fond of you too," Mrs. Adair said, "and I'm afraid he'll track you down. Can you slink off to a location where he won't ever find you? I don't mean to nag, but we really can't have you in his life."

"Trust me. I have no intention of remaining, and I will never return, no matter what, so we're both about to get what we crave."

"Have you written him a farewell note?"

"He doesn't deserve a note."

"Are you sure that's wise? You could be very curt, very firm, so he understands you're done with him forever. My aim is for him to quickly forget you, and a parting message might help to convince him that he shouldn't miss you or fuss over you."

"Fine. I'll write him a bloody note," Rose crudely spat.

There was a desk in the corner. She stomped over and pulled a sheet of paper out of the drawer. As she contemplated what to say, Mrs. Adair pitched in with her ideas.

“Be brief and concise: You’re disgusted that he’s such a libertine and liar so you’ve gone into hiding and he needn’t hunt for you. You’ve vanished completely.”

Rose wasn’t concerned about what he thought, and she couldn’t deduce why she was being so accommodating, but she was anxious for Mrs. Adair to leave her alone. If a paltry letter could spur her along, it was a small price to pay.

Mrs. Adair leaned in so she could read what had been penned, and she said, “That’s perfect.”

“I’m so glad you approve.”

“Put it there on the desk so the servants will stumble on it. They’ll give it to him immediately once he’s back.” She strolled off, hurling over her shoulder, “Don’t double-cross me, Miss Clark. No one wants you here, most particularly me. If you pop up in our lives again, you’ll have to deal with me, and there will definitely be consequences you won’t like.”

Rose scoffed. “What can you do to me that you haven’t already done?”

“You might be surprised.”

Mrs. Adair kept on and slithered out. Rose was rooted to her spot, listening as the quiet settled in. The gall of the woman! The audacity! Rose was still frozen on the inside, but she was gradually thawing out, and her temper was starting to flare.

“You old cow,” she muttered scornfully.

What was it about rich people that had them assuming they were better than everyone else? Why were they cruel, callous, and stupid?

Footsteps sounded in the foyer yet again and she braced. It would probably be Noah, and she couldn’t have him see how distressed she was, how heartbroken she was. Later on, when he reported their final encounter to his father, she was keen for him to say that she’d looked as if she didn’t have a care in the world.



“YOU’RE LEAVING?” NOAH ASKED Rose. “For where?”

“There are many boarding houses in London. I’ll rent a room, then begin searching for a job.”

“You have a job here, minding me.”

“You were never interested in having any supervision and let’s be honest. I have no special skills with children.”

Noah fumed with irritation. He liked her. He hadn't always shown it, but the prior year had been awful. If he met someone new, he was cautious. He didn't automatically befriend them. He waited to learn if they were worth befriending.

"Is this because of Lord Grenville's betrothal?" he asked.

"I could lie and claim it's not, but I doubt you'd believe me. I will embarrass myself by admitting that I was sweet on Lord Grenville and I assumed he might marry *me*. This is a terrible blow and it's not possible for me to tarry now. Not with his wedding approaching."

Noah scowled. "When is it to be held?"

"Mrs. Adair mentioned a Christmas ceremony so I guess in December?"

"December is months away," he said. "Anything could happen before then. It's silly to panic like this."

Rose sighed. "I shouldn't discuss this with you, but I can't watch him court Miss Adair. And even if their engagement fell apart, I could never be his bride. He's an earl, Noah. It means he has to wed very high. Miss Adair is a wealthy heiress. I could never compete with a woman like her."

"My father needs you. He's improved so much since you've been living with us. What if he gets sick again? What then? Who will tend him?"

"I can't help him anymore so this is a pointless debate."

She went over to the door, and as she grabbed her portmanteau, his pulse raced. She was really going!

"Take me with you!" he fervidly said.

"I'm sorry, but I just can't."

"Please don't abandon me. I can't imagine having Miss Adair as my stepmother. You can't want that! What will become of me?"

"You'll be all right," she said reluctantly, both of them aware that he wouldn't be. "Your father would like you to head to Grenville Downs, but would you like that? I could tell the butler and he could arrange to have a footman escort you."

"I can tell the butler myself. I can make my own plans."

He didn't intend to sound so surly, but he was incredibly hurt by her deserting him. Fog had left too, with Eddie, but he deemed their actions to be typical adult behavior. They hadn't paused to consider what he might like. He was an ignored afterthought to Lord Grenville, and with a stepmother being brought into the picture, who could predict what torments she might inflict?

She looked like a beautiful, evil fairy, and her initial task would be to be rid of him. What conclusion might she select? The answer to that question was too scary to contemplate.

Well, he'd always expected he'd wind up running away. He didn't have to stay with his father, and if he fled, he could pick his destination. Wouldn't that be preferable to dawdling and being miserable?

“Are you angry with me?” Rose asked. “I wish you wouldn’t be. I wish you could remember me fondly.”

“Are you sure I can’t come with you?”

“I’m very sure. I have no legal authority to abscond with you and it would upset Lord Grenville.”

“He wouldn’t even notice. In fact, I bet he’d be glad. It’s the truth.”

They stared for an eternity, then Rose surprised him by hugging him tight. Here at the end, it was nice to have her exhibit a bit of affection.

“You’ll be fine,” she said as she pulled away. “You’re tough and smart and you’ll survive these rough years. Before you can snap your fingers, you’ll be a grownup. You’ll be able to choose what sort of life you’d like to have. You won’t have to depend on Lord Grenville.”

“I’m afraid for you,” he told her, “and he’ll be furious with me for not stopping you. How can I?”

“You can’t stop me and your father won’t miss me.”

She was wrong. His father would be very irate, and he’d blame Noah, but what could Noah do?

She marched out, and as he stumbled after her, he yearned to be older and bigger so he could force her to obey him. His father could have changed her mind, but Noah had no idea how.

She exited the manor and started down the driveway toward the main road that led into the city. It was a lengthy walk to the first coaching inn where she could hire a hansom cab to carry her away from them. She appeared very determined, but young and small too, as if she needed a strong man by her side to keep her safe.

“Will you write to me?” he called to her. “Will you let me know where you are so I don’t fret?”

She halted and called back, “No, because I don’t want Lord Grenville to ever know where I am. Goodbye.”

She whipped away and hurried on, and he felt as if he’d failed her, but then, he was only ten. He didn’t suppose he had any skills that would be useful to her.

After she was a distance away, and she wouldn’t realize he was spying on her, he tagged after her to the coaching inn. As he’d suspected, she climbed into a cab, and he noted the driver and the vehicle. If things became particularly bad with his stepmother, he could track down the fellow and have him convey Noah to wherever he’d delivered her. He could find her and beg her again to allow him to live with her.

She was a kind person, and she liked him, despite his being so mean. She couldn’t refuse forever, could she?

He watched until she vanished from view, then he trudged back to the River House. He sat on the front stoop and tarried there all day. No visitors arrived. No one peeked out to

check on him. He might have been a ghost, floating through his father's world. When would he decide he'd had enough of being invisible?

He'd wait for Eddie for a month. He was certain his friend would show up soon, then Eddie could tell him exactly what to do.

Chapter

22

“WE’VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU TO SHOW UP.”

Janet glared at her brother, but didn’t put down her fork to stop eating. She was in the dining room of Christopher’s home—her home now—and she’d been having breakfast by herself when a footman had dashed in to announce that Nathaniel had finally arrived.

He was over in the doorway and glowering at her as if she were an insect he’d like to squash under his boot.

They’d figured he’d be furious with them, that he’d race to rescue her from Christopher’s dastardly clutches. The stupid dolt couldn’t fathom that she didn’t need rescuing. It was so early in the day, and she truly did not have the energy required to fight with him.

Christopher hadn’t come downstairs yet, and she was fervidly wishing he’d stroll in. He was a large, tough man so he could push back against Nathaniel’s absurd posturing.

With Nathaniel having blustered in, he seemed flummoxed as to his purpose, and she pointed to a chair and said, “Are you hungry? Would you like us to dish up a plate for you?”

He shook himself out of his stupor and he stormed over and plopped down. He didn’t mention whether he was hungry or not, but she motioned to the footman to serve him anyway. The boy rushed about and filled a plate without inquiring as to what Nathaniel might like, but who would be brave enough to dicker with him over his choices?

He looked like a vagabond or maybe a highwayman. His color was high, his hair unbrushed and snarled from the wind. He was dressed in black, and he hadn’t shaved so he could have been a bandit who was about to rob them.

The footman slid him his food, then flitted over to the corner and out of the line of fire. It was painfully obvious that an explosion was building, and she yearned to slink off to the corner too.

“Noah told me you were planning to marry Christopher,” he said. “I asked you not to encourage him.”

“Yes, you asked, begged, then ordered me to ignore him, but I couldn’t oblige you. Sorry.”

She wasn’t sorry though. She simply hated that she’d upset him, and in his current reduced state, she was afraid she’d created a permanent rift that they might not be able to ever repair.

“Doesn’t my opinion matter to you?” he asked.

“Yes, but Nathaniel, I barely know you and you barely know me. You can’t suppose you can boss me with any genuine authority.”

At hearing her comment, he appeared a tad lost. “I wanted us to form a bond so we could move beyond our awful childhood and become friends.”

“I still want that, but it’s up to you if one will flourish or not.”

“Have you any idea of how Christopher betrayed me?”

“You’ve asked me that question before and I’ve answered it before. He shared every wretched detail with me. He and I have no secrets from one another.”

“He left me behind! How could you think I’d allow him to join our family?”

“First off, he’s very ashamed of himself and he hopes you’ll forgive him someday. Not that you ever will, I’m sure. You’re too stuck in the mire you’ve dug for yourself and you can’t see a path forward.”

“It’s not that!” he fumed. “His behavior in Spain revealed his true character. If you wed him, I’ll worry about you forever.”

“You’re being overly dramatic, as usual, and I must remind you that you’re not in a stable condition to assess any difficult situation. You definitely can’t assess this one and I won’t argue about it.” She gestured to his plate. “Why don’t you have some breakfast? You’ll feel better once you have some food in your belly.”

“I don’t want to eat. I want you to leave with me.”

She tsked with exasperation. “I’m not leaving so please don’t nag.”

“What is your ploy then, Janet? Will you proceed, even though I’m vehemently opposed? Will you crush our new relationship? Will you break my heart?”

He was terribly distraught, and she was trying to be kind and sympathetic, but they might have been talking in different languages. She said to the footman, “Would you fetch Mr. Blake? Tell him my brother is here and request that he hurry.”

“I won’t discuss this with Christopher!” Nathaniel frowned at the footman and said, “Don’t fetch him. I’m having a private conversation with my sister and I won’t have him interfering.”

Janet rolled her eyes. “Don’t you dare countermand the instructions I give to my servants. This isn’t your home, and despite how grand you imagine you are, your word isn’t more important than mine.”

She waved the boy out, and he hesitated, embarrassed at being caught between them, and not certain if he should disobey an earl, but she shooed him away.

As his footsteps faded, Nathaniel’s glowering intensified. “You claimed he was *your* servant. What do you mean?”

“It was a wasted trip for you. I’m married.” She showed him the ring on her hand. “We obtained a Special License and held the ceremony immediately so you’ve staggered in much too late to accomplish any goal except to annoy me.”

“It’s over?” He looked as if she’d punched him.

“Yes, and would you congratulate me? Try to be glad for me, and if you can’t be glad, at least don’t strut about and hurl insults.”

Christopher took that moment to saunter in. In contrast to her decrepit, unkempt brother, he was handsome and dashing. He was casually attired, in tan trousers, blue coat, and white shirt, his cravat perfectly tied. His brown hair was smoothed back, his face shaved. He appeared competent, cordial, and wonderful, while Nathaniel appeared exhausted, disheveled, too thin, and even a tad ill.

Was he fully recovered from his fever? He didn’t seem to be.

“Hello, Nathaniel,” Christopher said. The tension was so thick he could have cut it with a knife, and he struggled to imbue the meeting with a bit of normalcy. “We’ve been expecting you.”

“I was opposed to you marrying her,” Nathaniel said. “You didn’t have my permission.”

“I know, but I love her and I couldn’t resist. When I proposed to her, I didn’t consider you at all.”

Nathaniel stared down at his uneaten food. “I rushed all this way for nothing. I should have realized it was a fool’s errand. I can’t make any situation turn out right anymore.”

Christopher peeked over at Janet and they exchanged a significant glance. Nathaniel’s fever had been ferocious and it was clear he still wasn’t well. Rose Clark had kept them informed, but evidently, his malady had been much more gripping than she’d let on.

“You’re weary,” Christopher said to him. “Why don’t you stay with us for a week or two and get some rest?”

“I can’t. I have pressing business in London. I have to talk to Rose. She was so angry with me and I shouldn’t have abandoned her.”

He stood to depart and Janet felt awful. She’d wounded him more deeply than she’d suspected she would and she asked, “Why is Rose angry with you? What did you do to her?”

If they’d had an ordinary sibling camaraderie, he might have replied with a witty quip, but they didn’t have an ordinary camaraderie. There was no foundation under them that would allow them to chat or joke.

He simply started out, and she shot a glare at Christopher, visually begging him to intervene, to stop him.

Christopher was standing in the doorway, not deliberately blocking Nathaniel’s exit, but Nathaniel couldn’t walk out unless Christopher moved.

“You’re not all that hale, Nathaniel,” Christopher said. “I think you were much sicker than Rose Clark admitted.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m better now.”

