



*Chance
for
Freedom*

TESS ST. JOHN

CHANCE FOR FREEDOM

by

TESS ST. JOHN

Chances Are Series

[Second Chances](#) ~ Book 1

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CHANCE FOR FREEDOM

(Chances Are Series ~ Book 2)

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Dedication

To my brother Danny who has dedicated so much time and talent to providing the people of Tanzania with clean drinking water. I pray one day everyone will enjoy what we so take for granted.

I would also like to dedicate this book to every man, woman, and child who suffered the cruelty of slavery, and all the men who were part of The West Africa Squadron from 1808-1860.

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CHANCE FOR FREEDOM

Chapter One

London, England, April 1826

Malcolm Westbourne startled awake, barely catching himself before the bouncing carriage tossed him to the floor. He'd had the dream again. Settling back in the seat, he tried to relax, but even in wakefulness he couldn't escape the torturous memory.

By order of the Royal Navy, Malcolm marched across the plank between ships. His crew boarded behind him, swarming the deck and below. They searched every inch—from the captain's cabin to the bilge. "They cannot all be gone." He stormed to the deck and rushed toward the vessel's owner. "What did you do with them?"

William Fitz's onyx eyes flashed with triumph. "Do with whom?"

"Everyone aboard ship."

Slight sneer on his lips, Fitz said, "My men are all accounted for."

"Where are the others?" Malcolm yelled.

"I do not know what you are nattering about."

He lunged for the bastard's throat.

Malcolm ran a hand over his face, trying to erase the memory, the images, the utter helplessness. At the age of six and thirty, he had witnessed his share of cruelty in the world, but what happened to those innocent victims that day was unconscionable. The most infuriating part of it all was the lack of evidence to prove what Fitz had done.

Forcing his thoughts back to the present, he buttoned his naval uniform coat and took in the familiar sights and sounds while the hackney rumbled along the waking streets. In the middle of the night, he'd docked *The Greyhound* at the naval shipyard in Southampton and immediately hired this hackney to convey him to London. Per Malcolm's instructions, the coach approached the dockyard. Each time he returned to Town, the polluted air seemed worse, thicker, producing an incessant cloud overhead. The port grew wider and busier, resembling an ever-growing bee hive.

A stench waylaid him as the driver traversed the roads near the Thames. Malcolm rapped on the roof and the vehicle stopped. Jumping from the hackney, he joined the driver on the seat up front. As they drove, he scoured the harbor, looking for Fitz's vessel and found it docked in its usual spot. When was the blackguard scheduled to leave port and with what aboard his ship?

Thankfully, the farther they rode from the river, the smell abated.

When the carriage took a sharp turn onto Dover Street, Malcolm inhaled a deep, chest expanding breath. He used his family's townhouse when in London, having never purchased his own residence. He'd lived more of his adult life on the sea than land, and considered nowhere home.

Once he arrived at his family's light gray brick townhouse, Malcolm paid the driver and picked up his bag. He tried the door. Locked. Banging the polished brass knocker, he waited.

When the door opened, Barkly exclaimed, "Captain Westbourne. Good to see you, sir."

"Captain? Sir? Why so formal?" Malcolm clapped his friend's shoulder, receiving a pat in return. "I am relieved to be in London."

"For a day or two perhaps, but you will long for the sea soon. She is your mistress."

Malcolm laughed. "You know me well."

Dressed in livery, Barkly motioned to Malcolm's bag. "Allow me to help you." Ebony skin, as dark as his eyes, Barkly's tall stately frame filled the doorway. He had been fifteen when Malcolm rescued him ten years earlier. Father instantly agreed to employ Barkly when Malcolm explained the boy's plight.

"Malcolm," his brother's deep voice called.

He entered the house to find Trevor in the hallway next to the dining room. Malcolm had not expected his brother to be in London. No wonder Barkly was standing on formality.

Trevor looked most earl-like in tan trousers and a green waistcoat of the finest quality, his white cravat tied perfectly. "So glad you are home."

"What brings you to Town?" Malcolm shook his hand.

"We can discuss that later. I am sure you would enjoy a meal and a bath."

"Do I smell that bad? I could not tell with the stench of the city."

Trevor chuckled. "You do not reek. Would you join me in breaking my fast?"

Malcolm's stomach growled.

His brother grinned and gestured toward the dining room. "Breakfast awaits."

Turning to Barkly, Malcolm said, "If you would, please take my bag to my room and ask for a bath to be readied. Also..." He dug into his coat pocket and handed Barkly his compass. "I was thrown against the gunwale in a storm and the glass broke."

"I will take care of it."

"Thank you." Malcolm joined Trevor in the dining room. The scent of freshly cooked eggs and ham caused his stomach to grumble again. He savored every bite of his meal, glad to eat anything besides hardtack for breakfast. He continued to sip his tea while his brother Colin, his wife Antoinette, and Trevor's wife Margaret joined them.

Trevor looked at Malcolm over the rim of his cup. “Was your trip successful?”

“Yes.” He didn’t elaborate. His family knew he was a Royal Navy officer, and that he served in the West Africa Squadron upholding the abolition of slave trading before being assigned to stopping the abductions of English workhouse children. But he never shared the details of his job with them. He saw no reason to describe the degradation he’d witnessed or give them reason to worry over his safety.

“Will you be on land for a while?” Trevor asked.

He nodded. “I hope to be.”

“What do you plan to do while in London?” Without waiting for an answer, Trevor spoke again. “I am quite sure I can gain another ticket to the theater tonight, would you like to accompany us?”

Margaret grabbed Trevor’s hand. “Malcolm has just arrived. Must you question him to death?” Everyone knew Trevor woke in a jovial, talkative mood each morning, while his wife, decidedly, did not.

“It is all right, Margaret.” Malcolm answered more of Trevor’s questions, then asked one of his own. “Are Beatrice and Mary due to arrive soon?” With his brothers in London, he expected his sisters and their families might be on their way.

Colin and Trevor glanced at each other. “Not that we are aware of.” Colin went on to invite Malcolm to other outings they had planned for that week. His brothers, like himself and his sisters, had dark-brown eyes and brown-reddish hair. Trevor and Colin wore their hair short and it had begun to gray around the temples, while Malcolm’s reached his collar and showed no signs of aging.

Throughout the conversation, Malcolm felt an urge to confide in them about his relationship with their father, but was unsure how they would react. Malcolm’s siblings shunned Father for years before his death because of a misunderstanding, and Malcolm had pretended to do the same. But he’d actually visited Father anytime he was in port.

Eventually, he excused himself to bathe and dress in a fresh uniform. The huge bed in his chamber, made up with a royal blue counterpane that matched the drapes, looked decidedly appealing, but he was never one to lie about in bed all day.

Unless he had a female companion.

The vision of Miss Katherine Ashby, her brown eyes smiling, flashed like a miniature painting in his mind. A year had passed since he'd seen her, but he still remembered her every feature in vivid detail.

He left his room, trod down the stairs, and knocked on the study door before entering. Trevor sat behind the teakwood desk, and Colin faced him in a wingback chair. Their father had traveled extensively, to India and beyond, and this study housed everything from brass incense burners to gold-handled, razor-sharp bayonets.

“Have you seen my messages?” Malcolm asked.

Trevor pointed to the side table where a pile of missives waited. Malcolm riffled through the stack, searching for a particular letter.

Nothing from Katherine.

Damn her.

He did find a message from Miss Celeste Young though. She apologized for her absence of their scheduled night over a year ago and requested his presence again—detailing the many pleasurable activities she planned for them to share.

Why wasn't his body standing at attention? Why wasn't he excited at the prospect of bedding Celeste? He brushed off his lack of enthusiasm as weariness from his journey. Retrieving a quill and paper, he wrote a response, agreeing to meet Celeste three nights hence.

If Katherine continued to avoid him, he would do whatever it took to expunge her from his thoughts. Celeste's invitation was just the thing.

He brought the letter to the foyer table to put with the rest of the outgoing posts. Before he threw it in with the others, he

paused.

If only Katherine...

No. She'd made it perfectly clear she wanted nothing to do with him. He tossed his reply on the stack and marched back to the study. A quarter hour later, done reading his mail, he arranged them in order of importance.

"Malcolm," Colin said. "There is a matter I..." He shared a look with Trevor, the same as the glance at the dining table. "*We* need to discuss with you."

A pinch of resentment tweaked in his chest at his brothers' relationship. They were close, as brothers should be. Malcolm was much younger and never enjoyed the same comradeship with them.

He sat in the chair next to Colin.

"This is a somewhat delicate matter." Colin rose and shut the door.

"One which will need a certain..." Trevor closed the account book in front of him. "Discretion."

Malcolm nodded. "I understand."

Colin paced the Persian rug. "Ten years ago, when Antoinette and the girls traveled to Bath to visit her aunt, I became involved with a woman. Her husband was fighting in the Peninsula war at the time. We were both quite lonely."

Though he detested the fact Colin betrayed his wife, Malcolm masked his emotions. Affairs were a common occurrence among the *ton*, but he expected more from his brother.

"Six months after the affair began, the woman vanished. A year after her disappearance, I received a summons and met with her. That's when I learned she had borne a son."

"*Your* son?" A throb pounded in Malcolm's temple as he processed his brother's revelation.

"She claimed so."

"You had doubts?"

“Perhaps at first, but after I saw the boy there was no question to his fatherhood, he resembled me too much.”

“Then she didn’t bear *a* son, she bore *your* son,” Malcolm clarified.

“As you say.” Colin stopped and turned to face Malcolm. “She explained the babe resided at St. Lucien’s Orphanage in Reading.”

“The mother did not keep the child?” Malcolm’s temper spiked as if a mast was thrust into his brain. He struggled to keep his voice even. “Did you offer to raise the boy?”

“How could I? Antoinette had just moved back home and she knew nothing of the affair. Still doesn’t. When she left for Bath in such a temper, I had misgivings she would ever return. But that happened years ago. We worked out our differences. I love Antoinette.”