“You’re so thin. Can we feed you? I can’t bear to send you away when you’re in such a poor condition.”

Nathaniel pondered Christopher’s suggestion, and just when she figured he’d sit back down, he said, “No, thank you. I have to ride to town and put out numerous fires that are burning there. I’m sorry to have bothered you. It was stupid of me to have come here.”

“You’re my brother-in-law,” Christopher told him, “and you were my friend in the past. We should shift ourselves back to that prior spot. For Janet’s sake.”

Nathaniel snorted with derision. “Janet doesn’t care about her relationship with me. Maybe there’s been too much water under the bridge.”

“I don’t believe that,” Christopher said, “and you shouldn’t believe it either.”

Nathaniel gazed at her, and his eyes were especially blue, poignant and filled with regret.

“I hope you’ll be happy.” He debated, then shrugged. “I have nothing else to add. That’s all there is.”

He marched out and Christopher followed him out to the driveway. Shortly, he returned and she said, “It was silly for him to flit in and out like that. Did he seem bewildered to you? And as if he’s still sick?”

“Those tropical fevers can be incredibly debilitating. It may be awhile before he reverts to his old self.”

“I’m not sure I like his *old* self. I wish a new one would blossom and grow.”

“We’ll cross our fingers. He can’t be furious forever, can he?”

“He’s a St. James male, and he frittered away his youth, watching my grandfather be an ass. I can’t predict what sort of person he’ll be in the future.”

“We can’t give up on him and we’re already making progress. He didn’t punch me. He didn’t yell at me. I was expecting both to occur.”

She chuckled, but miserably. “He didn’t *punch* you? Are we viewing that as a success? I will state for the record that it is a very low bar.”



NATHANIEL TROTTED UP TO the River House. As he headed toward the front door, he was so impatient, he couldn’t wait to leap from the saddle. For several days, he’d been on the road, pursuing his futile quest to dissuade his sister from folly. He couldn’t deduce why he’d commenced it.

His only defense was that his mental faculties weren't as sharp as they ought to have been. He spent too much time alone, fuming and reminiscing. His doldrums kept him from healing, and he had to find a method to feel that his ordeal was concluded. When he constantly vented and raged, he couldn't fix himself.

On his way to locate Janet, he'd ridden like the wind to stop her, but with his mission in tatters, he'd ridden home at a much slower pace. He'd taken a detour to Grenville Downs, assuming Rose and Noah would be there, but they hadn't been. Nor had the servants heard from them so they had to be in London.

His mind was clearer than it had been in ages. He had to repair his relationships with them. He would befriend Noah and begin to regularly fraternize with him so he'd realize he was a cherished son. As to Rose, he had to accept that he might be in love with her. He had to beg her forgiveness, then he would marry her. Immediately!

He would cry off from his engagement to Annette, then he'd wed Rose and be delighted forever. He'd persuaded himself that Annette's dowry was what he needed to be happy. He'd truly believed that, but as he'd meandered down unending country lanes, it had dawned on him that he required more than money to be genuinely content.

He was too mentally disordered, too rundown and reflective. Annette was a gorgeous, pleasant, sheltered girl who could never understand him. Rose had suffered her own calamity so she was a tough, brave fighter, and thus, the exact kind of woman he should have as his wife.

He imagined she was still angry with him so he'd have to work very hard to convince her that he was sincere, but he would convince her. She could never resist him when he was being charming.

He'd propose to her, then he'd meet with Annette and Ambrosia and sever the betrothal. They could sue him for breach of promise, but he didn't care. With Ambrosia threatening him, they'd misplayed their hand. They erroneously assumed he was desperate, but he wasn't, so they couldn't manipulate him.

He'd wanted Annette's dowry. He'd felt he deserved it, but he wasn't dying to receive it. Instead, he would retire to the country and carry on like the poor farmer he was. He'd sell what wasn't connected to the title. He'd retrench and regroup, would stop behaving like a pompous aristocrat. He'd become a thrifty, sensible, common man, and he'd succeed because he'd have Rose to guide and advise him.

It would be absolutely perfect.

He entered the house and it was very quiet. He stood in the foyer, listening for voices, and eventually, a maid wandered down the hall. He always conveniently forgot that he'd hired a slew of maids, and unfortunately, they wouldn't be working for him much longer. Since he wasn't marrying Annette, he didn't have the funds to pay their wages.

She was surprised to stumble on him, and he gave her various instructions, then he requested that a hot meal be served in an hour.

Apparently, Rose was away from the property, but Noah was up in the nursery. Nathaniel climbed the stairs to speak with him, and as he did, he walked by the suite Rose had been using. He happened to glance inside, and he noticed that her wardrobe was open and empty. Her brush and other items were missing from the dresser.

He stomped in and snooped about, only to discover that she'd left. When he'd asked the maid about her, the girl had said Rose was gone, but he hadn't grasped that she'd meant *gone* gone.

Wasn't it just like Rose to flee in a huff? Why hadn't he recognized that she would? He'd badgered her until she'd sworn she'd tarry while he was away, but obviously, she'd been lying. Why had he believed her?

Once again, he wrote it off to his muddled state, his lack of lucid thinking, and he was irked that he'd have to chase after her and bring her home.

He kept on to the nursery, and as usual, Noah was there by himself. He was staring out the window and he appeared to be the loneliest boy in the world.

"Hello, Noah," he said softly, not keen to startle him.

Noah spun around. "I heard you coming so you don't have to tiptoe about."

"You look miserable. I told Rose to escort you to Grenville Downs; I thought you'd be happier there. Why didn't you leave?"

"I would have had to travel there by myself."

"Where is Rose? I was just in her room and her belongings are missing."

"She was very upset with you so she packed her bag and went away."

"To where?" Nathaniel asked.

"She wouldn't tell me. I begged her to take me with her, but she wouldn't. She said she didn't have the authority."

"You'd rather live with her than me?"

"Of course I would. Why would I stay where I'm not wanted?"

"You're wanted," Nathaniel insisted. "Don't ever claim you're not."

"I'm *wanted* here?" Noah practically sneered the question. "You have a funny way of showing it."

"Things will get better. I promise. *I* will get better."

"How will you? I've been residing with you for months and you never change."

Nathaniel wouldn't debate the situation. He'd been awful and indifferent; they both knew it, but he would fix what was wrong. They would move to Grenville Downs—with Rose—and be a family. Hopefully, he and Rose would have a few children of their own so Noah would have some siblings. If they didn't, Nathaniel would dote on him and he'd always be more than enough.

"Did she jot down a forwarding address?" he asked.

“No. She was determined that you never be able to find her.”

“Well, that’s insane conduct,” Nathaniel said, as he tamped down a blanch of alarm. “What if she needs our help? What if she suffers some problems? She’s not a female who should be left to her own devices.”

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you broke her heart.”

Out of the mouth of babes, Nathaniel mused. He and his son were barely acquainted, but clearly—as a father—he was a great disappointment. He’d failed every test that had been presented so far.

“We’ll have to locate her, won’t we?” Nathaniel said. “How hard could it be? She’s not a ghost; she’s not invisible. We’ll track her down.”

“Why would she agree to return?” Noah asked. “I’m fairly sure she hates you.”

“She doesn’t hate me. She *loves* me. She just doesn’t realize it yet.” He gestured to the door. “I’ve ordered a meal and I’m starving. Will you eat with me?”

“I’m not hungry.”

Nathaniel forced a smile. “You have to eat with me anyway. From now on, we’ll dine together. I’m eager for us to be friends.”

Noah scoffed. “Really? When did this amazing insight occur to you?”

“As I was riding home. I have to alter how I carry on, starting with you. Then I’ll convince Rose to marry me and we’ll retire to the country. We’ll be content there. You’ll see.”

When he voiced it aloud, it sounded so simple, but a bit mad too, and apparently, Noah deemed it a deranged plan.

“It will never happen,” Noah said, “so please don’t fill my head with stories about the pretty future we might have. No matter how intently you insist, you’ll never make it come true.”



ROSE STAGGERED INTO THE room she’d rented. It was in a women’s boarding house, in a safe neighborhood, and run by an older widow who kept it clean and tidy. It was affordable and conveniently situated so she could easily trek about the city as she searched for a job.

She’d finally managed to confer with Mrs. Ford at the employment agency. For over a week, she’d tried to wrangle a meeting with the fussy matron, and it had gradually become clear that the woman was avoiding her. Eventually, after she’d grown impatient and had barged in and demanded an appointment, she’d been fired—with a firm command to never use Mrs. Ford as a reference.

To Rose's consternation, Mrs. Ford had received an anonymous note about her improper amour with Lord Grenville, and she figured it had been Ambrosia Adair stirring more trouble. Mrs. Adair was precisely the type of shrew who would stick in the knife, but twist it too.

After Rose had been terminated, her fortunes had plummeted dramatically, and she was beginning to panic.

Her room was tiny, with a bed, dresser, and chair. That was it. She'd bought a newspaper, and she pulled the chair over to the narrow window and plopped down on it to read the employment advertisements. There weren't many, and the ones that were listed were for male applicants. It was the curse of being a female.

A woman was supposed to be wed and taking care of her husband and children. She wasn't supposed to work at a position where she might steal wages from a man who had a family to support. What about the women who hadn't had a chance to marry and had no husband? What about the ones with no parent to provide shelter? What about the spinsters and old maids?

Those questions set off a dozen more: What if she never found a job? What if her small nest egg dwindled and she ran out of money? What would she do then?

She wondered if she shouldn't write to Fog, but how would it help? Even if Fog had forgiven Rose for being such a fool, she had no money to loan to Rose. Nor would Rose be welcome at her mother's. Fog had specifically warned Rose to stay away, so no, there would be no letter to Fog. Yet who else might assist her?

Should she visit her father? Colonel Clarkson had told her his name: Sir Anthony Brickwell. What if she approached him? What if she introduced herself and sought his aid?

The very idea was preposterous. How could she approach a stranger and declare herself his unmet, unacknowledged natural daughter? The fact that she'd ponder such a ridiculous notion only underscored her dire circumstances.

She closed the newspaper and tossed it on the floor. There hadn't been a single advertisement that a young lady might have answered. She spent her days at taverns, shops, hotels, and other establishments, and while several offers had been tendered, they'd been for lewd purposes.

She gazed outside, her dismal view a building across the alley. She was terrified over what was occurring, terrified over how few choices she had.

Her stomach gurgled with alarm. She cursed the Colonel for how cruel and unbending he'd been. She cursed her mother for dying and leaving her alone. She cursed Fog for deserting her, for giving up on her. Most of all, she cursed Nathaniel St. James.

How could he have deceived her? How could he have broken her heart? Was he sorry? Had he even noticed she'd left? Was he concerned that she had? Or was he simply relieved to be shed of her so easily?

That was probably the truth of it. She'd slunk off in disgrace, and he hadn't had to lift a finger to be rid of her.

She picked up the newspaper again, thinking she'd peruse it once more in case she'd missed something, but the article that greeted her was too distressing to read. She merely skimmed the headline. It was the official engagement announcement of Miss Annette Adair to Nathaniel St. James, Lord Grenville. A Christmas wedding was planned.

Rose's stomach gurgled again. Since dawn, as she'd traipsed about on London's mean streets, she'd felt dizzy and queasy. She was normally healthy as a horse so her symptoms had been annoying, but considering her ominous plight, who wouldn't feel ill?

Nausea swirled, and suddenly, she was about to vomit. She slid to her knees, grabbed the chamber pot under the bed, and she wretched over and over until there was only bile.

Then, trembling, sweating, her pulse pounding, she pulled herself up on the mattress, curled into a ball, and wept—for all that was lost and all that would never be.



NOAH WAS NESTLED IN the grass on the banks of the river behind the house. When Eddie had still been living with them, it had been their secret hiding place. It was shielded from prying eyes, and they'd constructed a pit so they could light a fire on chilly afternoons. They'd even cooked over it occasionally and had pretended to be explorers, camping in the jungle.

At the moment, he had a fire burning so the temperature was comfortable. He reached into his shirt and retrieved the note Rose had penned to Lord Grenville prior to her departure. She'd put it on the writing desk in the front parlor, and he'd stumbled on it before the servants had.

He read it a final time, being sad and furious that his father had hurt her so much. His father didn't deserve to have the note. Besides, it was short and to the point so it didn't reveal any pertinent information, except that she was very angry and Lord Grenville was a shameless ass.

"Goodbye, Rose," he said. "I hope you're all right."

He sent the words winging to the sky, praying—wherever she was—that she'd sense he'd been thinking of her. He didn't agree with his father about much, but with regard to her, they were in complete accord. She was a flighty female who might land herself in any kind of jam.

He tossed the letter onto the flames, watching as it crumpled to ash, then he stirred it with a stick so there would be no evidence of what he'd done. It was horrid conduct, but he wasn't sorry.

He tarried for a bit, at loose ends and wondering how to amuse himself. His father was napping, then they'd have supper together after he awakened. Noah liked dining with him, answering questions, telling him about his hard life with his mother. She hadn't been the best

parent, but with Lord Grenville not remembering her, Noah was able to embellish and claim she'd been grand.

He laid on his back, staring at the clouds as they rolled by, when a bird whistled from out in the grass. A pebble bounced next to him. He lurched to his feet and glanced around. It was his secret whistle with Eddie, their secret signal. With some dedicated searching, he found Eddie crouched in the shrubbery.

"Are you alone?" Eddie asked.

"Yes, and I have a fire burning. Come and sit with me."

Noah led him over to it, and as he took stock of his friend, it was clear his furtive journey had been difficult. He was dirty and disheveled, his coat torn, his trousers stained, his cheeks in need of a scrubbing. If his mother could see him, she'd be incensed.

"What happened to you?" Noah asked. "Was it bad with your grandmother?"

"It was worse than bad," Eddie said. "She's mean to my mother. She calls her names and taunts her for having an immoral character because she had me when she wasn't married to my father."

Noah frowned. "Your mother doesn't have immoral character."

"I know! She would never stand up for herself. I talked back though and I was whipped for it!"

"By your mother?" Noah was aghast.

"No, by my grandmother! She used a cane on me over and over."

Eddie stuck out his palms to show Noah the red welts. They'd been inflicted a few days earlier so they were fading, but they were still visible.

"I begged my mother to leave," Eddie continued, "but she wouldn't. She told *me* to be more polite, to not aggravate my grandmother so much. She insisted, if I'd behave better, my grandmother wouldn't be so grouchy."

"You never misbehave!"

Noah was enraged on Eddie's behalf, and as usual, he wished he was bigger and older. If he had been, he'd have visited Eddie's grandmother, and he'd have ordered her to be a nicer person. Then he'd have brought Fog and Eddie to live with him so they'd be safe. But he was just a boy so he couldn't protect them. It was so frustrating.

"Can I stay with you?" Eddie asked.

"Of course. It's what we planned and I've been waiting for you to arrive."

"You'll have to hide me. My mother will hunt for me and she'll drag me back there."

"I won't let her, no matter what! I swear it!"

They executed their secret handshake, then Eddie asked, "Is Rose here? She could help me."

“She’s not here! She thought Lord Grenville was about to wed her, but he’s engaged to someone else. He lied to your sister about it so she packed her bags and disappeared.”

“Where is she?”

“I’m not sure, but the cab driver who drove her into the city could probably tell us.”

“Does Lord Grenville miss her? Is he embarrassed for being so awful to her?”

“No. Why would he be embarrassed? He’s about to marry an heiress so he’ll become very rich. He claims he misses her, but I don’t believe him.”

“We should find her if we can,” Eddie said. “She wouldn’t allow my grandmother to be so cruel to me.”

“I bet we could run away with her. When she left, I asked her to take me too, but she wouldn’t. If she heard how your grandmother had treated you, she might change her mind.”

Eddie instantly glommed onto the notion of Rose rescuing them. “We should convince her to return to Egypt. You’d like it there. The sun always shines and it’s always warm. I’m certain she’d agree to go.”

“I’d like to see a pyramid so we should definitely suggest it. Are you hungry?”

“I’m starving.”

Noah gestured toward the manor. “I’ll fetch some food, then after it’s dark, I’ll sneak you up to the nursery. I’m like a ghost so no one ever bothers me there.”

“Shall we confess to your father that I’m here?”

“No. We can’t trust him and he’d send you back to your mother.”

“Why are grownups so horrible to children?” Eddie asked.

“I have no idea,” Noah said, “but we’ll be adults before too long, and we’ll be able to choose our own path. We won’t let anyone hurt us.”

They executed their secret handshake again, then Noah stood and rushed to the house.

Chapter

23

FLORENCE DRURY STOOD IN the hall outside the room she'd rented to Rose Clark. She knocked briskly, then opened the door and peeked in. Miss Clark was stretched out on the bed, a cool cloth over her eyes. She lifted a corner and peeked over, asking, "May I help you?"

"I thought we should talk. May I come in?"

"Certainly, but from how you're frowning, you're making me nervous. Have I upset you? Have I broken your rules? I'm not behind on my rent so it can't be that."

With enormous effort, Miss Clark pushed herself up onto the edge of the mattress, her feet on the floor. She discreetly tossed the wet cloth under the bed, as if hoping Florence wouldn't notice she'd been ill again.

Florence shut the door and leaned against it. There was a chair by the window, and she could have sat down on it, but this wasn't a social call. Miss Clark seemed like a very nice young lady. She was quiet, smart, and tidy, and when she'd first moved in, she'd admitted that she was between jobs and searching for a new one.

Initially, she'd rushed out every morning and had traipsed home very late, but to no avail. As the days had passed, she'd gone out less and less until, the past week, she hadn't gone out at all. She'd lost weight so she was pale and sickly. Florence's maids had noted her vomiting when she presumed the halls were empty and they wouldn't hear.

Florence had no living children, but she'd birthed six babies so she was cognizant of the signs. Did Miss Clark know? British girls like her were so sheltered and naïve. Florence was positive the truth would never have occurred to her.

"I have to mention a delicate topic," Florence said.

"My goodness. You sound so serious that you're scaring me."

"I have no idea where you worked previously, Miss Clark, but we must discuss why you left. You're so pretty and vivacious. I can't believe an employer would have allowed you to quit. I'm more inclined to imagine a troubling situation drove you away."

"I will confess, to my great mortification, that you're correct. I apologize that I wasn't more candid when I arrived, but I was too embarrassed to reveal my exact circumstances."

"Was it a man?" Florence asked. "Was he pressing his attentions on you?"

Miss Clark's cheeks heated. "Yes, to both."

“Then I regret to inform you that your dilemma might be bigger than you realize.”

Florence hadn't been clear, so Miss Clark didn't understand, and she said, “What do you mean?”

“I'm afraid you might be increasing.”

Miss Clark froze, her mind whirring as she struggled to interpret Florence's comment. Ultimately, she sputtered, “Increasing ... with a child?”

“Yes. Have you considered the possibility? I'm betting you haven't.”

“You can't be right.” Miss Clark vigorously shook her head. “This can't be happening to me. I won't *let* it happen.”

“The problem with babies is that they swell your belly whether you wish it or not.”

“How can you be sure? He and I, we only ...” Miss Clark cut off her sentence, too ashamed to finish it. “I didn't grasp that I could wind up in this predicament after such a brief amour.”

“If you assume I'm wrong, you could consult with a midwife, but it would be a waste of money.”

“I can't have a baby!” Miss Clark practically wailed the remark.

“Would the irresponsible fellow come up to snuff? If he learned about your quandary, would he marry you? I'm desperately thinking you should contact him.”

Miss Clark stared down at her hands, her dismay acute. “He's engaged to an heiress.”

“Well! A scoundrel will always pick a fortune over any other option. You're out of luck, unless you're acquainted with a kindly oaf who'd wed you on the spur of the moment in order to save you.”

“Trust me. I've never known any men who are kind.” A lengthy, fraught silence festered, and eventually, Miss Clark asked, “What should I do, Mrs. Drury? What would you advise?”

This was the worst part, and Florence hated to be cruel, but she had no duty to Miss Clark. They were strangers and Florence had a business reputation to protect.

“I have no advice to share,” she said. “I'm not your mother or even your friend, really. I would never involve myself because we have no connection that would provide me with any insight as to your needs.”

“Yes, but you're older and wiser than me. You must have some suggestions.”

“Have you any family who could step in? How about distant kin or neighbors? Is there anyone?”

“No, I can't conceive of a single soul.”

“And the scoundrel,” Florence said, “could you speak with *his* father?”

“His parents are deceased.”

Florence sighed with exasperation. She rented rooms to industrious young ladies who possessed the skills and ambition to succeed in London. They were generally good girls, moralistic girls. They weren't the type to consort with libertines. On two prior occasions, she'd lost tenants to this very same situation, and she was surprised to find Miss Clark cast into the same pot of woe. She seemed too astute to fall for a roué's lies, but then, she was delightful and fetching, and handsome rogues could be so charming.

"Since you're alone in the world," Florence said, "you should probably locate an unwed mother's home to furnish some assistance. They'll help you through the birth and they can put the child out for adoption afterward."

"I would give him away?" Miss Clark looked horrified.

"You'd have to. Without a husband in the picture, it would simply be too difficult to carry on with a bastard you had to raise on your own. You'll have to regroup and start over. The Ladies Aid Society at my church supports a facility, and I could confer with our vicar about it. You could write to check if they have space available."

Miss Clark flinched as if she'd been punched. Her shoulders sagged, and she appeared smaller, lighter, as if her vital energy had floated away. "I can't go to an unwed mother's home! Those places are for ruined maidens!"

Florence finally went over to the chair and sat down. She patted Miss Clark on the knee and said, "You *are* a ruined maiden and you have to accept that fact and begin making plans."

Miss Clark leaned forward, her elbows on her thighs, her head buried in her hands. "I can't believe this," she muttered.

"Life can be very hard and it's about to get even harder for you."

Florence was never one to commiserate, and Miss Clark must have noted the steely tone in her voice because she straightened and said, "What are you telling me?"

"I run a reputable establishment. I supply lodging to decent, honest girls who are busy at their jobs. My maids have already noticed that you're in trouble so it's only a matter of time before gossip spreads."

"If that occurred, I would die of shame."

"I can't have stories circulate that I allow promiscuous females to reside with me."

Miss Clark's temper flared. "I've never been promiscuous! I was in love! I thought he was about to marry me! The despicable cad told me so! I behaved like a fool, but I proceeded with the purest of motives."

"Maybe in your mind, your motives were pure, but to the rest of the world, you're a trollop now. You have to leave by Monday. You can't stay here."

"But...but...it's Friday. Where am I to go? Answer me that—if you can!"

"As I mentioned, I'm neither your mother nor your friend so I'm in no position to counsel you on your choices. Be out by ten in the morning. I will refund the rent you paid for the remainder of the month, but that's all I can do for you. Please don't tarry and please don't

beg me to reconsider. If you don't depart as I've requested, I will have the maids pack your things and put them out on the street."

She stood and walked to the door, and as she slipped into the hall, she glanced back at Miss Clark. The poor ninny was huddled on the bed, looking lost and bewildered. What would become of her?

Well, it wasn't Florence's problem, and once Miss Clark left, it wouldn't be any of her business. She'd laid down the law to the imprudent tart, and she had to face the consequences. None of them would be pretty.



ROSE DAWDLED AT THE gate of the Grenville River House. It was Saturday afternoon, and on Monday, she would be kicked out of her room. After that, she couldn't imagine her destination. She had no options, and after a torturous night, where she'd paced until dawn, she'd decided that she had to talk to Lord Grenville.

He could be cruel and dismissive, but on occasion, he could be very kind too. She had to cross her fingers and hope that he would offer her some assistance.

She should have marched in and announced herself, but she was hovering like a mouse that was afraid of its own shadow. If she confessed that she was increasing, what would his opinion be? How would he respond? She had no idea. Would he be inclined to help her? Might he give her some money so she could support herself and the child? By all accounts, he didn't have any money, so even if he was willing to be generous, could he be generous?

As she frantically debated his likely reaction, a fancy carriage rumbled toward her. It slowed to turn onto the lane that led up to the manor. If he was about to have guests, she wasn't keen to have them notice her lurking. If he was in a bad mood, he might send a footman out to chase her off with a stick.

She flitted behind a tree, trying to be invisible as the vehicle rolled on by, but she watched as it approached the house. He had so few visitors and she was curious as to who it would be.

There was a bit of a delay as the steps were set, then an outrider reached in and guided the occupant down to the ground. Her heart plummeted to her toes as Annette Adair climbed out. Her mother climbed out after her, and the gorgeous pair milled about, as if unsure of their purpose. Then Lord Grenville waltzed out to greet them.

He smiled at them, as if he'd been waiting for them all his life, then he clasped Miss Adair's hands and kissed her on the cheek. He clasped Mrs. Adair's hands and kissed her too. The trio disappeared inside, and for some minutes, Rose was frozen in her spot. She was too crushed to depart and she simply wished lightning would strike her dead.

During the dreary hours where she'd fretted and plotted over how to resolve her predicament, she'd convinced herself that Lord Grenville would have missed her, that he'd be pining away and desperately searching. She'd naïvely assumed that he'd have realized he loved her, that he couldn't live without her. He would have cried off from his betrothal to Miss Adair, but clearly, he had no intention of crying off.

What would be the point of confiding in him? Would she ask him to support her with some of Miss Adair's dowry? Had her circumstances plummeted to such an appalling level?

She whipped away and started the lengthy walk into the city. She had no coins to hire a cab so she'd have to trek all the way to the boarding house. That's how low her fortunes had fallen. She couldn't even hire a cab.



SIR ANTHONY BRICKWELL HURRIED into his library. The message his butler had just delivered was too shocking to fathom. He closed the door, after ordering the man, a loyal and dedicated employee for three decades, to block it and not let anyone interrupt. If he listened to any of the conversation in which Sir Anthony was about to engage, he could be trusted to keep his mouth shut.

Sir Anthony's visitor was over by the fire, her back to him, her fingers extended toward the flames to warm them. Autumn had arrived so it was blustery outside and she had to be chilled to the bone. He wondered how far she'd traveled merely to speak with him.

She was still wearing her cloak, as if she might have to make a quick exit, but she was holding her knitted hat so he could see her beautiful hair. It was her mother's hair: blond, curly, lush. She spun to greet him, and she had her mother's striking green eyes too, her mother's perfect face. He felt as if he was gazing at an angel from his past.

There was an awkward moment where they couldn't figure out how to begin, then he said, "I am Sir Anthony. My butler informs me that you would like to confer on a private and very urgent matter."

"Yes, thank you for meeting with me. My name is Rosalie Clarkson. Do you know who I am? You were intimately acquainted with my mother."

He feigned confusion. "Was I?"