Malcolm stood, crossed his arms, and waited.

“As soon as I learned about the child, I visited to check on him and give a stipend. That is when I met the manager, Tomas, who assured me the boy—”

“Use his name,” Malcolm interrupted. If his brother used the child’s name, perhaps he would become more compassionate toward the boy.

“Charles. His name is Charles. I continued to meet with Tomas once a year. He promised me of the boy’s happiness living there.”

Who could believe the words of an orphanage manager? It was common knowledge many of them mistreated the children and pocketed the financial contributions. Not all of them, of course. He felt certain Katherine involved herself in every facet of her orphanage and the children at Harrington’s were treated well. And loved. She never stopped talking about them the first time he met her.

“I received a missive three days ago from Tomas explaining Charles had vanished.” Colin scratched his forehead. “And Charles is not the only one. There are others.”

“From orphanages?” A prickle of awareness swept Malcolm’s spine. He knew all too well what happened to many of the missing children in England.

“Yes.” Colin spoke quickly. “Close to a dozen children.”

And those were the ones reported. How many others had been taken that no one cared about or noticed missing? Another thought hit him. What about Katherine’s children? If any of her orphans turned up missing, she would be devastated.

“Tomas alerted a magistrate and the Bow Street Runners. Malcolm, we are here to ask for your help.”

“I will see what information I can find.” Malcolm grabbed his messages and hastened across the room, then stopped at the doorway to glare at Colin. “You must inform Antoinette. And do it soon. I do not plan to keep secrets from your wife.”

Once out of the room, he strode to the table where he’d tossed the note for Celeste, but the stack was gone. He doubted he would make his night with the beautiful courtesan. That was probably for the best; she was not the woman he desired.

His concentration must center on uncovering information about the children, but that would be a challenge since his thoughts constantly reverted to Katherine. He hoped her beloved orphans were safe.

~

Malcolm met with Admiral Tisdale and explained about the missing children. Once the admiral officially assigned him to investigate, Malcolm made his way to Bow Street—a place he called on often with the line of work he performed for the Navy—and acquired a list of the reported missing children.

From Bow Street, he headed for the Derby home in hopes Zachary was in town. The afternoon had become refreshingly dry and mildly cool. Once in Grosvenor Square, he tugged on the horse’s reins. “Endicott,” he patted the Arabian’s neck. “It does not seem like a year since we last rode together.” He

dismounted and pulled a carrot from his pocket. Endicott snatched it swiftly, making Malcolm smile.

As he made his way up the drive to the red brick home, the front door opened. Selridge smiled, the butler's mouth wide and toothy. "Captain Westbourne. Lieutenant Derby did not mention you would be visiting today."

"I did not send word. Is he in?"

"Yes, sir, in the study."

"Thank you, Selridge. I will see myself there." The extravagantly decorated hallways were familiar and comfortable. Malcolm spent many holidays with Zach and his family during his years at Eton and considered them family. Once in the royal blue opalescence of the study, he spotted Zach behind a magnificent mahogany desk, one of the few pieces of furniture the man didn't dwarf.

"Account books? Really, Zach?"

His best friend lifted his head and an easy scowl came to his face. He ran a hand through his shoulder length black hair. "My brother is worse with figures than I. If I leave it to him, he will beggar the earldom."

Malcolm grinned.

"I did not receive word you were back. Was your voyage successful?" Zach rested his quill in an ornate silver inkwell.

"Very. You should receive a report by the end of the day. If I had known I would be stopping by, I would have brought it myself instead of securing a messenger from Southampton. Which brings me to the reason I am here. I have a sensitive issue to discuss with you." There was no need to ask for Zach's discretion. He never repeated anything Malcolm told him in confidence.

Malcolm explained about Colin, Charles, and the missing orphans.

Zach's dark brows furrowed. "These new disappearances must be a result of our having successfully stopped the abduction of workhouse children."

“I agree. And since we never caught all the persons responsible, they must be preying on orphans now.”

“Bloody hell.”

Malcolm picked up a sextant on the corner of the desk, the brass instrument heavy and shiny. “My reaction as well. I was ready to resign my commission, but I can’t relinquish my post until we find out what is happening.” Malcolm went on to explain what he learned at Bow Street.

“Where do we start?” Zach asked.

He pulled a parchment from his coat pocket with the names and places where the children had last been seen. “I intend to visit Oxford first. The manager of an orphanage there will want information about these disappearances and may have news for us. While there, I plan to attend Samuel Sharp’s charity ball. Then I will continue on to meet with a gentleman who runs the orphanage where Charles was abducted. Silas Green will investigate the orphanages south of London, and I need you to visit the ones on this list and check into any disappearances.”

“Of course.”

“We must get this matter under control quickly, Zach.”

“With everything we learned the last few years, we will succeed.”

He was thankful for his part in rescuing the children and all the Africans they’d kept from the auction block. But somehow, his thoughts always returned to the ones they’d lost. The ones they could not save.

A pain stabbed his chest.

“Don’t, Malcolm.” Zach had always been able to read Malcolm’s thoughts. “We cannot continue to grieve what is lost.”

He swallowed hard knowing Zach was still struggling to get over the loss after an attack on his ship over a year ago. “You are right.” Malcolm pinched the bridge of his nose. “I have another dilemma.”

Zach squinted. "Dilemma?"

Malcolm placed the sextant down. "Do you remember when I offered you my night with Celeste Young?"

"And she never showed. Yes, my blue balls and I remember."

Malcolm fought a grin. "I received a note of apology and a rather detailed invitation of the decadent night she has planned."

"I don't need your boasting."

"I am offering the liaison to you again. We both know Celeste will be just as happy to see you at her door."

Zach sat back in his chair. "Why?"

"I depart this afternoon and am not sure how long I will be gone. The night is planned in three days' time."

"You can leave and return at any time," Zach stated the obvious.

Was Malcolm using Charles as an excuse not to bed Celeste?

No. He didn't want Celeste, he wanted Katherine. The oddest feelings about Katherine had plagued him since meeting her a year ago. He had never been so distracted by a woman.

She perplexes and exhilarates me at the same time.

"I need to set out immediately." He pulled the letter from Celeste out of his pocket and placed it on the corner of the desk. "The note explains everything and you will find her key inside."

"I hope she is there this time." Excitement glinted in Zach's eyes. Malcolm's comrade always paid close attention to Celeste, even while she was under Sir Roderick's protection.

"She promised to atone for her absence a year ago."

Zach smirked. "I do appreciate when a woman overcompensates."

“As does every man.” Malcolm laughed. “I should return to London next week.”

“Have a safe journey.”

“Have an enjoyable night with Celeste.” Malcolm started for the door. “Give her my best.”

“I believe you mean for me to give her *my* best.”

Malcolm chuckled while he strode down the corridor and out to his waiting horse. He stepped into the saddle and settled onto Endicott’s back. On the ride, he concentrated on what he needed to do before he left this evening. He should probably wait until morning to depart. However, there was a restlessness in his body that would not quite resolve. An anxiousness. He would find an inn and rest on the journey when too fatigued to go farther.

Once at his family’s townhouse, he brought the horse to the stable himself. Striding on the path leading to the house, he noticed Antoinette on the bench in front of the rose garden. She waved him over, a parasol overhead to keep the sun from her skin. Had Colin confided in her yet?

The flowers flourished in full bloom. His mother had loved roses, so Father planted every variety he could acquire. The buds set off an earthy-sweet scent. This garden was a miniature of the one at Westbourne—the family estate in Northampton.

He approached his sister-in-law, unsure what to say. He needn’t have worried. Before he made it over to her, she stood, black curls framing her heart-shaped face. “You must find Charles.”

“I will do everything possible.”

Tear tracks stained her cheeks. “He must be scared.” Suddenly, she closed the umbrella, dropped onto the bench, and covered her face with her hands.

He broke off a few dead buds from the rose bushes, giving her time to compose herself, then sat beside her.

After a moment of silence, she tilted her head and leaned it against Malcolm's shoulder. "The poor boy. I cannot believe Colin did not tell me of his existence earlier." She sniffed. "Charles is the son I never gave him."

Her words surprised him. He never heard his brother mention wanting a son. "Colin loves the girls, Antoinette."

"Oh, I know he does. That has never been in question. But I always felt somewhat lacking having not borne him a son."

"That is absurd."

"Mayhap." She lifted her head, her face red. "Colin is not solely to blame for his affair. When I left with the girls for Bath, he had every reason to believe I would not return."

What a tangled web. "But you did."

"Yes, and we worked past our differences. When he found out about the child, our reunion was tenuous. I understand why he did not explain about Charles. And to be perfectly honest, I am not sure I would have taken the news well then."

"And now?"

"I will welcome another child to raise, and the girls will be overjoyed." Two of their daughters were married and had children of their own, and Abigail, the youngest, would have her coming out next year. "I fear Charles is in danger and what might happen to him."

"I leave this afternoon. I hope to find him quickly."

"Oh, Malcolm, how lucky we are to have you in our family."

He patted her hand. "I feel the same about you, dear."

~

Oxford, England

Exhausted, her muscles protesting each move she made, Katherine Ashby rose from the dining table and followed her father into his study. Decorated in cherry wood-paneled walls, the room had one window, so even during sunny days it

remained dark. And at night, like now, shadows played on the walls from flickering flames in the fireplace like sunlight dancing through a shady tree. She felt particularly comfortable in this room, always had.

“I already miss the pitter patter of Samantha’s feet,” she said. And the child was not yet gone twelve hours. The house seemed empty without her three-year-old niece. Since Katherine’s sister died while giving birth to Samantha, this house retained little happiness except when Samantha visited. And the last few weeks, having the little girl to dote on, had been wonderful for her and her parents.