"I always thought Colonel Alfred Clarkson was my father, but he never liked me and I couldn't deduce why. I was so polite and obedient. One day, when he was angry, he revealed the reason for his dislike. He claimed I wasn't really his daughter and he wasn't really my father. He claimed my mother had had an affair when he was stationed overseas and that *you* are my father."

Sir Anthony understood that he should deny her, deny the story, deny his paternity. Before he could spew a falsehood, the wrong words trickled out. He hadn't planned to be candid, but she looked so forlorn.

"Your mother was a childhood friend whom I cherished," he said.

"I appreciate your acknowledging the relationship."

"I regretted that she was forced to wed Colonel Clarkson. He was a very stern, very difficult man, and she was so merry and spirited. It was a tragic mismatch."

"Yes, the Colonel was very difficult," she agreed. "He's recently deceased."

Sir Anthony scowled. "I guess I heard that somewhere."

"I am an orphan and I need some help." She paused, then scoffed. "Actually, even if the Colonel had still been alive, he would never have helped me. He was quite nasty."

On the rare occasions Sir Anthony had ever pondered her, he'd suspected her life with the Colonel would have been very exhausting. But how could he have aided her? He had his own wife—who definitely hadn't learned about her—and his own legitimate children. Rosalie had been born during her mother's marriage to the Colonel. The Law and the Church deemed him to be her father.

Even if Sir Anthony had dared to assert differently, his allegation would have been mocked and tossed aside. Not that he would have done that. Not that he would have intervened. He'd picked his bride and it hadn't been her mother. He had no rights or authority over her and he sought no authority.

His wife could be unforgiving over moral lapses. If she ever found out about his indiscretion, she'd pitch his clothes out on the street and change the locks.

"What sort of assistance are you requesting?" he asked.

Her cheeks heated with shame, but she was very brave. "I'm in a terrible jam. I've been seduced by a scoundrel and I'm in the family way."

"My goodness."

"I realize this is a humiliating situation to lay at your feet, but you will be the child's grandfather. I am very frightened and I have nowhere to turn."

"I take it the scoundrel in question can't or won't marry you."

"He's about to marry someone else and he would never cry off."

He yanked away and studied the floor. He was stalling, trying to devise a reply that wouldn't paint him as a callous cretin, but honestly! She had such gall to stroll into his home.

"There's naught I can do for you, Rosalie," he ultimately said. "I'm sorry."

"Can you at least offer me some advice?"

"No. You and I are strangers and it was outrageous of you to approach me."

"All right. I apologize for bothering you, and my only defense is that it proves my level of desperation. I'll show myself out."

She whirled away to leave and he said, “Wait, wait.”

She pulled up short, and there was an optimistic gleam in her eye, as if she believed he might aid her after all. Her hopefulness embarrassed him. His purse was in the drawer in the writing desk. He grabbed it and retrieved a few pound notes, then he walked over and handed her the money.

“Spend it wisely,” he said and he sounded like a fool.

She gaped at it as if she’d never previously seen hard currency. Then she snorted with derision. “If I had any pride remaining, which I don’t, I’d throw this in your face and tell you you’re an unlikable ass. But I have no pride or sense, and it’s clear I’m on my own, as I’ve been my whole life.”

“I loved your mother. Once,” he said, apropos of nothing.

“I’m sure it was a grand passion.”

With no further words voiced, she exited the room, crossed the foyer, and trudged outside. The butler had been lurking so close, probably spying through the keyhole, that he’d had to stagger away so she didn’t knock him down.

Sir Anthony followed him over to the door, but they kept it open just a crack so they could watch her as she maneuvered herself out the gate and down the street. After she’d vanished from view, they straightened, and since it was obvious the butler had eavesdropped, the moment was a tad awkward.

Sir Anthony mustered his aplomb and said, “Did you get a good look at her? Would you recognize her if you saw her again?”

“Yes, of course. She’s very pretty, very memorable.”

“In the future, don’t ever welcome her. I will not *ever* receive her.”

His wife appeared up on the landing and she inquired, “Who was that, dear? Is it a visitor?”

“No. It was a girl from the church, selling ribbons for the fundraiser. I didn’t have any pennies so I didn’t buy any.”

The fib worked like a charm and she tromped away. The butler sniffed with disdain, displaying an unusual lack of circumspection, then he marched off to the kitchen, his ethical tendencies put to the test.



“I’VE COME BACK—LIKE A bad rash.”

Christopher laughed heartily, as if he’d exhibited great wit. Nathaniel glared at him, wishing he could turn him to stone with a glower, but the force of his gaze wasn’t that

powerful.

“I should be able to get married without you and Janet bothering me,” Nathaniel told him. “The next week will be very stressful. You two will merely add to my burdens.”

Christopher clucked his tongue like a fussy nanny. “Janet is your only sister. You can’t wed without her being present.”

“Yes, I can. If I’d wanted you badgering me, I’d have asked you to travel to town. Call me crazy, but I don’t remember extending an invitation.”

“We constantly expect you to behave better, but you don’t. When Mrs. Adair wrote in your stead, we leapt at the chance.”

“I’ll have to talk to her about butting her nose into my private business.”

Christopher continued as if Nathaniel hadn’t spoken. “Janet and I have decided to ignore your tantrums and sulks.”

“I never sulk and I’m not having a tantrum.”

“If you say so.” Christopher smirked with amusement. “We won’t fight with you. We will carry on like the sensible, cordial couple we are. Eventually, you’ll become a sensible human being again too. We’re very patient so we’ll wait you out.”

“You’ll likely be an elderly codger before my opinion changes.”

“There’s an interesting rumor circulating about you,” Christopher said.

“I’m not surprised. There are thousands of them.”

“Apparently, a vicious fiend bumped into Charlie Money Penny a month or two ago. Out of the blue, and for no discernible reason, he delivered such a thrashing that Money Penny’s nose and several ribs were broken. I don’t suppose you have any information about it.”

“Why would I have any information?”

“People are claiming *you* were the assailant, that you publicly announced your identity.”

“If that’s what *people* are claiming, it’s obvious they have too much time on their hands.”

“His sister, Maude, has been trying to have you arrested, but no magistrate is willing to charge you. I guess it’s one of the perquisites of being a nobleman.”

“Aren’t I lucky?”

“You should have delayed until I could join you. I’d have been delighted to pitch in.”

“I was fine on my own. Your dubious assistance wasn’t required.”

He slid away, not keen to discuss Money Penny or any other topic with Christopher. That afternoon in London, when he’d perpetrated the assault, seemed as if it had been committed by some other idiot. *He* couldn’t have been the man who was so incensed on behalf of flighty, unreliable Rosalie Clarkson. It wasn’t possible that she could have driven him to such heights of outrage.

He wandered through the crowd, not eager to provide Christopher with the slightest hint that he might be relieved to have had him and Janet arrive. In light of his determination to wed, and in light of the speed with which it was about to occur, he needed all the support he could get. Since he had no friends, he figured Christopher and Janet were better than nothing.

He was in the front parlor at the River House. Supper had just ended and the place was packed. It wasn't any of the debauched horde that had reveled with him earlier in the summer. No, it was an engagement party, hosted by Ambrosia Adair, so the guests were very posh and stuffy.

His wedding would be held in four short days, and before it transpired, Ambrosia had declared that he should host a celebration too. He hadn't been able to devise an excuse to refuse. As with so much of what had happened recently, he felt as if he was floating along on a peculiar tide. He'd relaxed and had let the water carry him away.

After his pointless trip to the country, where he'd presumed he could stop Janet from marrying Christopher, he'd raced back to London. The cobwebs had finally been brushed out of his mind and he'd seen his path so clearly. He'd convinced himself that he was in love with Rosalie Clarkson, and he'd constructed an entire fantasy where they would have wed and lived happily ever after. But she'd vanished without a trace.

He'd spent a futile month searching for her, but he didn't have a clue as to where she might be. He'd visited the old bat, Mrs. Ford, at the employment agency, assuming the woman might have had a forwarding address, but it had simply earned him a scolding from the sarcastic harpy.

She'd accused him of seducing Rose, of behaving egregiously toward one of her girls. She'd told him that—even if she knew where Rosalie was hiding—she wouldn't have apprised him because he was a deranged lecher who should leave her alone.

He'd also visited the boarding house where she'd been staying with Fog and Eddie when he'd first met her. She hadn't been there and no one remembered her. He'd written to Fog too, but Fog hadn't heard from her and had no suggestions either.

Other than those paltry contacts, he couldn't imagine where she might have gone. He was such a vain ass that he'd rarely pried into the details of her past. Did she have family or friends in the city? He had no idea. Did she have any money? He had no idea. Where might she be? He had no idea.

As he'd hunted and fumed, he'd gradually calmed down and realized he'd been acting like a madman over her. She was a stranger and commoner, with whom he'd been acquainted for a few brief weeks. They shared no mutual foundation, no lineage, rank, or experiences. What had he been thinking?

He'd cared so little about her that he'd lied to her. He'd tricked and betrayed her, and when his sins had been exposed, she'd fled his awful presence. Her departure had saved him from serious folly.

When Ambrosia had proposed that they skip the buildup to the wedding and march straight to the altar, he'd blithely consented. She'd sweetened his opinion by offering him a

down payment on the dowry.

Her putting hard currency on the table had been an irresistible temptation, and he'd agreed to the hasty ceremony. Rosalie had left him and she wasn't coming back. He had to move on and he wanted Annette's money. It was as simple as that.

He was hovered in a corner, sipping on a whiskey, and emitting the impression that no one should sidle over to chat, but Ambrosia approached anyway.

"Are you enjoying your party?" she asked. "You don't appear to be."

"You throw a very nice soiree, but did you show me the guest list? Did I approve it?"

"Yes and yes."

"Then why are my sister and Mr. Blake here? I could swear I wasn't informed."

Usually, she was a master of aplomb, but her smile slipped. "We didn't notify you in advance because we were hoping to surprise you."

"I hate surprises and they're not welcome."

"Don't be ridiculous. You and Mrs. Blake are siblings. It's only natural that she be included."

"You're about to be my mother-in-law, and I recognize that you're used to running your daughter's life, but I won't permit you to run mine. After Annette is my bride, you'll need to find a new hobby to keep you busy. I can't have you interfering and making decisions for me."

"I have to make a few decisions. You've been struggling to manage on your own and look at the condition you're in."

"My condition is fine."

She snorted. "You're the sole person who thinks so."

He was weary of her, and he glanced around, searching for an escape route. His irked gaze swept across a dark area on the landing up on the stairs. Noah liked to crouch there on his stomach and spy on Nathaniel and his friends. He thought he was furtive and unnoticed, but he wasn't as clever as he liked to suppose.

He was there tonight too, huddled in the shadows, his eyes a slight twinkle that couldn't be observed on the main floor except by Nathaniel. Yet on this occasion, there were *two* pairs of eyes. Someone was with Noah, and Nathaniel gnawed on his cheek, a sneaking suspicion dawning.

He handed Ambrosia his whiskey, saying, "Stop annoying me."

"I'm not being annoying. You're simply very tempestuous and you overact to my every action and remark."

"You ought to tread a bit more carefully."

He started off and she said, "We're about to raise our glasses for some toasts. You and Annette will be up at the front of the room."

“I have to check on something. You can begin without me.”

She grumbled a comment, as he casually sauntered out of the parlor and down a rear hall. He reached the servants’ stairs and dashed up them, then he tiptoed over to the landing. He leaned down, grabbed a jacket, and lifted in a quick motion.

“Hello, Eddie,” he said. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Noah leapt up and whirled around, as Eddie dangled from Nathaniel’s fist. They didn’t try to squirm away or defend themselves. They gaped at him like the devious, conniving boys they were.

The butler had mentioned that food was missing from the larder, but Nathaniel had ignored the complaint like the lackadaisical oaf he could definitely be. Apparently, food *had* been missing—because they’d been feeding an extra mouth.

How long had Eddie been in the manor? How long had Noah hidden him? If Nathaniel grew anymore apathetic, what else might occur right under his nose?

“Up to the nursery!” he commanded. “Both of you! Now.”

He set Eddie on his feet, and the unruly duo marched away like a couple of felons on their way to the gallows. He was biting down a smile. He wasn’t really angry with them. No, he was angry with himself for not being a better father.

Fog had to be frantic with worry and he wondered why she hadn’t written. If Eddie had run away, surely she was aware that the River House, and Noah, would be his destination. Then again, she might have corresponded, but he hadn’t bothered to read his mail.

They entered the nursery and he pointed to a spot on the rug.

“Sit!” he snapped and they plopped down.

With him standing and loomed over them, he probably appeared very fierce. He wasn’t livid, but if they feared he was, it would help him unravel their mischief a tad faster.

“Who wants to start?” he asked. “And don’t you dare lie to me. I’ll know if you are.” They peeked at each other, clearly wishing the other would take the lead and he said, “Don’t look at him! Look at me! I won’t give you a chance to get your stories straight.”

They whipped their gazes to the front and Noah said, “Eddie ran away. His grandmother constantly yelled at him and she called his mother bad names. She even hit Eddie with a cane.”

“Is that true, Eddie?” Nathaniel asked.

“Yes, sir, and I begged my mother to leave, but she wouldn’t. She warned *me* to behave better so my grandmother wouldn’t be angry.”

Noah huffed with offense. “Eddie has never misbehaved in his whole life! That’s how awful it was.”

“Well, he never misbehaved until now,” Nathaniel said. “How long have you been hiding here, Eddie?”

“Two weeks. You won’t send me back, will you?”

Noah vehemently added, “I won’t let you send him back!”

For an eternity, Nathaniel studied them. He wished he’d had a friend like Eddie when he was a child. Maybe if he’d been this close to another person, he wouldn’t have become such a despicable wretch as an adult. Maybe he’d have had more support after the debacle in Spain. Maybe he’d have healed faster.

Ultimately, Nathaniel said to Noah, “No, I won’t send him back, but I have to write to Fog about this. She must be frantic with worry, and Eddie, I’m astounded that you’d treat her this way.”

“Don’t write to her,” Noah pleaded. “I know what grownups are like. Even if you insist he can stay with us, she won’t agree.”

Noah’s entreaty was so stirring that Nathaniel was greatly touched by it. He couldn’t guess how Fog would react, and he figured Noah was probably correct that she’d demand Eddie return to his grandmother’s house. Could Nathaniel stop her? Could he bribe her? How about if he asked her to reside with them again? Could he pay her so she’d watch over them? Would that work?

Annette and Ambrosia wouldn’t like it. They were adamant that Noah be tucked away out of sight, and he’d already booked a spot for Noah at a military academy. He wasn’t arranging it to placate them, but because he sincerely believed it was an excellent idea for Noah. Should he buy a second spot for Eddie. Would Fog like that?

Annette would be furious, but Nathaniel wasn’t necessarily concerned about her. He would simply hate to fight with his new bride right off the bat.

“No more hiding,” he said to them. “No more sneaking around. You were stealing food from the larder and I nearly interrogated the staff about it. What if I’d fired a servant for theft over this? I’d have been so ashamed of both of you. You can’t have planned to get anyone in trouble.”

Eddie was particularly glum. “We couldn’t tell you, sir. We were afraid you’d be upset that I was here.”

“You have to trust me,” Nathaniel said.

He’d have liked to tarry with them and delve further into their antics, but before he could commence a conversation, Annette popped up in the doorway.

“Mother sent me to locate you,” she said. “It’s time for our toasts so you have to come down.”

She stepped into the room, and as Noah bristled with dislike, Nathaniel sighed. He didn’t need this complication.

She assessed the odd scene, then she pointed at Eddie and asked, “Who is this?”

“This is Noah’s friend, Eddie. He’ll be living with us.”

It was Annette's turn to bristle, and he sensed a thousand nasty remarks perched on the tip of her tongue, but he didn't want to hear them. He especially didn't want the boys to hear them.

"You two head to bed," he told them. "No more spying tonight. We'll talk in the morning. We'll have breakfast together at nine, and I will expect a full report about what's been happening."

Noah might have argued, but Eddie—always the peacemaker—said, "We'll tell you everything, Lord Grenville. We won't leave anything out."

"Good. Now go to bed."

He clasped Annette's arm and ushered her out, but she constantly peeked back. Her curiosity was exhausting.

"What was that about?" she inquired, once she'd accepted that Nathaniel wouldn't allow her to interfere or intervene.

"It was just children's mischief and I'll deal with it."

"Is that boy, Eddie, really staying with you?"

"We'll discuss it later."

He hurried down the stairs at such a quick pace that she stumbled to keep up. Much too soon for her liking, they were in the main parlor and surrounded by a crowd of people. It meant she couldn't demand he clarify a single detail about the peculiar situation. Not that he would have clarified. Not that he would have explained.

He simply wished his wedding would be over, that the dowry money would be deposited into his bank account. Then he'd retire to the country with Noah and Eddie. He and Annette would probably quarrel relentlessly about them, so immediately in his marriage, she'd likely elect to remain in town. He truly thought—whatever she chose—he would be fine with it.



EDDIE AND NOAH LOITERED outside the boarding house where Rose had moved after she'd left her post as governess to Noah. Lord Grenville had written to Fog about Eddie so she'd arrive shortly and drag him back to his grandmother's.

Despite how swiftly or how slowly she appeared, Lord Grenville was marrying in two days, and they were determined to vanish before the ceremony was held. Lord Grenville had insisted they'd like Miss Adair after they spent time with her, but it was a lie.

Disaster was approaching and they had no doubt they'd be separated again. They'd been frantically debating over the best path and they'd decided they should track down Rose and beg to live with her. They were certain she'd let them.

Since dawn, they'd lurked in the yard of the coaching inn on the outskirts of the city. It was where the driver who'd whisked Rose away often started his route, and they'd bribed him with a stolen candlestick to deliver them to the spot where he'd taken Rose.

He'd done as they'd requested. He hadn't tricked them, but had conveyed them to the appropriate place. Yet to their enormous dismay, she was no longer there, and the owner hadn't been apprised as to why she'd departed or where she'd gone.

At the news, Eddie was terribly discouraged. A noose was tightening around them and they were about to be ensnared and parted.

"What should we do?" Eddie asked.

"I don't know," Noah replied, which was depressing. He always had a plan. "I was so sure she'd be here."

Eddie kicked a few rocks, while Noah stared up at the sky, as if an answer was visible in the clouds. They were about to begin walking home when the front door opened and a young lady emerged. She was pretty and tidy, and she had a basket over her arm, as if she was off to run errands.

She stepped through the gate and Eddie nudged Noah with his elbow. Noah was much braver than Eddie and he was never afraid to talk to strangers.

"Excuse me, Miss," he said.

She halted and glanced at them. "Yes? Were you speaking to me?"

Noah gestured to Eddie. "This is my friend, Eddie. We're looking for his sister, Rose Clark. You might have known her as Rosalie Clarkson. She rented a room here, but the owner told us she left and there's no forwarding information. We're very worried about her and we're anxious to find out where she is. Might you have been acquainted with her?"

The woman hemmed and hawed, then she asked, "How old are you boys?"

"We're ten."

"I shouldn't share this story with you, but I'm glad to discover you're searching for her. We'd heard that she was all alone in the world and she definitely needs some help."

Eddie's heart plummeted to his shoes. "What's wrong? What happened?"

She leaned nearer and whispered, "Miss Clark is in the family way." They gaped at her, not understanding, so she added, "She's having a baby—when she shouldn't be. The maids were gossiping about her. She was seduced by a scoundrel, and she has no husband, so she's ruined and in trouble."

"Oh, no!" Eddie breathed, as Noah asked, "Where is she?"

"She's hidden herself away at an unwed mother's home."

Eddie couldn't listen to much more than that. There was such a loud ringing in his ears that he thought he might faint.

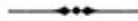
Noah peppered her with questions, prying out every detail she could provide, but it wasn't much and it was based on rumors. Luckily, she furnished the name of the village and the facility. However, they had no guarantee Rose was headed there. It was entirely possible that she'd changed her mind.

Noah thanked her, then he and Eddie departed. Eddie was fortunate that Noah liked to be in charge. If he'd had to select the correct road to the River House, he might have wandered in circles forever.

They had to tell someone what they'd learned, but who should it be? Who would care about Rose? Lord Grenville was getting married so soon. He'd been fond of her once, but he never mentioned her anymore.

The only other choice was to speak with Eddie's mother, but she and Rose had fought, then his mother had abandoned Rose, just when Rose had needed them the most. Would his mother be willing to assist Rose? What if she wouldn't? What then?

The likely consequences were too scary to ponder.



ROSE TRUDGED UP THE lane to *Mrs. Pettigrew's Private Home*. She'd ridden on a public coach to Baywick and she'd debarked at the coaching inn. She had coins in her reticule, and she could have hired a servant to drive her, but she'd been too embarrassed to state her destination. She'd been certain, in the rural area, that everyone would be aware of what her destination indicated.

She was carrying a single portmanteau. It felt especially heavy and her palm was blistered. The trek from the village hadn't been that far, but then again, it seemed as if she'd never walked farther in her life.

The building came into view and she stopped and studied her surroundings. It was situated on the coast, an old country cottage in a picturesque meadow. Behind it, the ocean was visible. There was a garden, with benches and groomed paths that led down to a rocky beach. The benches would supply many opportunities for quiet reflection, but she had no desire to contemplate any topic.

She'd already engaged in plenty of mental wrangling, and she simply wound up at a spot of great fury and shame, so why obsess? She couldn't alter the past; she could only stagger forward into the untenable future.

She dithered, unable to force herself over to the door, which was silly. Why quail with indecision or terror? She'd traveled to the isolated location on her own and she wasn't a coward.

While still in London, she'd written to apprise them that she would arrive and request their aid, but she'd fled the boarding house so rapidly that she had no idea if anyone had replied. What if they were full and couldn't accommodate her? What if their fees were exorbitant and she couldn't pay them? What then?

The answers to those questions were so alarming that she was trembling from head to toe. She had to physically shake herself out of her distressed stupor. If they couldn't help her, she'd devise a different plan. She was smart and shrewd and she always landed on her feet. She'd maneuver through this quagmire too.

She took a deep breath, took another, then she marched over and knocked. A pretty maid peeked out almost immediately and Rose said, "I'm Rosalie Clarkson, from London. I hope very much that you're expecting me."



"WHAT HAVE YOU TO say for yourselves?"

Fog glared at Eddie and Noah, and she was delighted to see that they were nervous about the punishment that might be approaching. Eddie was abashed too and she was glad to observe it. Previously, he'd been so obedient, but with his developing the habits of a miscreant, she blamed Noah St. James.

He'd never had any supervision and he was accustomed to being on his own. He was like a wild wolf pup who'd been brought inside to reside among humans.

They were in the parlor at the River House, and for hours, she'd been pacing, fuming, and waiting for them to return from their furtive jaunt.

She was seated on a chair by the fire and they were standing in front of her. They were troublemakers who'd been up to no good and who probably deserved a whipping. Lucky for them, she'd never struck a person in her life.

She'd reached London to find that Lord Grenville was off attending his wedding rehearsal and supper, while Noah and Eddie were missing and none of the servants had had any clue as to where they might be. Since Rose had quit and vanished, no one had been appointed to watch Noah, and the Earl certainly couldn't be bothered. He'd proved, over and over again, that he was completely worthless for any useful purpose.

After Eddie had disappeared from her mother's, she'd written to the Earl, but initially, she hadn't received a response. Eventually, as she'd been frantically scouring the countryside, figuring Eddie was dead in a ditch, Grenville had posted a letter to tell her that Eddie had shown up in town and Noah had been hiding him.

Neither boy had replied to her opening query and she said, "Well? I'm eager to hear an explanation. Eddie, let's start with you. You ran away without a word. Have you any idea

how upset I've been? We thought you'd died in an accident!"

"I'm sorry, Mother." He peered down at the floor in shame. "I didn't mean to worry you, but I couldn't remain there. Not when Grandmother was so mean to me."

"He's not going back!" Noah vehemently stated. "Lord Grenville promised he doesn't have to. He promised us! We have to be sure Eddie is safe."

Fog tsked with offense. As if Eddie was *safe* when he traipsed off with Noah! They had no adult to rein them in and she wondered if the Earl would like her to step into the role. She'd left her mother's forever, so if Grenville didn't invite her to tarry, she couldn't imagine where she'd end up.

She'd known better than to scurry home in the first place, but she'd just been so angry with Rose for her ridiculous affair. Yet if Fog had learned one thing over the years, it was that she was awful at taking care of herself, and she needed Rose to do it.

Her mother was a vicious shrew who'd constantly belittled and berated her, and about the time Fog had had enough and had been packing her bags, the letter from Lord Grenville had arrived. He was a kind man, usually, and he'd rescued her once. If she threw herself on his mercy, would he be kind again?

"We won't return to my mother's," she told them and they relaxed. "And Eddie, I apologize for making you move there with me. I apologize for how my mother treated you."

"Are we staying with Lord Grenville then?" Eddie asked.

"If he'll permit it."

Noah said, "He already agreed about Eddie. I'll talk to him about you. I can convince him."

"It's obvious you two require supervision. I'll bravely attempt it, but I swear—if you continue with your mischief—I'll have to impose some severe consequences."

She frowned at Noah, visually apprising him that she blamed him for Eddie's spurt of lying and deceiving, but he was a tough, hard child. He simply stared back, totally unaffected by her displeasure.

He nudged Eddie and they exchanged a significant glance that hinted at secrets she'd never pry out of them. Then Eddie straightened and said, "Mother, we were in the city today."

"Eddie! The two of you alone? I would never have allowed it. You're ten now and you're aware that I expect you to make good choices."

"We were looking for Rose. She was renting a room at a boarding house and we went to see her."

The servants had indiscreetly chatted with her about how Rose and the Earl had quarreled over his engagement, how she'd been so devastated that she'd fled, how he'd searched for her, but to no avail. With him being at his wedding rehearsal, it was probably fortunate that she hadn't been located.

Fog's only surprise was how quickly he was marching toward the altar. But then, why wait? After he spoke the vows, he'd be very rich.

"Was she there?" she asked Eddie. "Has she forgiven us for abandoning her?"

"She wasn't there and you won't believe what happened."

Fog blanched. "Is she all right? Is she hurt? Is she ill? What's wrong?"

They appeared stricken and Eddie's cheeks flamed bright red. He couldn't spit it out so Noah blurted it out for him. "She was seduced by a scoundrel and she's in the family way!"

"Who told you that?" Fog said.

"It was one of the young ladies who lived there too. The maids were gossiping about her. Rose doesn't have a husband so the owner kicked her out. She's in a home for unwed mothers!"

Eddie chimed in with, "We have to help her! We can't leave her to fend for herself."

"No, we can't."