“She does brighten a room, does she not?” Father ambled to the window and fingered the heavy gold curtains. The firelight brandished his brown hair golden. “It is good to see Drake happy. Although he will be much more settled once the baby is born.”

Her sister’s widower, Viscount Drake, spent the first two years following her sister’s death grieving, until he fell in love with Lady Emma Easton a year ago. They quickly married and at this very moment were on their way to London to await the birth of their first child.

Katherine sighed. She and her father had not spoken of her mother’s absence from the evening meal. Mother’s melancholy mood often kept her confined to her room, and Katherine wasn’t sure how her father tolerated it. Her patience had long run out on the woman’s fickle moods. She hoped her mother’s heart had somewhat mended while Samantha was about, but her nonattendance at dinner proved otherwise.

She understood her mother’s anguish. Katherine missed Elizabeth more than words could express. Nevertheless, her sister would not want any of them to mourn her forever, and so Katherine insisted on going to Harrington Orphanage each day to aid the less fortunate.

Father turned from the window and waved a hand toward the chairs in front of the fireplace. She gripped the arms and lowered herself into one of the chairs, trying not to jostle her body.

“Why are you stiff?” he asked.

“I took a fall down the stairs today.”

His expression filled with concern. “Do I need to send for a doctor?”

“Oh, no. I am fine.”

“How did it happen?” He advanced to the side table.

“One of the children accidentally tripped me.”

He picked up the decanter. “Truly, Katherine, you might think about spending less time at Harrington’s.”

“Not this again.” Her parents approved of her association with Harrington’s, but often voiced their opinion that she volunteered too often. This was one fight she did not wish to have. She scooted to the edge of the seat and braced her hands on the arms, ready to escape the room. “I will not be browbeaten.”

“No one is browbeating you. Don’t run off in a temper.” The crystal decanter clinked against the glasses as he poured the brandy. “I am merely suggesting you spend too many hours there.”

Usually twelve a day. The list of duties was endless. “And why shouldn’t I? Am I missing activities here? Should I hurry home each day for whatever social plans mother has made?”

He flinched.

Blast her tired body and mind. He did not deserve her anger. “Please forgive me. I spoke unfairly.”

“You do not understand your mother’s pain.”

“I know of pain, Father. I lost a twin.”

He passed her a brandy. “I realize a part of you died with Elizabeth.” Her father rarely talked about losing his daughter, but one only had to look into his pale blue eyes to witness his grief. “However, burying one’s child is the ultimate penance on Earth.” He sat in the chair next to her. “But even in our grief, your mother and I should have consoled you more.”

“You did, Papa.”

“I wish I had done more, encouraged you to find a husband. Maybe then you would believe you deserved a life of your own. Happiness.”

“I have my orphans. They make me quite happy.”

“You have settled into this way of living because it is safe. You should be enjoying a marriage, a house, and children of your own.” They sat in silence before he finally added, “Do you believe this life can make you happy forever?”

“Very.” A pain shrieked deep within her. An ache she never experienced before.

“It will not. It is not enough, Katherine. You need a husband.” He softly added, “What your uncle—”

“Don’t.” She spoke louder than necessary, not wanting to discuss that nightmare.

He grabbed her hand. “You cannot judge every man by what happened years ago.”

“I don’t.”

“Yes, you do, dear.” His compassionate gaze met hers. Then he let go of her hand, stood, and downed the contents of his glass. His body grew rigid and his countenance hard. “Katherine, I have a tidy sum set aside for your dowry. When can I expect you to announce you have selected a match?”

By all that is holy, my father has gone mad. “You are aware I do not plan to marry.”

He continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “If you do not select a husband, I will.”

“You can’t mean this.”

“I do.” He had never been a domineering brute, but the determined firmness to his jaw promised he was deadly serious. “When your mother and I are gone, what will you do?”

“If you grant me the dowry, I will be able to live quite contentedly.”

“Alone? With no one to protect you?”

She raised her hands. “What do I need protection from here in Oxford?”

He lifted his face to the ceiling. “You are not that naive. I did not raise a daughter who thinks she can live a safe life alone.”

“I will hire a driver and butler to protect me.”

“No one will respect you and see to your well-being better than a husband.”

Captain Malcolm Westbourne’s face appeared in her mind—his dark eyes, his brown hair with a hint of red mixed in, and his playful smile. He was the only man, save her father and Drake, whose company she had ever been able to tolerate longer than an hour. He’d been charming, kind, and made her forget her reservations about becoming involved with a man.

“I will do what I must to ensure your happiness and safety.” Father’s voice held a determined tone. “That is, and always has been, my concern. My duty.”

“And what of *my* wishes?” She hated the way her voice sounded small and unsure.

His entire countenance softened and he sat next to her. “If I was confident you understood your own heart, I would respect your wishes. But with what happened in the past, you have no bloody idea what you want.”

Wishing to argue, she didn’t. He was correct. She never gave any man a chance to win her heart. Even though she’d been totally enchanted with Malcolm, she had not pried open her heart to let him inside. “Why do you suddenly expect me to marry?”

“This isn’t sudden, dear. I have always wished for you to wed. I never pressed the issue, hoping you might find someone and come to me.”

How could she give her heart into a man’s keeping? She finished the rest of her brandy in one huge gulp, hoping the fiery trail down her throat would ease the pain in her body and

make the sting of her father's dictates easier to bear. Unable to stop a cough, her eyes watered from the spirits. She would find some way to thwart his plans.

Strained wrinkles wreathed her father's mouth. "I pray one day you will understand my reasons." Sounding almost whimsical, he added, "There is much happiness to enjoy inside a marriage."

And much hell.

Her mother's refusal to continue with her life since Elizabeth's death, and the action of Katherine's uncle years ago, were proof of that.

Chapter Two

Halfway to Oxford, a drizzly rain started, bringing with it a dip in temperature. Miserable and fatigued, Malcolm stopped at an inn and requested a room, a bath, and a meal. The time neared one in the morning, but the dining area was still loud—patrons laughing, many clearly in their cups. The subdued lighting made every man appear mysterious and every woman inviting.

His suite contained a bed covered in fashionable, floral bedclothes. He sat at the desk in the corner and ate a hearty, delicious stew while two inn workers brought in a copper tub and bucket after bucket of steaming water. Tub almost full, a pretty young wench set another pail down. She stopped at the door and closed it, snubbing the lock before turning to him. “I am available for whatever you may need.”

No man could mistake her blatant invitation. He waited for a spark of desire to ignite inside him. After all, more than a year had passed since he last enjoyed the supple body of a woman.

Nothing.

Perhaps he was ill.

“I am available to assist with your bath.” She smiled.

“For a fee, of course.”

“No coin is required for a man as finely proportioned as yourself.”

Malcolm snorted and stood. She knew nothing of his proportions. “You flatter me, Miss...?”

“Bea.” She twisted a hank of red hair around her finger. Freckles dusted her skin, and her blue eyes were lively. She appeared not to be a day over eighteen. “I would consider it an honor to bathe your...” Her gaze traveled downward to his trouser buttons. “Nebuchadnezzar.”

Bold and brazen. If only he were younger, and not consumed with thoughts of another woman. “Miss Bea, I must admit you are an appealing temptation, but I stopped solely for rest before I continue my journey.”

Her head bowed.

“Please don’t take my refusal as an insult. You are quite comely.”

She lifted her face, a slight pout dimming her features.

He reached into his trouser pocket, walked over, and set some coins in her hand.

Her eyes widened. “How much might I earn if I—”

“Go, Bea.” A small lie might get rid of the girl. “You do not want the responsibility of my breaking a vow to my wife.”

“No, sir.” A sullen frown on her face, she left with a click of the door.

Malcolm undressed and soaked in the warm water. He rested his head against the curve of the copper and when he closed his eyes, he saw Katherine’s smiling face, her white dress whirling around her while she played with the children at Westbourne.

His body leapt to attention.

He definitely was not sick.

Maybe he should take Bea up on her offer. Although his heart would not be engaged, his body would enjoy the exercise, the release, and perhaps he might forget—at least for a moment—how he longed for a woman who would not even reply to his letters.

He had repeatedly gone over the last time Katherine and he were together. The memory pierced him with need. The way she kissed him until they both became breathless.

God help him, he ached for her. Ached to hold her, press her body intimately to his. Pull her beneath him, have her rise above him—

Splashing water on his face, he tried to wash the thoughts away. This fascination, bordering on obsession, was driving him to Bedlam.

Enough.

Rising from the water, he dried his body with a towel while he approached the bell pull. He had no doubt who would answer when he yanked the cord. He'd have to close his eyes with Bea. But even in the dark, she would never pass for Katherine. Her young slim body had not yet developed into a curvaceous beauty like his obsession. He lifted his hand and took the rope between his fingers. Fingers that once caressed Katherine's nape. Traced her lips. Rubbed her cheek.

Damn her.

He let his hand drop and faced the cold, empty room.

A minute later, he calmed and his body returned to normal. Well, as normal as possible without release.

Concentrate on something else.

When he met with Zachary earlier, he'd forgotten to ask about Jimmy. After they rescued Jimmy, an English child, on a slaver boat in Africa, Zach and Malcolm conveyed the boy back to England. Since he had no family, Jimmy went to live with Zach's sister.

Upon the completion of that assignment, they met with Admiral Tisdale and explained Jimmy's plight. From that moment on, he and Zach had been relieved of their duty to The West Africa Squadron and assigned to stop the trafficking of workhouse children. Along with Silas Green, the Bow Street Runners, and a team of military personnel, they had succeeded. Not everything they had done was above reproach, but when it involved a child, Malcolm and his comrades would do anything to keep them safe.

Malcolm pulled the bedclothes back and snuggled underneath. Before allowing his exhausted body and mind to rest, he remembered the thousands of grueling days he'd spent aboard ship cruising the African coast. Owning slaves was still legal, although immoral in his mind, but The Slave Trade Act

of 1807 abolished slave trading in the British Empire. The West Africa Squadron's responsibility was to suppress slave trafficking by patrolling the West African coast.