Fog sighed, hating that such a dilemma had arisen the minute she'd staggered in and was hoping to beg Lord Grenville for shelter. Noah and Eddie had heard that Rose was seduced by a *scoundrel*, but evidently, it hadn't occurred to them that Lord Grenville was the culprit.

They liked him very much, and while Noah tried to conceal his devotion, he was especially fond. What would their opinion be when the truth was revealed? It couldn't be tamped down and Fog would ensure it circulated widely so Grenville was exposed as the libertine he was.

Due to her own ruination, she'd suffered over the last decade. She'd been maligned as a harlot, treated as a pariah, and shipped out of the country to hide her shame. In reality though, the shame had been caused by Rose's father. Why was he never castigated? Why hadn't his reputation been destroyed?

She wondered when Lord Grenville would return from reveling with his fiancée. What if he didn't return? He was so close to his wedding. What if he remained in town and misbehaved with her? What if she was already deflowered and the ceremony merely a formality? What then?

Fog wasn't about to give him an extra second to bind himself too tightly. He had obligations to handle before he became a husband. He owed Rose a few things and Fog wouldn't permit him to shuck them off.

He had to be informed about Rose's predicament and his fiancée deserved to be informed too. With him recently siring a bastard, why would the woman proceed? Fog intended to throw numerous wrenches into Grenville's path, then his betrothed could decide whether Grenville was worth the bother. And Fog was thinking he *wasn't* worth it.

"Noah," she said, "where is your father's rehearsal being held?"

"The wedding is to be at Mrs. Adair's home, so it's taking place there, with supper served afterward. She's Miss Adair's mother."

“Do you know where her residence is located? Or do the servants know?”

“We all know.”

She nodded to the door. “Would you find a footman and have them harness a carriage for me? I have to speak with Lord Grenville immediately.”



“WHY ARE YOU HERE?”

Nathaniel glared at Christopher, the brother-in-law who refused to vanish as Nathaniel kept demanding.

Christopher grinned. “You need a best man for the ceremony and you’re a social leper with no friends, so Mrs. Adair asked me to step up.”

On learning that Ambrosia had interfered again, Nathaniel’s blood boiled. It wasn’t so much that Christopher had barged in. Nathaniel was beginning to accept—if he expected to have a relationship with Janet—he’d have to be cordial with Christopher. But he was incensed by Ambrosia’s brazenness.

He’d just had a conversation with her about this very issue, and clearly, she hadn’t heeded him. What were his options with regard to her? Should he fight with her? Should he have a word with Annette and order her to control her mother? He didn’t suppose that was possible. Ambrosia had always run Annette’s life and Annette would have no idea how to put her foot down.

They were in Ambrosia’s ornate parlor, sitting on sofas and watching her flit about and explain various details to the servants and her vicar. Annette was off in a corner, observing Ambrosia, as if absorbing her mannerisms so, in the future as his wife, she could act exactly like the irksome harpy.

Janet was seated next to Christopher, and Nathaniel leaned toward her and said, “I don’t want your husband at my wedding. You shouldn’t have brought him to London.”

“We’re ignoring you,” she replied. “Haven’t we clarified this? You’re a bit mad so why would we heed you on any topic?”

Ambrosia clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention. “Let’s start, shall we? Nathaniel and Christopher, come up to the fireplace and stand here. Annette, you and Marie stand there.”

Marie was Annette’s cousin, a woman Nathaniel didn’t know and wasn’t interested in befriending. She’d been invited—years earlier—to participate in Annette’s wedding, whenever it occurred. It meant Annette would have a maid-of-honor so Nathaniel needed a best man to balance out the group. Ambrosia had selected one, without consulting him.

How was he to deal with such an exasperating situation? He realized he could be cranky and cantankerous, but he was being manipulated and pushed in directions he didn't care to travel. Suddenly, his cravat felt too tight and he couldn't catch his breath. A very loud question was ringing in his mind: *Why am I doing this?*

He wasn't really eager to marry. He'd simply like to move to Grenville Downs and live quietly with Noah. His goal was to heal and recuperate, but it was taking forever. Ambrosia's nonsense exacerbated his low condition, and it left him ambivalent about having Annette as his bride.

He suspected she'd be a huge drain on his temper and energy. They were strangers and she was very young. She would never comprehend what drove him so they'd quarrel constantly. They'd have separate residences and rarely see each other. Could he bear that kind of existence?

The impression that he was suffocating was growing by leaps and bounds. He rose to his feet, and Ambrosia smiled, thinking he was about to walk over to the vicar like a trained puppy. Instead, her smile turned to a frown when he said, "Could I talk to you for a minute?"

He exited out to the foyer. The other people in the room were staring as if he were a lunatic, their eyes like daggers in his back. No doubt they were worried about Annette. They'd commiserate and compare rumors. They'd cluck their tongues and spread stories about how recalcitrant and difficult he could be.

He wasn't concerned about their gossip, and despite what they all imagined, he wasn't mad. He was tired and he was yearning to be anywhere else but where he was.

He whipped around, relieved that Ambrosia had followed him. Annette had too. And Janet. He barked at his sister, "You're not welcome for this discussion."

"I should listen in," she had the gall to retort. "I figure you're about to go off half-cocked and I'll prevent an explosion."

"Leave us, Janet!" His tone was so curt and condescending that she slunk away.

Once the air settled, Ambrosia inquired, "What is it, Nathaniel? We have to finish the rehearsal. The vicar has another engagement this evening and he can't be late for it."

Without preamble, he said, "You asked Christopher Blake to be my best man."

She dithered over a response, then claimed, "You hadn't picked anyone so I conferred with your sister about it. She suggested Mr. Blake."

Ambrosia brimmed with innocence and her audacity was too infuriating to abide. "Christopher Blake was captured with me in Spain."

"I'm aware of that fact. I dare say every person in the kingdom is aware of it."

"He abandoned me. He never attempted to rescue me or arrange to have me ransomed too. He simply trotted home and never considered my plight again. Then he married my sister—very much against my wishes."

"Oh."

“You’ve involved yourself in my private business again, which you seem to do repeatedly. Didn’t we just recently have a conversation about this?”

“I’m working to make your life easier. I recognize that you’re weary.” She gestured to her daughter. “Annette and I are just trying to help.”

He vigorously shook his head. “No, you’re butting in when I’ve specifically warned you to butt *out*.”

Annette stepped in so she was partially blocking Ambrosia from his caustic gaze. “I’m sorry we’ve distressed you, Nathaniel. If you don’t want Mr. Blake to stand up with you, I’m fine with that.”

She flashed a glare at Ambrosia that advised her to be silent, and Ambrosia tepidly grumbled, “I guess I’m fine with it too.”

He was feeling particularly aggrieved, so merely to antagonize them, he said, “I’ve decided to have my son stand up with me.”

They scowled, as if they didn’t grasp who he meant, then Annette squealed with outrage. “No, no, no! Absolutely not! We are not having your bastard son at our wedding.”

Ambrosia studied him disdainfully, as if he was an alien creature that had climbed out of a boggy marsh. Her mind was whirring, as she struggled to devise a suitable comment, but of course, any remark would be an insult to Noah, and Nathaniel would be even more annoyed. He wouldn’t be bossed by them!

Ambrosia hadn’t chimed in and Annette wailed, “Mother! Say something! Tell him he can’t do it! Tell him it’s impossible!”

As Ambrosia debated what argument to raise, someone knocked on the front door. The butler had been hovering, eavesdropping, and he went to answer.

They glanced over to discover who had arrived, and when Nathaniel saw it was Fog, he was totally bewildered. She was so out of place that, for a moment, he was certain he was hallucinating.

“I am Agnes Fogbottom and I have to speak with—” She started to apprise the butler of her purpose, but when she noted Nathaniel across the foyer, she cut off her sentence. “There you are, Grenville. We have to talk.”

“I’m a little busy, Fog,” he told her. “Can’t it wait?”

“No, it can’t.”

“Why are you in London?”

“I’ve come to live with you again. If you’ll have me.”

The request sounded incredibly risqué and Annette hadn’t ever met Fog. She squealed even louder.

“You live with him?” she shrieked. “You accost him in my home? Have you no shame?” She spun to Ambrosia and said, “I’ve put up with enough, haven’t I, Mother? The man is

deranged. Everyone knows he is and he constantly proves them correct. I can't marry him! I just can't!"

She burst into tears, raced over to the stairs, and dashed up them. In the blink of an eye, she vanished to the upper floors.

Ambrosia's temper flared and she fumed, "Are you happy now, Grenville? Have you caused sufficient chaos for Annette?"

He ignored her and said to Fog, "What is it you need, Fog? And can you be brief? I'm in the middle of a situation and I have to deal with it."

"Eddie and Noah mentioned that you're marrying in two days."

He sighed with regret. "Yes, I suppose I am, if my fiancée is still willing."

"I'm stopping this farce," Fog said.

Ambrosia bristled. "Who are you, ma'am? Might I point out that you have unbelievable gall to interrupt our proceedings!"

Fog ignored her too and said to Nathaniel, "You can't wed Miss Adair."

"Why not?" he and Ambrosia asked together.

"You have to marry Rosalie. You see, Grenville, you're about to be a father, and after how relentlessly you worked to seduce her, she shouldn't have to birth a bastard. It's a rather contentious issue for me and I won't permit you to behave like this."

Ambrosia looked at Fog, looked at him, then she said, "You ruined the governess? She's having your baby?"

Nathaniel was too stunned to reply so Fog replied for him. "Yes, he's about to be a father, while he's preparing to march to the altar with your daughter. He's an unrepentant scoundrel, and if I were you, I wouldn't let him near her."

"You ruined the governess?" Ambrosia repeated, her horror blatant and humiliating to witness.

"Yes, sorry," he said, even though he wasn't.

"I thought I'd rid us of the pesky nuisance!"

"She's turned up again," Fog told her, "despite any machinations you may have implemented." Then she glowered at Nathaniel. "We're leaving so you should say goodbye to your guests."

"I will. Give me a minute."

Nathaniel realized that he could finally catch his breath. The air was fresher, his burdens lighter. He hadn't assumed he could sire another child. He hadn't since Noah, but Rose was increasing? What a wonderful surprise! What joyous news! She was in trouble? She needed him?

He would have headed into the parlor to inform people of the circumstances, but Ambrosia grabbed his arm and dragged him to a halt.

“Don’t you dare go in there!” she seethed. “Don’t utter a word about this! You’re marrying Annette on Saturday! I won’t accept any other conclusion.”

“I’d like to oblige you,” he said, “but I simply can’t. I love Rose and I have to help her.”

“You miserable, duplicitous ass!” Ambrosia spat and she slapped him just as hard as she could.

It was the second time in his despicable life that he’d been slapped by a female. Once by Rose and once by Ambrosia. He was a cad and a bounder; he couldn’t deny it.

Ambrosia whirled away and ran up the stairs after Annette. He and Fog watched until she disappeared, then Fog stoically said, “You have a real *way* with women, don’t you, Grenville?”

“You haven’t exactly caught me when I’m at my best.”

“That has to be the understatement of the century.” She scoffed with disgust. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, I’m ready. Take me to Rose as fast as you can.”

Chapter

24

ROSE HAD BEEN STROLLING along the rocky beach behind the unwed mother's home. She was gazing at the scenery and letting the fresh air calm her. It was a blustery autumn day, with winter just around the corner. The tide was fierce so huge waves were crashing on the shore.

Angry clouds whipped by and seagulls cawed in the sky. There were sea cliffs to her left, and off in the distance, she could see a portion of Baywick village nestled on the bay. She supposed, in the summer, it was sunny, colorful, and beautiful, but at the moment, it was bleak and dreary so it matched her low mood perfectly.

She'd forgotten how magnificent the ocean was. Next to it, she was small and insignificant and it helped to put her petty problems in the proper perspective. She wasn't the first female to birth a child out of wedlock and she wouldn't be the last. She'd muddle through her current catastrophe and come out of it stronger and tougher.

The temperature was frigid, the wind ferocious, and she shivered and pulled her cloak more tightly around her body. It was probably time to head inside, but she was in no hurry. The facility's manager, Katherine Hastings, had created a safe, comfortable abode for the women who arrived in such desperate conditions, and Rose was fortunate to have found it.

Katherine, and the rest of her staff, worked hard to make their guests feel welcome and ordinary, as if they were facing no terrible dilemma. Rose greatly appreciated their kindness and support, but she was livid and unhappy, and she doubted she'd ever return to a more stable, rational spot.

Katherine had meetings every morning, where the residents could rage and weep together. She patiently claimed they'd survive their situations, that they'd regroup and start over, but Rose was having trouble convincing herself that she'd ever be fine.

She yanked herself away from the water and walked into the beach grass and toward the house. She was approaching the rear door when Katherine stepped outside. She'd grabbed a shawl and was wrapping it over her shoulders as she frantically gestured for Rose to rush over.

She increased her pace through the desolate garden. As she neared Katherine, and her expression became clearer, Rose suffered a spurt of alarm.

“What is it?” she asked. “Has something happened?”

“I'm not certain what your opinion will be about this development, but you have a visitor.”

“I have a visitor? That's impossible. I haven't told anyone where I am.”

Katherine exhaled a heavy breath. “It's Lord Grenville. He'd like to speak with you.”

They were the strangest words Rose had ever heard and she blanched with astonishment. “Lord Grenville is here? Nathaniel St. James? Is that who you mean?”

“Yes. He's in the drawing room.”

“How did he find me? Why would he have searched?”

“I have no idea. When he announced who he was and demanded to talk to you, I was so surprised that I admitted you were staying with me. I should have denied any knowledge until I’d conferred with you. I apologize.”

“I can’t talk to him!” Rose said. “It’s an insane request. What could he want?”

“Again, I have no idea, but I don’t think he’ll depart until he’s had a chance to share whatever is on his mind.”

“There’s not a single topic I’d like to discuss with him.”

“Are you sure about that?” Katherine’s focus dipped to Rose’s stomach, where her enlarging girth was definitely visible. “Perhaps you can twist his arm and persuade him to give you some money for later on.”

Rose’s pulse was pounding at such a furious rate that she was amazed her heart didn’t simply burst out of her chest. She was awash with questions and accusations, and her emotions were careening in a hundred different directions: He’d come for her and she was so glad! She hated him and couldn’t believe his gall! She needed him to save her, to rescue her! She would like to load a pistol and shoot him right between the eyes.

She trusted Katherine’s judgement and she asked, “What would you advise? I’m too bewildered to make any decisions.”

“It’s a very rare occasion when a scoundrel shows up on my stoop so I’m intrigued by his daring. Why not take a minute and listen to what he’s dying to tell you.”

“I’m afraid to be alone with him.”

Katherine frowned. “Why? He was never violent with you, was he?”

“No, it’s not that. He just has the slyest methods for coercing me. I’m scared he’ll pressure me into engaging in conduct I

shouldn't allow."

"Well, my drawing room is a very boring place so no awful event will transpire there. If you'd like, I could sit in on the conversation; I could be a barrier to prevent him from behaving like an ass."

"I'm not worried about bad behavior by him. I'm worried about wonderful behavior. He can be so charming and I can never resist him when he is."

"If you don't discover why he's here, you'll always regret it."

"True."

"And he's not the sort of fellow who will slither away until he's fawned over and obeyed."

Rose sighed. "True again."

"You're not a coward. Let's get this over with. The sooner he's finished harassing you, the sooner he'll go away and you'll be able to calm down."

Rose nodded and they dashed inside. There was a hook on the wall, and she hung her cloak and hat on it, then she spun to Katherine and asked, "How do I look? This will sound ridiculous, and I recognize it's a petty vanity, but when he sees me, I want him to remember what he threw away. I couldn't bear to appear rundown or bereft."

Katherine snorted with amusement. "You look fabulous. A tad windblown, but your cheeks are rosy and you're glowing with good health. You're a lucky female who oozes beauty when she's in the family way. You'll have him mourning the loss of you forever."

Rose chuckled, but miserably, then they marched down the hall. Much too quickly, they were at the front of the house and at the drawing room. The doors were shut to keep in the heat and they paused so Rose could muster her fortitude.

“Are you ready?” Katherine whispered.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

Katherine went in first. For a moment, she blocked Rose, as she said to Grenville, “I’ve brought Rose, Lord Grenville. She’s willing to meet with you, but I will be eavesdropping. If there are raised voices or quarreling, I will interrupt and ask you to leave. I have several burly footmen on the premises who would be delighted to escort you out, so mind your manners.”

Katherine employed no burly footmen, so it was a bald-faced lie, but she told it with enormous aplomb so he’d assume he should beware.

From in the room, he said, “I shall be the most polite guest you’ve ever permitted across your threshold.”

She snickered skeptically and stepped out, and she winked at Rose, then gestured for her to enter. Rose muttered a hasty prayer for courage, then she walked in. Katherine closed the door behind her. She wasn’t locked in, so she wasn’t trapped, but she definitely felt as if she couldn’t escape.

He was seated on a chair by the fire, and he’d been served refreshments so he was sipping on a glass of wine. When he saw her, he stood and bowed slightly, clicking his heels as if it was a formal appointment. Then he grinned his devil’s grin, as if he’d played a great trick on her and she should be impressed by it.

She’d always been knocked sideways by that grin. He was just so handsome, and she’d never had the strength to deflect his allure. She warned herself to buck up, to be careful, to watch out. If she wasn’t cautious, before he was through with her, she’d be completely destroyed again.

She’d been at the facility for two months, and she’d struggled valiantly to forgive herself, to let the past fade away. She was a

person who obsessed and fretted though, so it was difficult to forget and move on, but she'd been making progress.

Now, in a short instant, he'd very likely sent her scurrying back to square one.

"Hello, Rose," he said. "Have I surprised you?"

"Lord Grenville." Her tone was cool, as if they were strangers. Weren't they strangers? She'd once presumed she knew him better than anyone ever had, but it had been a charade.

"That's a very tepid greeting," he teasingly said. "I could have sworn you'd be excited to finally have me stagger in."

"I'm not excited, so you'll have to pardon me, but I won't gush."

"Can't you at least admit to being curious about my arrival?"

"I'm not curious so much as astonished."

"You didn't think I'd search?"

"No, I didn't."

"Oh, ye of little faith. Guess how I found you."

"I won't guess, for I won't listen to you bloviating about subjects that are none of my concern. Miss Hastings informed me that you would like to talk to me, and I've agreed that I will, but please be brief. I have no desire to spend a second longer than necessary in your company."

He laughed, as if she was hilarious. "You seem angry with me."

"I'm not angry. I'd just like you to get on with it, then go away."

"Really? You'd like me to abandon you here? Isn't this a home for unwed mothers? It means this is a very scandalous place. For the prior seven years, haven't you been trying to avoid scandal? You can't be eager to embrace one; you can't have changed that much."

She didn't reply and she had no comments to share. It was torture to be sequestered with him. She'd loved him so dearly, and there hadn't been a sufficient interval for her roiling emotions to wane.

With his being so hale and dashing, it hurt to look at him. He was bundled for the weather, in wool sweater and trousers, wool-lined boots on his feet. She couldn't imagine the distance he'd traveled that day, but his cheeks were reddened from the cold, his hair windblown and messy. He had a kerchief tied around his throat, and it gave him a jaunty air, as if he were a pirate or bandit.

In comparison, she felt rotund and slovenly, her hair mussed by the wind too, her cheeks and lips chapped. Her tummy was bigger than it had been, and the skirt of her gown was too tight. Very soon, her dresses wouldn't fit anymore and she didn't have funds to buy new.

Katherine collected castoff garments from the church basket in the village, and her maids added fabric to widen them, so Rose would have items to use, but they'd be pauper's clothes. That was how far she'd fallen off the normal path.

He motioned to his chair. "Won't you sit?"

"I'd rather stand."

"You're being ridiculous and I insist you oblige me."

He stared her down, and as usual, she couldn't deny him even that small request. "Fine, I'll sit, but I'll do it because I choose to. Not because you demanded it."

She came over and eased onto the chair, and thankfully, he stepped away so he wasn't loomed over her. If he'd hovered too close, she'd have leapt up and run out of the room. As it was, he was over by the hearth, but she perceived his proximity like the prick of a sharp knife.

A fraught silence festered, but she wasn't about to break it. *He* was determined to chat so he could figure out how to begin. Ultimately, he pointed to her stomach, indicating her growing baby.

“Were you ever planning to tell me?” he asked.

“I realized you had to be apprised, and I stopped by to notify you, but your fiancée and her mother were visiting. It wasn't an opportune moment to reveal my predicament.”

He smirked. “What about later, after they left?”

“Why would I have told you? How could it have mattered?”

He pretended to ponder the question, then he smirked again. “How about the fact that I'm an earl and you might be carrying the next Lord Grenville?”

“You would have had to wed me in order for me to furnish you with a little earl, but you were very clear that I wasn't exactly bridal material for your grand self.”

“I was very pompous about it, wasn't I?”

“Yes, you were. Is that what you needed me to confess? Is that what you were seeking by journeying all this way? Or are you hoping to torment me? To scold me? To humiliate me? What is it you want?”

“It's obvious you're miserable in my presence.” He chortled, as if he thought her woe was funny.

“Are you about to beg for forgiveness? Is that it? If so, I shall declare you forgiven. Is that what it will take to make you leave?”

He rolled his eyes, as if she was a nuisance, then he strolled to a sideboard where there was a wine decanter on a tray. He refilled his glass, then he returned and sat in the chair across from her. He slouched down, his long legs extended, his manner casual and

relaxed, as if he didn't have a care in the world. And he didn't really. She was the one who was unduly burdened.

"In case you were wondering," he said, "Janet married Christopher."

"I wasn't wondering."

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "You warned me not to chase after her, and I detest how you're always correct about every paltry issue."

"Yes, I'm a veritable genius," she facetiously mumbled.

"By the time I reached her, they were already husband and wife. They'd obtained a Special License to accomplish it immediately so it was a wasted trip."

"Of course it was, but you're so stubborn. You never listen to anyone."

"No, I don't and I'm sure you'll agree that my depleted brain isn't functioning as it should. I repeatedly engage in idiotic conduct."

"I have no opinion about you or your conduct. You're none of my business."

He tsked, as if it was a foolish remark. "You still haven't asked me how I learned you were here."

"I haven't inquired because your answer is irrelevant to me."

Again, he ignored her and blathered on. "Eddie ran away from his grandmother's home. I guess Fog's mother is a vicious shrew."

Rose scowled. "She is a shrew, but what's this about Eddie? Is he all right?"

"He's fine. He snuck to London on his own! Can you believe it?"

She gasped with dismay. “No, I can’t believe it. Why would he?”

“The conditions with Fog’s mother were very dire so he fled, and Noah hid him in the manor. For two whole weeks! Fog was terrified he was dead in a ditch, and Noah was so sly at concealing him that I didn’t realize we had a secret guest.”

“Eddie never would have acted like that prior to his meeting Noah. Evidently, your son is as much of a menace as you are.”

Grenville preened, accepting the insult as a compliment. “Yes, he is very much like me, isn’t he? Anyway, my wedding was two days away and Eddie was—”

She blanched. “You’re a husband, yet you traveled to see me? What is wrong with you?”

“Past tense, Rose. My wedding *was* approaching.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means poor Annette Adair finally had enough of me and she’s cried off. The cancellation will be a huge mess and I’m betting her mother will sue me for breach of promise. There will be months of gossip and legal wrangling, but I’m still a bachelor. What do you think of that?”

His expression was so cunning and so dangerous to her equilibrium that she had to glance away. “I don’t think anything of it. If you’re married or not married, how can it concern me?”

“How can it indeed?” he murmured, then he kept on. “When you bolted in a snit from the River House and, by the way, you swore you wouldn’t, Noah followed you. He didn’t tell *me* though. He left me to hunt for you like a blind dunce.”

“Noah followed me? He’s such a devious fiend.”

“Yes, he is, but before we address his role in this debacle, may I state for the record that you are a liar?”

“I told you from the very first that I constantly lie. I wasn’t joking, and when I vanished on you—after I insisted I wouldn’t—I will confess to being less than honest about my intentions. I wasn’t about to tarry and watch you march to the altar with your beautiful heiress.”

“I searched for you everywhere.”

At the admission, her pulse raced. Could it be true? No! He was so full of himself. “Now who’s lying?” she asked. “You would never have searched for me.”

“Oh, but I did, Miss Clarkson, and you may not doubt me. You are the dissembler and you boast about it. I, on the other hand, am an earl so my veracity can never be questioned.”

She scoffed with disgust. “You never spew any comments that aren’t laced with nonsense and I’m still waiting for you to get to the point.”

“The point is that I had convinced myself that I needed to wed for money.”

“Is that why you’re here? Will you torment me again by forcing me to endure a few more of your preposterous clarifications? I *don’t* care about your justifications and it’s outrageous of you to assume I’m interested.”

She stood, as if she’d stomp out, but he jumped up too and blocked her exit. They engaged in a paltry standoff, then he nodded imperiously to her chair. “Sit, Rose! I’m not finished.”

She studied him, hating how confident he seemed, how in control, while she felt beleaguered and put-upon and was about a second away from weeping. It was torture to be shut away with him.

He had such a large, vibrant personality and it was simply a fact that he took up all the space in any room he entered.

She grumbled with frustration, then eased down. Katherine had been correct that he wouldn't depart until he'd had his say, and clearly, he still had numerous daggers to throw in her direction.

“Noah and Eddie tracked you to Mrs. Drury's boarding house in London. They talked to one of the tenants about you, then they told Fog what they'd learned. Have I mentioned that Fog gave up on her mother and she's living with me again?”

“No, you didn't mention it,” she glumly replied.

Her family, which had consisted of Eddie and Fog, had abandoned her, and now, they were cozily ensconced in Grenville's home—where Rose had once yearned to be. Rose was alone, but Eddie and Fog had glommed onto him as their lifeline. After how he'd treated Rose, it was offensive that Fog would seek him out and beg shelter.

“Since I've tossed away my heiress—” he said.

She interrupted to stop him. “Why exactly have you split with her? I'm still confused.”

“Didn't I explain? Whenever I was with her, I would feel as if I was suffocating. It gradually dawned on me that it would be deranged to shackle myself to her. I simply couldn't.”

She snickered with derision. “Apparently, you relinquished a fortune for what sounds like no valid purpose. I've always accused you of being insane and you've proved me right.”

“It was a mad decision; I can't deny it. I have to regroup and figure out how to carry on like a common man.”

“I'm sure it will be a great trial for you to be ordinary,” she sarcastically said.

“Yes, it will be, but I’ve had to accept that there are things I need more than money.”

“What things?” she asked, when she shouldn’t have. She was being drawn in by his storytelling. She was anxious to hear what he was thinking, what he was planning. If she didn’t watch out, she’d quickly be hanging on his every word.