He was thankful for the Africans and the English children they'd rescued over the years, prayed for the ones they'd lost, and sent up a plea for the ones still enslaved.

~

Morning gloom was nothing new to Oxford, but, oh, how Katherine wished for sunshine. A ray or two to touch her skin and chase away the chill from her body. For some reason, she could not warm up on this cool, wet, spring day. Her carriage rambled up to Harrington Orphanage. The gray brick building, dreary in the dimness and rain, presented a misleading darkness. The happy faces and laughter inside made it the most cheery of places.

The children would be sleepy-eyed and quiet at breakfast, but by mid-morning, excitement would race across their features. Katherine made it her mission to ensure each child's happiness. Two boys were nearing an age when they needed to find employment, and she dreaded the day they would leave.

She eagerly opened the door of the carriage and hopped to the sodden pavement, not wanting to bother the driver. "Seven this evening, Richard," she called.

"Yes, Miss."

Before she ascended all the steps, the black door opened. Mrs. Stanford stood inside with a glower on her rotund face. "Miss Ashby, you should insist Richard escort you inside."

"No need for him to aid me to the door in such weather. I want him to make it home swiftly to get dry and warm."

"While you get wet?" The older woman, dressed in serviceable gray, clucked like a hen.

Katherine flipped the hood of her cape off her head and sprinkles of water plopped to the tile. "I am dry. No harm done. How are the children faring this morning?"

“Fine. They are eating breakfast. Mrs. William has already arrived and is in the schoolroom waiting.”

“At this hour?” A quarter of seven was early for her new volunteer to arrive.

“Yes’m. And she brought three huge boxes with her.”

“I will join her after I greet the children. Is Amelia’s cough better?”

“Oh, yes’m.” Mrs. Stanford followed close at Katherine’s heels. “She slept well last night. The toddy you made helped.”

“Good. The poor dear was fagged yesterday.” They reached the dining hall and Katherine peeked inside. The children ate quietly, conversation minimal. The long pine table was set up with benches on each side—simple and useful—as was everything at Harrington’s. Little Amelia sat next to George eating her porridge.

“Miss Ashby.” Celia, a blonde girl of eight, rushed forward. “You look lovely.”

“You, too, Celia.” Katherine waved to the other children. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Miss Ashby,” the children said together. Except Amelia. She came to them over a year ago. Now three years of age, she had bouncy dark curls and expressive blue eyes, but no one had ever heard her utter a word. Not one.

A doctor proclaimed the child healthy and able to hear, so it befuddled them why Amelia never chose to speak or babble.

Amelia pushed up from the stool and ran to Katherine. Black circles no longer framed her eyes, and she appeared considerably healthier. Being the youngest moppet at the orphanage, the other children spoiled her. She hugged Katherine’s skirts. “Hello, Amelia.” They’d given the child the name once she’d been with them a few days.

The girl’s hug reminded Katherine of how much she was needed here. Belonged here. Perhaps she should take on more chores and spend her nights here as well as her days. That would teach her father to give dictates about marrying. She

sighed. Deep in her heart, she understood he was doing what he believed best for her. At five and twenty, society would consider her lucky to catch any husband, even one her father could purchase for her. If only she wanted the same thing.

Katherine addressed everyone in the room. "I have duties to attend, but I will meet you after your lessons." She greeted each child, then headed out of the room with a smile on her lips. *I will never give up these children.*

The scent of expensive perfume assailed her as she entered the schoolroom. Mrs. William, a beautiful brunette with extraordinary green eyes, stood behind the desk opening one of three large boxes. She'd visited a couple of weeks ago and volunteered in any way the orphanage needed. Katherine welcomed the help, and this was Mrs. William's third visit.

"You are about early this morning," Katherine said.

"Miss Ashby, so good to see you. I hope you will accept this clothing. I have siblings whose children have grown. Much of the clothing is not considered the height of fashion, but they are sturdy and well kept."

Fashion? The children had no idea about fashion. "The youngsters will put the clothing to good use."

"Excellent." Mrs. William pulled out piece after piece of finely crafted clothing of all sizes.

"Do you have any children of your own?" Katherine asked.

"Not yet. And since my husband is at sea more than in port, it seems an impossibility." She smiled. "Please forgive my forwardness, Miss Ashby, but why is it you never married?"

Katherine's insides clenched. How dare she ask such a question?

"You must admit marrying is expected of a gently bred woman such as yourself."

"Society may dictate many things..." Her father also. "But I will only marry if it is right for me, and I have not yet met a man I find suitable."

“Dear, your reasoning is wrong. You will never meet a suitable man. You must find one you do not wish to murder and train him to be the husband you need.”

Katherine laughed.

Mrs. William put her hands on her hips. “I speak the truth.”

“I would not argue that point.”

They separated the clothes into stacks for the twelve children they housed.

“This is so generous of you.” Katherine tugged a wrinkle from the shoulder of a tiny dress.

“Nonsense. The children need them.”

“Mrs. William, you are a blessing.” With Emma gone to London, and Lady Estelle Sharp visiting only once a week, Katherine desperately needed help. Plus, after learning there were missing orphans from other institutions, she welcomed as many hands as possible to keep the children safe.

~

The next afternoon, Katherine held her bonnet between her fingers while she followed the girls to the pond. A local blacksmith was instructing the boys on how to shoe a horse, so she and the girls escaped the building, the weather too fine to remain indoors. Katherine loved that the days were getting warmer and the crisp scent of spring filled the air. She lifted her face to the sun-shining sky.

“Why do you peer to the heavens, Miss Ashby?” Celia asked. Amelia stood beside Celia, her face tilted upward also.

“To thank God, Celia. He has blessed me greatly with you children.”

“And we are blessed to have you.”

“That you are,” a deep familiar voice rumbled.

Katherine spun around.

Her heart leapt.

She just stopped herself from raising her hands to her chest. “Captain Westbourne.” She detested how out of breath she sounded.

“Miss Ashby.” He looked down at the girls. “And a good day to you too.”

Amelia ducked behind Katherine and shyly peeked at Malcolm.

Katherine couldn’t believe he was here. “This is Celia.” She patted the young girl’s back and put her other arm around the tiny girl tugging at her skirt. “And this is Amelia.”

Malcolm bowed. “Miss Celia.” He turned slightly. “Miss Amelia.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Celia curtsied, studying his uniform. “Are you an officer with the Royal Navy?”

“I am.” His blue coat, tailored perfectly to his strapping body, had gold buttons marching down the front and ribbons of different colors on his chest.

Celia appeared as positively dazzled as Katherine felt.

Amelia stepped out to stand beside Celia.

“Miss Ashby taught us about the Navy last summer,” Celia said.

His eyes met Katherine’s, and she was thankful he could not read her mind. She’d spoken to the children about the Navy because she’d missed him so much since meeting him in the spring. A kind of longing she’d never experienced and had not been able to shake from her mind. At the time, she had wondered where he was and what he was doing.

Malcolm crouched to be on Celia and Amelia’s level, something Katherine did often with the children. “What information did Miss Ashby impart about the Royal Navy?”

“She said the men who serve are brave and defend us against our enemies.”

Amelia nodded her tiny head, her ringlets bouncing.

“That is the way of it. And we are helpful when damsels are in distress.”

Celia giggled and skipped toward the water. Amelia trailed behind her and stopped to wave at Malcolm, then ran to catch up with the other girls.

“Amelia doesn’t speak?” He straightened.

“No. Not since arriving a year ago.”

“I witnessed the same thing with children rescued from slaver ships. She will talk when she becomes comfortable with all of you.”

“I do hope so.” His familiar scent of sandalwood and soap assailed her. “To what do I owe the honor of your presence?” She fought an urge to move closer to him.

His lips made a straight line. “Have you been apprised of the disappearances of some orphans from their institutions?”

A pang clamped her stomach. “I have. Orphanage managers have sent news of such. We have been fortunate none of our children are missing.”

“You need to be on your guard.”

“We are always diligent.”

“I am planning to have a couple of associates arrive to help keep watch until more is learned about the disappearances.”

“We cannot afford to hire anyone.” She had contemplated doing that very same thing, but found no way to pay guards.

“This will be on my pound.”

“I cannot ask you to do—”

“You did not ask,” he interrupted. “I offered.”

“Are you involved in the investigation?”

“Yes.”

Her heart gave a surge. “You are searching for the children?”

“Aye. Since I was assigned to the disappearances of youngsters from the workhouses, and that endeavor has been successful in stopping those kidnappings, we have hopes of foiling this quickly.”

What a noble cause. What a noble man.

“I did not only come because of the orphans. I have a more pressing issue to discuss with you.” Gazing directly into her eyes, he said, “It seems you are rather poor at returning missives.”

Her cheeks heated. If only he knew the countless sheets of paper she had used to write him note after note, only to throw them into the fireplace.

Circles under his eyes showed signs of weariness, but made him no less handsome. “We left things unsettled when you ran away from Westbourne.”

“I did not run away.”

He lifted a brow. “Would you rather I use the word escaped?”

“I had no reason to escape.” Why was he bringing this up? Her refusal to answer his letters should have been enough for him to realize she didn’t want his pursuit. “Nothing is unsettled between us. We are friends.”

“I don’t want to be your friend, Katherine.”

A spike of anger raked over her heart. “Indeed. Then, we are *not* friends. And you may call me Miss Ashby.”

“That is not what I meant, and you know it.” Frustration laced his tone.

“I don’t know anything, Captain Westbourne.”

The sun gleamed off his reddish-brown hair. “Katherine. If you hadn’t been spooked, we would have woken in the same bed. As a matter of fact, I’d have you in my bed right now.”

A drum beat low in her abdomen. What a forbidden, illicit fantasy—they together in bed. It both intrigued and terrified her. She shook off the image and laughed. “You are shameless.”

What makes you think I would have gone to your bed in the first place?"

"Because you wanted to. You still do."

If only she could deny him, refute his words. "Nothing happened between us."

"Don't pretend with me, Katherine."

"My name is Miss Ashby."

He pinned her with a gaze. "Not after the time we spent together."

A flood of memories bombarded her...his sweet words...his light touch...the way he kept his attention focused on her. Yes, they had shared something.

What, she wasn't quite sure.

She'd never experienced instant attraction as when they were first introduced. Right there in the nursery of his family's estate home, she felt like she'd been hit by a lightning strike. He mesmerized her from the initial glimpse of his mischievous eyes and he'd ensnared her heart with soft-spoken words, passion-filled kisses, and gentle playfulness.

"You felt it, just as I did. From the moment we met, each minute we spent in each other's company, has been magic." He neared her, his body blocking out the sun's rays. "Like now." He ran the backs of his fingers down her cheek. "Magic."

She shivered. A part of her wanted to pull away, but a stronger part wanted to step closer. She managed to remain still. "Magic is not reliable."

"How do you know? I've never experienced the feelings you stir inside me." He tenderly tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Why did you leave? Did I do something wrong? Did I offend you?"

Heavens no. He had done everything right.

Too right.

Too perfectly.

The emotions he awakened in her had frightened her, scared her to the point that she did not recognize herself. She never wanted the feelings he evoked. What lay between a woman and a man was not all good, she'd learned that the hard way.

But what she experienced with him was beyond anything she ever imagined. "I left because I needed to get back to the children."

"Rubbish."

She winced at his brusque tone. "Captain Westbourne, I am sure you are not accustomed to rejection, but this is it."

He faced the pond and watched the girls for a minute. When his eyes met Katherine's again, she swore he'd glimpsed hell...it was there in his eyes...the loneliness and desolation, but something else too. Heat? "I do not accept your rejection. You will have to do it publicly."

"Don't be daft. No one, save the Westbournes and the Drakes, are privy to our affiliation."

"Not after tonight. I plan to attend the Sharps' ball."

Blood beat in her ears. "How did you gain an invitation?"

He spoke easily, his entire countenance relaxed. "Samuel and I attended Eton together. He is a couple of years older."

Blazes.

"And I am well aware you cannot make an excuse to avoid attendance since the Sharps are one of Harrington's prime contributors. Estelle practically begged me to attend and I would do anything for her."

Everyone would. Estelle was an angel walking the Earth. Her contributions to Harrington's were large and plentiful.

Katherine saw no other option than to face him socially. Another thought pierced her, only the heavens knew why. "So you are not here solely for me."

They were still standing close, and Malcolm reached out and tipped her chin with his fingers. She had nowhere to look,

but into his unwavering eyes. “Make no mistake, my dear. I am here for you.”

~

Malcolm’s nerves tightened like the strings drawn overly taut on a violin as he rode away from Harrington’s.

After thirty hours of rest at the inn, Malcolm set out for Oxford prepared to confront Katherine—only to find himself exasperated after seeing her. Where had the ease between them gone? At Westbourne, during a somewhat taxing time, their banter stayed light and good-humored. But when he saw her today, standing with her face lifted to the sky, something inside him altered. She was not another woman to seduce, but one to keep, guard, and protect.

But he needed answers. Answers to why she never wrote back to him. Answers to why she hastily left the study that last night at Westbourne and departed the next morning without so much as a farewell.

She would have to be coaxed into telling him why she shied away from him, and all men for that matter. From their first encounter, she had shown nervousness, but after a short time she seemed to accept him. She encouraged his attentions, initiated a closeness to him, and he’d been only too happy to indulge her. And, without conceit, he knew she enjoyed it.

If only he could put a finger on what he’d done to upset her.

Chapter Three

Malcolm considered waiting until midnight to attend the ball, but realized Katherine would use any excuse to leave as soon as possible, without being rude. At ten, he arrived at the Sharp estate. Carriages and horses lined the drive and street, while more littered the stretch of grass on each side of the house.

He hated these events and felt grateful his brother was the Earl of Easton and not him. Not that he didn't enjoy dancing, he rather did, but he did not relish the crowds or marriage-minded mamas. In his crisp, newly tailored uniform, he dismounted Endicott and handed the reins to one of the waiting boys.

Sucking in a breath, he steeled himself. Only the enticement of seeing Katherine Ashby and learning her reasons for deserting him a year ago could make him suffer this torture.

From the foyer, he saw hundreds of candles lighting the large ballroom. Estelle had outdone herself on the huge gold planters filled with bouquets of white flowers. The men were dressed in formal black while the women provided a rainbow of color around them—resembling sea spray in the noonday sun.

Malcolm entered and spotted Samuel just inside the arch to the ballroom. He and his friend shook hands and slapped each other's backs. "Estelle will be over the moon now that you are here. Not to mention the mamas." Samuel had not changed since his wedding two years ago. His black hair did not yet show signs of graying, and his hazel eyes were alert as ever.

"I plan to spend most of the night in the card room." When he wasn't extricating answers from Katherine.

"Wise man."

"Where is Lady Sharp?"

Malcolm glanced to where Samuel pointed.

Estelle rushed toward them. “Captain Westbourne!” Her blonde curls bounced around her face. “You are a sight.”

“A good sight or a bad sight, my dear?” He leaned over and kissed the back of her gloved fingers.

She squeezed his hand. “Very good. Thank you for attending.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it.”

“Do come meet our guests.”

Estelle held on to him like a rider clutching the reins of a spooked horse while she introduced him to one person after another. Samuel did not follow, but remained at the door under the pretense of welcoming guests. The coward.

Malcolm greeted each person with a smile while he scanned the room for Katherine. He finally spotted her on a divan with the older women, exactly where she did not belong. She should be dancing, laughing, and flirting. Not that he would be able to tolerate another man’s attentions on her.

Better she stay right where she sat.

“Lady Sharp, you must introduce me to the mamas.”

Shocked by his words, Estelle laughed. “Are you jesting?”

Yes. “No.”

“Captain Westbourne, I have never understood your actions, and I will not venture a guess about your motives this night.”

He held silent while they walked, knowing the temptation would prove too much for Estelle. She would not be able to hold her tongue longer than—

“Are you in the market for a wife?”

One minute.

He gestured to their surroundings. “One merely has to spy around this room to recognize Oxford has a lot to offer.”

One would swear he’d gifted her with a priceless bauble by the way her face lit up. “There are many proper young ladies whom you should meet. I...” She prattled on while they

strolled. He listened, but not closely, his concentration centered on Katherine. He stared at her, willing her to glance his way.

She finally looked at him, her eyes bright, intelligent. How did she completely enchant him? Was it the chase? He had never been thwarted in his pursuit of a woman. Did her refusal of him, and their budding connection, intrigue him?

He smiled.

She smiled back.

Of course she did, he was still yards away, far enough for her to be comfortable.

As he and Estelle approached the divans, he got a good look at Katherine. *Blast and double blast*. She wore an ugly black spinster cap. Why would she cover her beautiful hair? He wanted to rail at her. Tell her to appreciate everything within her reach. Tell her to enjoy the intimacies of relations with a man. With him.

Estelle let go of Malcolm's arm. "Captain Westbourne, may I introduce Miss Ashby. She helps at Harrington Orphanage and is our resident saint."

Katherine's skin turned crimson. Better to let Estelle believe her compliment was the reason, but Malcolm knew better. She had flushed the same color at the pond earlier today. "I am acquainted with Miss Ashby." He bowed. "A pleasure to see you again." Grasping her hand, he pressed his lips to her knuckles longer than appropriate. When she tried to pull away, he tightened his hold. "I do hope you will honor me with the first waltz, Miss Ashby."

The women near her divan stopped their conversations and gawked at them. Katherine squirmed. "I have no desire to..."

With a lift of his brows, he waited, as did the others around her. If they were alone, he knew her next words would be *dance with you*. But if she said such a thing, how would she explain it to the women listening?

She cleared her throat. "The first waltz will be lovely."

“Excellent.” He winked and released her hand. “Until our dance.” She might avoid his correspondence, but she was not rejecting him in public. He would have no recourse if she had given him the cut, yet she hadn’t.

Estelle continued to introduce him around until one of the guests asked her to dance. Relieved, Malcolm escaped to the card room. Katherine agreeing to dance with him gave him satisfaction for the moment. But he would have to plan the waltz. Figure out a way to keep her in his arms after the dance finished.

He sat at a table where the dealer shuffled cards. The stale scent of cigar smoke and port lingered in the air. The dealer began passing out cards when Malcolm recognized a familiar face at another table. The hair on his arms stood at attention. He narrowed his eyes at William Fitz. Malcolm could not even glimpse the blackguard without wanting to kill him. He knew of the unthinkable horrors Fitz inflicted on countless victims, but had never been able to prove the man’s exploits.

Fitz’s evil glare met his.

Excusing himself from the table, Malcolm hurried over to Samuel, who had just entered the room. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“Who?” Samuel turned around as Fitz walked in their direction.

“That bastard.” Malcolm watched Fitz’s every move. “You have to stop me from killing him.”

“Easy, chap. A lot of good it will do to find yourself in gaol.”

“I would spend the rest of my life on a prison hulk if it meant sending that blackguard to hell.”

“Who is he? I have never seen him before,” Samuel said, but Fitz was already close. Samuel stepped in front of Malcolm and addressed Fitz. “Sir. I have discovered you and Captain Westbourne are acquainted. In the hope of avoiding flying bullets—”

“Who needs bullets?” Malcolm growled.

“Right.” Samuel waved Fitz off. “If you value your life, you will not address the captain.”

“Grudges? Still?” Fitz asked.

Samuel snorted. “Captain Westbourne’s scorn for you reaches beyond a mere grudge.”

Fitz folded his meaty arms across his chest. “May I remind the captain that when my ship was boarded, I housed no slaves.”

Malcolm lunged. “You bastard.”