“I’m moving to Grenville Downs,” he said, “and I’ll stay there—with Noah, Fog, and Eddie. The four of us will be a family. It’s too bad you won’t be there with us.”

The news was like a knife to the heart. She’d previously presumed *she* would move to Grenville Downs with him, that she would be his wife and they would live happily ever after. It crushed her to realize that her prior dream was about to come true, but she wouldn’t experience it with him.

“I’m certain it will be wonderful for all of you,” she curtly stated.

“I wouldn’t agree on the *wonderful* part. We’ll be missing a very important piece.”

“What will be missing?”

“You don’t know? Seriously? It’s *you*, you ridiculous ninny.”

He’d confounded her and she sputtered, “It’s *me* ... what? What are you talking about?”

“We can’t go without you. You have to join us. I’m completely incapable of managing my chaotic world and you are so good at it.”

“You’re rewriting our brief history. I’m incompetent at every task I’ve ever attempted and we couldn’t abide each other. We argued like cats and dogs.”

“Yes, but it was because I was acting like a lunatic. And I concur that you’re incompetent at every endeavor—except in one

very vital area.”

He'd been hovered over by the sideboard, leaned against it, and as they'd verbally sparred, he'd begun sidling toward her. As he neared, there was a wicked gleam in his eye, one that alarmed her, one that annoyed her, one that tantalized her.

“What vital area?” she asked. “You're babbling in such dizzying circles that I can't unravel what you're telling me.”

“Honestly, Rose, you're blind and deaf today. Please pay attention.”

Suddenly, he was directly in front of her, and to her stunned surprise, he dropped to a knee. There was only one reason a man put himself in that position and it was to propose marriage. Could that be it? What else could it be?

He didn't want to marry her! From the outset, he'd been blunt that she could be his mistress but never his wife. She started to tremble, and her shaking increased until she was quaking so violently that she was amazed she didn't slide to the rug in a shocked heap.

He clasped her hand in his, and she couldn't bear to have him so close, to have him touching her. She tried to jerk away, but he tightened his grip and wouldn't release her.

“Would you get up and sit on the sofa?” she inquired. “You have me so disoriented that I can't think straight.”

“I'm about to ask you a question,” was his response, “and you're going to say *yes*. You will not be angry or stubborn. You won't raise silly objections. You'll agree, then we'll have the servants pack your bags and we'll head home.”

“I'll head *home*? Where would that be? I don't belong anywhere.”

“You absurd woman. You belong—with me—at Grenville Downs. Let me take you there.”

“As your what? I won’t be your mistress. I may be ruined and disgraced. I may be on the road to birthing a child out of wedlock, but my opinion about my conduct with you hasn’t changed. I’ve debased myself quite enough and I won’t participate in further folly. You’ll never persuade me.”

“Are you finished?”

“I suppose I am.”

“Here’s my question then: Rosalie Clarkson, will you marry me?”

The air whooshed out of her lungs. “I could swear you just asked me to marry you.”

“I did so it appears you aren’t deaf after all.”

She gaped at him, and she was suffering from the strangest bewilderment, almost as if she was in the middle of a peculiar dream. It was too odd to fathom: his unexpected arrival, his chatty mood, his proposal. She glanced around, wondering if she wasn’t hallucinating, but no, he was really in front of her.

She yanked away and pushed back the chair, and she staggered over to the hearth, leaving him prostrate on the floor, like a spurned suitor.

“You don’t want to wed me,” she scolded. “You’ve never wanted that and it’s so cruel of you to tease me. Why travel all this way merely to be an ass?”

He gnawed on his cheek, studying her as if *she* was the deranged person in their pathetic duo. Then he stood and sidled toward her again.

“Can you actually presume I’m joking?” he said.

“I can’t imagine what’s driving you.”

She watched him approach and her alarm spiraled. He could be flighty and disorganized, but when he was fixated on an issue, he could be doggedly determined. There was a sternness in his expression that was downright scary.

She extended her palm, as if to ward him off. “Would you hold on a minute?”

“No.” He reached her and dropped to a knee again; he slipped his hand into hers. “I met you last summer,” he said, “and I was instantly fascinated.”

“No, you weren’t. You thought I was an exhausting nuisance.”

“You’re wrong, Rose. You were brought into my world for a reason. I was ill and floundering and you stepped in and repaired what was broken. Then I wrecked it—like the conceited wretch I can definitely be.”

“I won’t argue the point.”

“I shouldn’t be alone. I realize that now. I’m weary and muddled, and most mornings, I can barely climb out of bed. But you have the patience to deal with me and cope with my eccentric habits. You know exactly what I need and I can’t move forward unless you’re standing by my side.” He repeated, “Will you marry me? Say *yes*. Say you will.”

Tears flooded her eyes. He was spewing the sorts of comments she’d once been dying to hear, but he’d proved that she couldn’t trust him, that she shouldn’t believe him. What had changed? Nothing.

She’d been trying to regroup, to get over him, to absolve herself for her many sins, but he’d strutted in and was begging her to leap back into their relationship. It was too much too fast. It was too baffling.

“I don’t understand any of this,” she said.

“Allow me to explain a bit more clearly.” He rose to his feet, and he smiled down at her, his affection wafting out. “I love you, Rose. I will love you forever—if you’ll let me. Please be my bride. Be my wife. If you refuse me, what will I do with myself?”

“You love me?” she asked, as if testing the words, then she vigorously shook her head. “That can’t be true.”

“Tell me you love me too. I’m sure you were fond of me in the past and it can’t have completely vanished.”

Of course she still loved him. She suspected she always would, and he was promising to supply what she craved more than anything. Was he serious? Could he be sincere?

“I don’t know, Nathaniel,” she murmured, and the fact that she’d called him by his Christian name indicated that he was wearing down her defenses. But then, he was adept at manipulating her.

“What don’t you know, you crazed female?” He laid a palm on her tummy, feeling the bulge situated there. “I didn’t think I could sire another child. I assumed Noah would be the only one, but this incredible miracle has occurred. I’m about to be a father again and you can’t suppose we won’t be a family. You can’t want that.”

“I’m so confused!” she practically wailed. “I’ve hated you for months! I’ve fantasized about murdering you, then you show up without warning and you’re acting as if I should ignore the sins you committed.”

“I’m a fool and a dunce. I’m an obtuse idiot and wastrel. I admit to my many failings. I’ve suffered egregiously and survived against all odds and I can’t possibly carry on without you.”

“You’re making this so hard,” she claimed.

“It’s not hard at all. You just wed me, Rose. You should stop debating. You’re aware of how persistent I can be. I won’t quit nagging until you relent.”

She gazed up at him and a swirl of memories washed over her. She recollected the afternoon they’d met, when she’d come for her interview. He’d been ill and hungover, a broken man who’d desperately needed saving. She’d spent a few short weeks with him and she couldn’t deny that they’d been the best weeks of her life.

He’d become her precious friend and she’d become his. She’d organized him and his home. She’d nursed him back to health when he’d nearly perished from his fever. It had bonded them in what she’d regarded as a potent, abiding fashion.

Then he’d tricked and deceived her. He’d lied and betrayed her. She wished she could loathe him, but she couldn’t. He’d searched for her. He’d located her and had raced to whisk her away. He’d gotten down on bended knee and proposed.

Could she muster the courage to grab for what she’d yearned to have? Or was she a fool and a dunce too?

She inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, then said, “Yes, Nathaniel St. James. I’ll marry you, but you better mean it.”

“I mean it. I swear.”

“And it better happen as quickly as we can manage it. Today or tomorrow—if we can arrange it that fast. I won’t give you a chance to renege and scurry away.”

“I won’t scurry away so you’re being ridiculous. As usual.” He was cockily confident, as if he’d never had any doubt that he could coerce her into agreeing. “Haven’t you forgotten a very important detail?”

“No. You proposed and I consented. What more is there?”

“Well, there is the little matter of me confessing how much I love you. Can’t you imagine what I might be waiting to learn in return?”

His smile was so cunning that she snorted with disgust. “I *might* love you too, but I’m not about to humiliate myself by declaring it. You have so much apologizing to do and so many amends to make. I’ll apprise you of when you’ve earned my pardon, but you won’t receive it a minute sooner than necessary.”

“Is my bachelorhood about over?”

“Yes, and you’re an earl—as you constantly like to remind me—so there has to be a way for you to slip a ring on my finger immediately.”

“I have a fairly good idea as to how we can accomplish it.”

He leaned down and nestled his forehead at her nape. He stood there, his warm breath brushing her shoulder, sending goosebumps cascading down her arms.

“I’m so relieved I found you,” he ultimately said. “If you hadn’t been here, I can’t fathom where I would have gone next. I’m so glad you’ll be mine.”

“I’m glad too.” She ran a soothing hand through his hair. “It will be all right, Nathaniel. It will be all right forever.”

“I know.”

He straightened so he could kiss her. It was sweet and dear, and as he drew away, he grinned another devil’s grin. “Your body is different, Rose. You’ve put on some weight.”

“If I’ve gained some weight, it’s because there’s a baby growing inside me, which is all your fault.”

“What is your opinion? Are you excited about it?”

“I hope it’s a boy who is as surly, churlish, and impossible as you and Noah so he’ll overwhelm you and teach you some lessons.”

“And I hope it’s a girl with your beautiful green eyes.”

How could she not love him? How could she not forgive him?

She rested against his chest, her ear over his heart where she could hear its steady beating. It was probably why, initially, she didn’t notice the noises out in the hallway. It seemed as if a boisterous crowd had arrived.

“What on earth is causing that commotion?” she asked.

He didn’t reply, but simply chuckled as Katherine peeked in and said, “You’re being awfully quiet. You haven’t killed each other, have you?”

“No, we’re still very much alive,” Rose told her.

“You have more guests. May they join you?”

Rose was totally bewildered. “I have *more* guests?”

Katherine opened the door and the people Rose cherished most in the world streamed in: Fog, Eddie, Noah. Janet and Christopher Blake were with them too. The whole group must have traveled with Nathaniel from London. They’d come with him to find her, to rescue her. It was such a marvelous notion that she burst into tears. She couldn’t help it.

Nathaniel produced a kerchief from somewhere and dabbed at them.

“Don’t you dare cry,” he murmured and he kissed her again, with all of them watching.

Fog bustled over, and she pulled Rose into a tight hug, saying, “I leave you alone for a month or two and you land yourself in so much trouble!” She eased away and studied Rose, then she added, “You look good. In fact, you appear to be glowing.”

The others approached. Eddie hugged her, then to her great surprise, Noah hugged her too.

“I’ve been so worried about you,” he said.

“I’m fine, Noah, and with you being here, I’ve never been better.”

He gazed up at his father and said, “Are we having a wedding or not? Did you propose? Did she accept?”

Nathaniel raised a brow, and he paused for an eternity, letting the tension build, letting them wonder, then he said, “Yes, I proposed, and yes, she accepted. We’re having a wedding.”

“When?” Noah sounded impatient. He retrieved a box from his coat and showed it to her. “We have a ring and everything. We’re ready if you are.”

Rose’s jaw dropped. “You brought me a ring?”

“Yes, and a Special License,” Noah said. “Nathaniel applied for it before we left town.”

Mr. Blake glanced at her rounded tummy. “If we can scrounge up a vicar, we can proceed this afternoon. From how events have unfolded, it’s obvious we shouldn’t delay.”

Nathaniel grinned at her. “Well, Rose? You insisted on a quick ceremony. Are you prepared to hold it at once?”

“I can’t believe you managed all of this,” she said, stunned by his focus and planning.

“I figured you’d be stubborn and I couldn’t furnish you with any reasons to avoid the inevitable.”

She cried even harder. “I’m so happy! I’m honored that all of you are with me. I’m flattered that you cared about me so much.”

Katherine was hovering by the door, observing the tender scene, but trying not to butt into the private moment either. Nathaniel

peered over at her and inquired, “Are you acquainted with a local vicar, Miss Hastings? Is there a preacher who might be inclined to perform a hasty wedding?”

“I know a very nice fellow,” she said, “and he’s supposed to arrive shortly for a prayer session with some of my guests. I’m sure he’d be delighted to pitch in. Shall I ask everyone in the house to come down? Shall we make it a party?”

Rose smiled at Katherine, then at her small family. For years, she’d told herself she was unlucky, that Fate was torturing her, that nothing ever worked out as she was hoping, but she’d been wrong about that. She was the luckiest woman in the kingdom and her life was absolutely perfect. It would be perfect from this point on.

She snuggled herself to Nathaniel’s side and said, “Yes, please invite the entire house. Let’s have a party to celebrate.”

THE END

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About the Author



CHERYL HOLT IS A *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and Amazon “Top 100” bestselling author who has published over sixty novels.

She’s also a lawyer and mom, and at age forty, with two babies at home, she started a new career as a commercial fiction writer. She’d hoped to be a suspense novelist, but couldn’t sell any of her manuscripts, so she ended up taking a detour into romance where she was stunned to discover that she has a knack for writing some of the world’s greatest love stories.

Her books have been released to wide acclaim, and she has won or been nominated for many national awards. She is considered to be one of the masters of the romance genre. For many years, she was hailed as “The Queen of Erotic Romance,” and she’s also revered as “The International Queen of Villains.” She is particularly proud to have been named “Best Storyteller of the Year” by the trade magazine *Romantic Times BOOK Reviews*.

She lives and writes in Hollywood, California, and she loves to hear from fans. Visit her website at www.cherylholt.com.