Samuel seized his arm. “If you make a scene, you will deal with my wife’s wrath on your own.”

He halted. Estelle would never forgive him if he made a spectacle. “You will be caught.”

“Not by you,” the scoundrel taunted before walking off.

Samuel faced Malcolm. “You must tell me—”

“He’s a slave trader. Unfortunately, we were never able to catch him with slaves aboard ship,” Malcolm explained.

“Then how are you certain he trades...” Samuel’s voice died, Malcolm’s words finally registering. His friend knew the rumors of what happened to slaves when The West Africa Squadron pursued the traders. “Bloody bugger.”

“What the hell is he doing here?”

“I cannot say. I will ask Estelle how he gained an invitation.”

~

At the first strains of a waltz, Katherine’s heart—pounding harder since spotting Malcolm—now somersaulted. Lightheaded, she cast her gaze toward the ground remembering Malcolm’s words that afternoon. *Make no mistake, my dear. I am here for you.*

But he did not explain why. To finish what they started at Westbourne? To take another step toward intimacy?

When immaculately polished boots entered her line of sight, she looked up. If only he wasn't so devastatingly handsome, his body so well-proportioned, and his face so classically attractive.

He held out a hand. "Shall we?"

Never one for cowardice, she let him lead her to the dance floor. She already knew what an exceptional dancer he was from their many dances at Westbourne.

"Are you enjoying the evening?" he asked.

"Not particularly." She tried to ignore the way their bodies moved as one. Tried to discount how comfortable she felt in his arms.

"That is your fault for sitting with the old crones."

Heaven help her, a giggle escaped. "Malcolm, someone will hear you."

"If I see you with a ridiculous cap on your head again, I will remove it myself. Cut it off with my knife if need be."

In this hideous cap, no man alive would want to dance with her. Except Malcolm. "Touch my cap and I will use the skills my father and brother-in-law taught me about defending myself."

He grinned. "That might prove interesting."

She chuckled. Why did his charm and humor appeal to her so much?

"I missed you," he murmured.

Her body heated. She closed her eyes, not wanting to declare the very same thing.

"Tell me why you ran away."

Opening her eyes, she focused on the gold buttons on his coat and followed his easy lead amidst the throng of dancers. "Not here, Malcolm. Please."

"Only if you agree to take a turn about the gardens with me when the waltz is finished."

“I will.” She knew others would hear if they discussed the matter while dancing. For the next few minutes, she enjoyed being in his arms. His powerful body held her gently, reverently, but his strength frightened her.

As the dance drew to a close, he positioned them near the glass doors leading to the back lawn. They ambled outside and greeted other people while he guided her farther from the house. The moon was half-awake, its glow casting a shadowed silver pall across the gardens, muting the colorful plants to shades of gray.

Once out of earshot from the others, he stopped along the path. “I deserve an explanation for your disappearance at Westbourne.”

“I explained this afternoon.”

“Not to my satisfaction.”

“I am quite sure I can do little to your satisfaction, Captain Westbourne.”

“We both know that is not true.” His eyes appeared black in the dimness. “You were quite adept at satisfying me a year ago, before you panicked.”

She took particular interest in the roses in front of them. “Why can you not accept it was time for me to leave?”

“Because you did not say good-bye to anyone. Not Emma. Not me. I am the last person you had contact with.” He leaned to whisper in her ear. “And the loss of that contact left me cold, alone, and aching for you.”

Even with the weak moonlight, he probably saw her blush. “Please do not say such things.” She glanced around. “Others will hear.”

He expelled an audible breath. “Why are you afraid of men?”

Startled, she whipped her head around to look at him.

Malcolm frowned. “I have observed you. Drake is the only man I have ever seen you relaxed with. All others you hold in contempt.”

“I do not.” But, God help her, she did.

“Did someone hurt you?”

For an instant, she wanted to explain. Elucidate the reasons for her skittishness.

He slowly took a step toward her. “I will not hurt you.”

She buried her face in her hands. Pain wracked her entire body from holding in her secrets. “I...my...” She could not tell him what happened. How would he regard her afterward? Shaking her head, she did not utter another word.

“It’s all right, darling. It’s all right.”

Tears soaked her throat and droplets trickled from her eyes. “I am sorry.”

“No. It is I who needs to apologize.” He slipped a handkerchief into her hand. “I will not ask again, Katherine. I cannot bear the pain it causes you.”

She swiped at her eyes and nose with the linen.

“Let us walk a bit more. The fresh air will dry your tears, and I will endeavor to be pleasant company.” He motioned to the path without offering his arm, of which she was grateful. She wasn’t sure what contact with him at this moment would do to her.

After they walked for a while, he asked, “How are Emma and Drake?”

“Emma’s confinement has begun, and she can no longer visit the orphanage, so Drake insisted on taking her to London until the babe is born. You must pray they have a boy, I doubt he will survive another term of Emma carrying a child. He is beside himself with worry.”

“As he should be,” Malcolm said softly.

“Yes. But Elizabeth would want him to have and enjoy other children. He is quite the doting father.”

“After your sister’s death, I suppose he had to be.”

“As you say.” The tension and apprehension left her body, leaving her oddly reassured by Malcolm’s presence.

“And how is Emma faring?”

“At Drake’s overreactions, she simply tells him she feels wonderful. Between you and me, she cannot feel wonderful any of the time. Her body is so...” She hesitated, unsure what to say.

“My sister Mary equated herself to a hippopotamus in the last months before the births of her children,” Malcolm bluntly said.

Katherine’s hand flew to her mouth, hoping to cover a smile. “I would never term Emma a hippo.”

“My other sister, Beatrice, said she felt more like a beached whale.”

She bit her lip to keep a cackle from escaping her lips.

“And I cannot repeat Margaret’s words about confinement in polite company.”

Unable to stop herself, she laughed out loud. “You are part devil, Malcolm.”

“Ah. I do love to hear my name from your lips.”

“Earlier you mentioned you missed me.”

“I did.”

Katherine reached out and grabbed his elbow with both her hands. Then she pushed him to start walking again. “I, too, missed you.”

He patted her hands. “I am extremely glad to hear that.”

~

Malcolm watched Katherine’s carriage roll away. Satisfied the ease between them had returned, he admitted there was definitely still a wall to scale—possibly an insurmountable one. Her terror when asked why she was frightened of men had been real and unbearable to witness.

He took in a breath of damp night air and reentered the house. Samuel and Estelle were saying good-bye to the stragglers. After everyone left, Estelle eyed Malcolm. “Miss Ashby?”

Why did he feel like the cook had caught him stealing a tart? “What about her?”

Dishes clanked as servants cleared away the remnants of the ball.

“Yes, what about her?” Estelle plopped into one of the chairs by the wall. “She is a treasure. Certainly not a woman to trifle with.”

“I have no plans to trifle with her.”

Samuel sat next to his wife and draped his arm along the back of her chair.

Estelle tugged off her white gloves. “I must tell you, before this night I have never seen her dance with anyone save Lord Drake or her father. She spends most of her time with the spinsters and widows. A waste for such a beautiful young woman.”

He agreed.

Estelle pursed her lips. “Do you design to marry her?”

“We met at Westbourne a year ago. Miss Ashby has made it clear she is only interested in friendship.”

She scowled. “But you want more. I can tell by the way you look at her.”

“There is no denying she is of the first order. When she’s off her guard, she is quite pleasant. But marriage? Not everyone can be the marrying kind like Samuel.”

Samuel laughed.

She wagged a finger at Malcolm. “You are not fooling me. You are clearly taken with her.”

He hated the conversation to center around Katherine and him. “Estelle, I have to ask about one of your guests tonight.”

“Whom?”

“William Fitz.”

“I do not recognize that name. Nor do I remember him being announced.”

Why had the reprobate attended tonight? Hatred fired in Malcolm’s blood. “Estelle, can you ask your guests if anyone met the man or invited him along with them?”

“May I ask why?”

“He is a slaver.”

She gasped and scooted closer to Samuel.

Damn. He shouldn’t have come out with that so callously. “Please forgive me. I have been too long in the company of men. I tend to speak my mind too freely.”

“I am glad you told me. I will be diligent in ferreting out his reasons for entry into my home.” She rubbed Samuel’s chest. “Our home.”

Her husband clasped her hand and kissed it. Such love flowed between the two; a blind man would be able to see it.

Estelle rose. “If you gentlemen will excuse me, I am quite fatigued.”

Samuel stood.

After Estelle left, Malcolm took her seat.

Samuel sat back down. “Why are you really in Oxford?”

“I have an assignment to find missing orphans.”

“Can I help?”

“Keep your ears peeled.” Malcolm put his hand inside his coat pocket to find his compass, then remembered it was being fixed. “I plan to stay in Oxford a day or two and hopefully learn why William Fitz attended tonight.”

Chapter Four

Prepared for the night of his life with Celeste, Zachary rode the dark street of London in a hired hackney. A copper lamp hanging next to the driver lit the way. Well-appointed townhouses lined both sides of the road. Prosperous merchants lived in the brick buildings, but the dwellings would never be considered *ton* approved. But honestly, who gave a bloody bit about the *ton*.

The cloudless, cool night should have cut through him, but his body was so heated, he didn't feel the chill. At number sixteen, the driver stopped, and Zach paid his fee. Once the hackney rolled away, Zach slid the key in the lock and opened the door. Three candles lit the entryway, a good sign Celeste was home, unlike a year ago when he arrived and the entire townhouse had been dark. Dodging around the door, he put the key in the lock from the inside and bolted it.

Desire, lust, and excitement shuddered through him. Thoughts of Celeste made him hard—everywhere. It was a mystery how some men and women were drawn to each other. Each time he'd met Celeste, he felt as if a force propelled him toward her.

He chastised himself for thinking like a greenhorn. Maybe she affected all men in such a manner.

Having to duck to miss the archway, Zach walked down the hall not being particularly quiet. He didn't want to startle her. Passing the first room on the left, he made out the outline of a small kitchen table and cabinets in the shadowed darkness.

Next, he came to a closed door. With a quick knock, he turned the handle. Candlelight flickered from within when he pushed the door open.

“Stop right there!” a feminine voice shouted.

Odd. If Celeste expected Malcolm, why was she screaming at Zach? She couldn't see he wasn't Malcolm. He peered

around the door.

Straight into the barrel of a gun.

“Stop.” A tiny woman with red hair springing from her bun waved the gun. “Or I shall be prevailed upon to shoot.”

Not the request he hoped to get from Celeste. No, indeed. Her requests, huskily spoken, he would have obeyed. Over and over again.

Damn. He had a cockstand he doubted the chilly Thames could cure.

The girl wasn't going to shoot, that much was obvious. He had been on the receiving end of too many guns not to notice the signs of someone who rarely handled them. And she might accidentally discharge the firearm the way her hands were shaking.

Slowly, he held up the key. “My name is Lieutenant Zachary Derby. I am here for Miss Celeste Young.”

The woman glanced back and forth between the key and him. “I was expecting Captain Westbourne.”

“He is not currently in London. I am here in his stead. Miss, put away the gun. You don't appear to use one often, and I have no aspirations of being maimed.”

She hesitated, her entire body still.

“I am not going to hurt you. Word of a gentleman. Do you know when Celeste will arrive?”

Gun still in her hands, she backed away and kept the weapon pointed toward him. “I am not certain when my sister will return.”

Sister? The two didn't have one feature alike. Celeste had wavy russet hair, soulful sherry-colored eyes, a figure a man would sell his soul to caress, and everyone she met instantly fell for her charm.

This woman before him had wild red hair, light blue eyes, was skinny in all the wrong places, and her voice held a grating tone that reminded him of his childhood nanny.

“Or if she will ever return,” her voice choked before she aimed the gun toward the floor. She sounded upset.

This did not bode well for his night of debauchery.

Without the gun pointed at him, he got his first good look at the room. Handsomely decorated in purple and gold, a painting over the bed depicted Celeste stepping out of a decadent purple gown, not wearing unmentionables. Every time he saw her henceforth, he would wonder whether she wore undergarments. He laughed to himself. That was no doubt the reason for the painting.

The sight of her naked body made his knees weak. He had never seen Celeste in any other color than purple, the same rich hue of the dress in the picture and of this boudoir. But the bedchamber was not feminine.

Hell, he was waxing on about her room. He desperately needed a good f—

“I am reimbursing Captain Westbourne’s money.” She slid her hand into the pocket of her skirt and handed him two hundred pounds.

Holy...What would he have got for that much blunt? Zach shook off his lurid thoughts. “Miss Young?”

“Yes. Juliet Young.”

“Miss Young, were you to take your sister’s place with Captain Westbourne?”

If eyes could launch daggers, Zach would have been slain. “Lieutenant Derby, I assure you, I am no one’s mistress.”

“Of course not.” He didn’t want the scrawny woman anyway.

“Our family has gained much from Celeste’s association to Sir Roderick. And I love my sister, but I do not share her pursuits.”

“Your sister performs a great service.” One he’d been enthusiastically anticipating.

“If you consider being at a man’s beck and call a great service, I shudder to think what you consider refined behavior.”

His views on refined behavior would give the girl vapors. “Why are you here if you weren’t planning to take your sister’s place?”

“After reading Celeste’s posts, I understood the rendezvous tonight was rescheduled from a prior arrangement. I found the money in her appointment book marked Captain Westbourne’s and planned to return it and hoped to convince him to help me find Celeste.”

“Find her?”

“Well, yes. She’s been missed five days now.” Miss Young set the gun on the bed and collapsed beside it, her voice a high-pitched squeaky sob. “I cannot fathom where she might be.”

He had no tolerance for emotional females. Blubbering never solved anything. “When did you last have contact with Celeste?”

“I have not seen her in two months, but Friday mornings she attends Burton Orphanage and teaches the children French. She is extremely well-versed.”

He didn’t doubt that. Sir Roderick entertained foreign diplomats regularly. “Has your sister perhaps left to visit family?”

“I am just back from Hertfordshire. She has not paid a visit for two months.”

“Have you spoken to the landlord of this building?”

“She admitted me into the room. Mrs. Jacobs has not seen Celeste since Friday last. No one has. I cannot imagine where she’s gone. I fear she’s been abducted.”

Fingers of alertness scraped his back. “Why would you fear that?”

She shrugged. “I am not sure if you are aware, but there have been children abducted from many orphanages. None

from Burton where she teaches, but when I went to the director, he explained others have lost children.”

“Your sister is hardly a child.”

“Under a cloak, her petite body resembles a young girl’s.”

It is possible. But what would happen once they discovered she most definitely was not a child? Dozens of possibilities crossed his mind—none of them favorable for Celeste. Of premium stock, her beauty was unparalleled by any woman he’d ever met. What would kidnappers do with her? Send her to the West Indies topped the endless list.

God, save her.

“You might elicit help from Bow Street.” Another idea came to him. “Have you gone to Sir Roderick? I believe he will be concerned and interested about Celeste’s disappearance. Or, he may have knowledge of her whereabouts.” For some reason he felt compelled to help the chit. He pulled the timepiece from his pocket. “I will call on Sir Roderick in the morning.”

Her startled expression almost made him laugh. “I want to go as well.”

“I doubt Lady Roderick would appreciate us barging into her home with news of Celeste. You can wait in a hired carriage while I meet with Roderick.”

“Oh, sir, how you’ve pleased me.” Words he’d wished to hear from Celeste, but in a sultry whisper.

“We will wait here until a proper time of morning.”

“Here?” Her eyes widened. “The two of us?”

He nodded.

“I assure you, I will be perfectly safe staying here alone.”

“Not without information on Celeste’s disappearance. I cannot allow that. And it would be indecent for us to be seen together on the streets at this hour. Unless you do not have a care for your reputation.”

“No one would challenge my character. I am staying with my other sister and her husband who live three miles from here. I will travel there unescorted.”

“No, you will not,” he said with steely calm.

“I did not ask your permission, Lieutenant Derby.”

“You didn’t need to, Miss Young.”

She stood and crossed her arms over her chest. “How dare you order me about.”

“Make yourself comfortable on the bed.” He pointed at the chaise chair. “I will rest there.”

She started across the room, her boots thudding on the wooden floor. Very practical. Before she made it to the door, he seized her arm. Juliet wheeled around, her words harsh, her lips tight. “Unhand me.”

“I am not going to accost you. Had I wanted that, I would have done it already.” He let her go. “And I like my women agreeable. I would never attack a helpless chit.”

She aimed the gun at him again.

He had not noticed her pick it up. How he loved surprises.

This woman had spunk.

He swiftly reached out and twisted the gun from her grasp. “I asked you not to point this at me.”

“You are impossible,” she screeched.

“And you are welcome. Go to bed and get some rest.”

“I do not sleep on command.”

He doubted she did anything on command. Pity that. He grabbed a pillow and leaned back on the chaise.

She stood by the side of the bed for the longest time, her hands fisted at her side. Finally, she crawled onto the bed and rested her head on a pillow. “Thank you.” Her blue eyes blinked. “I am in great need of your assistance.”

What a complicated woman, madder than a bull one minute and thankful the next.

“Good night.” He snuffed the candles and the smoldering embers of the fire did little to cast even a flicker of light into the room. He would have to get a message to Malcolm and explain about Celeste’s disappearance.

~

“Morning, dear. How was your night?” Katherine’s father was already seated at the dining table. Her favorite blue delftware dishes were set out.

“Fine.”

He sipped from his cup. “When I stopped in to give the Sharps my regards and a contribution, I saw you dancing.”

She picked up her plate and approached the sideboard filled with meats and kedgerie. Not wanting anything that filling, she selected two pieces of toast and poured herself a cup of steaming tea. “Yes, I danced with Captain Westbourne. I am sure you’ve heard Emma and Drake speak of him.”

“Both describe him as an agreeable sort.”

Malcolm had been quite agreeable during their time at Westbourne. The whole encounter seemed more like a pleasant dream now—her reaction to him totally at odds from her usual response to men.

“Are you interested in the captain?”

“We danced, Papa. I do not have my cap set for Captain Westbourne. Or any other man.”

She sat at the table and their eyes met for the first time. Neither of them seemed to want to start their day with a disagreement over her finding a husband, so they ate in silence.

When she finished, her father said, “Dear, you can find a man who would join your endeavor with the orphans.” She should have known he would not let the topic go. “What you do is commendable and many men will find that appealing.”

“And not appropriate for a *proper* wife.”

“That is untrue. Lady Sharp is a perfect example.”

“Estelle does not come to the orphanage every day. If I marry—”

“When you marry,” he corrected.

She refused to say those words. “I still plan to work at Harrington’s as much as possible.”

“Then I suggest you find a man who will tolerate such action.”

The image of Malcolm with the children yesterday played in her mind. How he’d gone along with Amelia and Celia when the girls tugged his hands and led him to the pond to see a turtle. Katherine did not believe he would stop her from helping with her orphans.

Heavens, why was she thinking of Malcolm as a possible husband?

She must watch herself. He’d already captured her attention and fondness. Without much incentive, she would fall in love with him. And too many uncertainties surrounded love. She had seen the sweet side with her sister and Drake. But the ugly side, what her uncle had done—

“Finding a husband is what is best for you, dear,” Father murmured.

“I know you believe that.” Heart heavy in her chest, she took one last sip of tea, stood, and left the room.

~

Juliet woke cozy and warm, then remembered the night before.

Her eyes flew open.

Lieutenant Derby, his huge frame dwarfing the chaise, appeared incredibly lad-like in slumber, his face tranquil and relaxed. His black hair hung to his shoulders, and his skin was swarthy—but in a most appealing way.

Sun-kissed.

She'd never met a taller man. Was he a giant? What constituted a man to be deemed a giant?

Not wanting to disturb him, she simply looked her fill. His size alone should intimidate her. And last night it had, at first. But he squashed her apprehension by offering to help her.

Scandalous as this situation was, the two of them sleeping in the same room, she appreciated his concern in not letting her travel alone. Gallant would describe him.

Gallant and Herculean.

He'd removed his cravat to reveal the dark V of his neck. Having draped his waistcoat and overcoat on the dresser, he'd left on his white shirt and black trousers. His feet, covered in black stockings, were huge. She remembered a couple of rumors about men's feet and the size of their—

“Good morning,” his voice sounded gravelly. “I never expected you to wake this early.”

“I rise early.”

He chuckled like she'd said something funny. “Me too,” he said and mumbled something else she did not hear. Then he stood.

She inventoried him from head to toe. A day's growth of beard and the longish length of his hair made him appear like a pirate. His dark eyes were mysterious, but nothing compared to the man himself. His arm muscles flexed and his thighs rippled beneath his trousers. Oh my, she was staring at—

Her gaze darted to his eyes and she hoped her cheeks were not as visibly heated as they felt. “You must have been dreadfully uncomfortable last night, Lieutenant. I hate to point out the obvious, but you are exceedingly tall.”

He laughed. “The good news is you will never lose me in a crowd.”

Her stomach growled and she slapped her hands over her middle.

Without embarrassing her more, he pointed to the door. “I, too, am famished. I will scrounge up breakfast if you would

like to use the necessary first.” He yawned and extended his arms over his head.

“Thank you.”

He marched out the door.

Juliet waited until his heavy footfalls faded from the corridor before she threw off the bedclothes and jammed her feet into her boots. She stood and pressed her palms down her skirts, trying to flatten the wrinkles, wishing for something else to wear.

She scrutinized the picture above the bed. She wanted to hate the intricately detailed painting, but the beauty of Celeste and her body were undeniable.

Feeling like an ugly duckling, she spied Celeste’s armoire. Her sister would not mind sharing her clothes, if Juliet could find something suitable. Their bodies weren’t similar, but a simple day dress might prove just the thing. Juliet could tie it tightly around her waist and gather the extra fabric that would cover Celeste’s ample bosom. With a turn of the key, the wardrobe door creaked open.

Did her sister own anything besides purple? The lavishness and extravagance of the fabrics and designs of the gowns were exceptional. With Celeste’s skin and dark hair, the color accentuated her features. Toward the back, Juliet glimpsed some simple gowns. She tugged one out and fingered the delicate material. She had never worn anything this fine. Why did the thought thrill her?

She peeked at the door.

No, Lieutenant Derby wasn’t the reason. She did not care if he spared her a passing glance. She only needed a fresh dress.

~

An hour later, Lieutenant Derby hailed a hackney. Beside herself with worry, Juliet trembled when he helped her into the carriage. He’d already given the driver the address.

“Are you chilled?” he asked as they jolted forward.

He probably believed her a total ninny, cold before they had been out of Celeste's townhouse a quarter hour. "No. I am a basket of nerves."

"We should arrive at Roderick's estate directly."

Juliet watched the city flash by. She folded her gloved hands in her lap and prayed they would find Celeste unharmed, not lying in an alley hurt and bleeding to death. "Where might she possibly be? If someone is holding her against her will, how will she survive? If someone has hurt her—"

Lieutenant Derby's hand settled over hers. "We will do everything to find her."

"But what if we are too late?"

"You are not an optimist, are you?"

"Decidedly not."

"Miss Young," he spoke like addressing a child. "Your sister is a resourceful woman. She's been living on her own since what age?"

"Celeste began her liaison with Sir Roderick at sixteen." His hand on hers gave her consolation.

"Are you older or younger than your sister?"

She smiled. "How kind of you to ask, but I'm sure you can tell I am older."

"I cannot tell. You have a youthful countenance."

"Whatever do you mean?" How dare he. "Are you implying I am puerile?"

"A gentleman would never imply anything of the sort. I simply meant that you do not look older." He clenched her hand tighter. "You are more prickly than a porcupine. I would attribute your mood to the possibility you are unpleasant in the morning, but since last night comes to mind, I believe this is often your mood."

"Please forgive my tongue. It often gets me in trouble."

A peculiar expression crossed his face and his gaze darted from her eyes to her lips.

The carriage stopped.

Shaking his head, he opened the door and jumped down. “I will return shortly.”

Crisp white shutters framed the elaborate red-brick home. Lieutenant Derby slammed the black knocker and waited.

A tall elegant butler opened the door. Juliet could not hear a word exchanged between the men, but saw the lieutenant hand the butler his card.

Once back in the carriage, Lieutenant Derby said, “Sir Roderick and his wife are attending the christening of their niece.”

Juliet’s heart clutched in her chest.

“They are due back day after the morrow. I will send a post asking him to meet us at my townhouse.”

An uncontrollable sob left her throat.

He reached in his pocket and handed her a handkerchief.

She wiped her nose. “I...I...”

“We will find her, Juliet.” The familiarity with which he used her name was not acceptable.

“I did not give you leave to use my name Lieutenant D—”

“Zachary. Or Zach.”

“That intimacy is not yet warranted.”

“I disagree.” His devilish grin caused her stomach to flip. “We have slept in the same room. Some would say we have been quite intimate.”

~

Zach studied Juliet while the carriage sped down the street. The dress she wore, too big in particular areas, complimented

her freckled skin. Celeste may prefer to wear purple, and she truly glowed in the color, but it favored her sister also.

Why was he fixating on her dress? Her skin? Her freckles? His reaction to her confounded him. “Juliet, as you know, I am a lieutenant for the Navy. Most recently I was assigned to finding missing orphans. If Celeste has indeed been kidnapped, because someone believed her an orphan, I can do much to find her.” He did not elaborate his suspicions of what might have happened to her sister.

“Oh, Zachary. Thank you.”

Why did her using his name please him? “Malcolm Westbourne is also assigned to this investigation and I will get word to him of your sister’s disappearance.”

She smiled. The simple gesture caressed his insides like a painter’s brush stroke against a canvas. “You give me hope.”

Chapter Five

As he approached Harrington's, Malcolm surveyed the orphanage. While not in a terrible state of decline, the gray building and dark windows manifested gloom. Not a place a child would find inviting. The front flowerbeds had long been overrun by unruly weeds and grass. He motioned to the two men behind him. "Henry. Patrick. Why don't you acquaint yourselves with the property?"

All three dismounted their horses and Malcolm jogged up the stairs. He tried the door, pleased to find it locked. He'd done the same thing on his way back to his inn last night, to check on the building without waking the children or their keeper.

He rapped the tarnished brass knocker.

Celia and an older boy answered. The little girl's face brightened upon seeing him. "Captain Westbourne, may I help you?"

"I am here to call on Miss Ashby."

Celia gestured for him to follow her. "I'll take him to the schoolroom, George." The boy bobbed his head, then closed and locked the door.

"Please follow me." Celia led the way.

The inside was as bad as the front, the walls a dreary, flat gray. When they turned a corner at the end of the foyer, growls and shouts erupted.

Katherine stood between two young boys in fisticuffs, their arms flailing. One of the boys threw a punch that connected with Katherine's stomach. She grunted and grabbed her middle.

"Stop!" Malcolm commanded.

Everyone froze.

Celia took a step backward, away from him.

He strode forward. “Are you hurt, Miss Ashby?”

Her eyes met his. “Oh, no. I am fine.”

Malcolm stopped himself from grabbing the boys by their collars, and instead glared at them.

Both boys, no older than six, stared up at him with wide eyes.

“Apologize to Miss Ashby.”

The boy who accidently hit Katherine said, “Sorry, Miss Ashby. I didn’t meant ta hit cha. I wanted to bloody Jacob’s lip.”

When the other boy offered no apology, Malcolm glowered. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

“No, sir. My aim was true. I didn’t hit her.”

Katherine put a hand over her mouth, humor brimming in her eyes.

Malcolm fought a smile. “Jacob, apologize to Miss Ashby.”

“But I didn’t touch her.”

“Gentlemen never fight in the presence of a lady,” Malcolm explained.

The boy pouted. “Miss Ashby, I am sorry Jonathon hit you.”

Before Katherine offered leniency, Malcolm said, “You will both go weed the front beds.”

“That is not our chore,” Jacob whined.

“You will do as Captain Westbourne says.” Katherine placed a hand on each of their shoulders. “That will be your punishment for fighting.”

The boys tramped down the hall, neither going particularly fast. Celia trailed at their heels.

Once the children were out of earshot, Katherine said, “They understand fighting is not allowed, but it invariably happens.”

“Perhaps the boys need more physical exercise.”

She laughed. “They will get it today tending the flowerbeds.”

He must make her laugh more often. She was quite lovely when happy, her entire countenance joyful.

A worried expression crossed her face. “The boys cannot venture outside without an adult.”

“My men have arrived to guard the orphanage. They are surveying the front and back of the property. Nothing will happen to the boys.” He escorted her outside and introduced her to Henry and Patrick, then accompanied her to the foyer.

“Thank you.” Katherine frowned. “The cost must—”

“It is necessary. I must take my leave, but please invite my men inside prior to your departure and introduce them to the children so they are not fearful of them.”

“I will.” Her brows pinched together on her forehead. “You have plans this evening?”

“I am expected at the Sharp estate. If you need anything, send word through my men.” He leaned over, raised her ungloved hand, and placed a kiss on the back. “I hope to see you again soon.”

Her eyes flickered with awareness before she smiled.

He must make her smile more too.

As Malcolm jogged down the steps, Jacob and Jonathon were on their knees yanking weeds from the flowerbeds. Three other boys kicked a ball behind them. Patrick watched from the corner of the lot.

“Well done, boys,” Malcolm said as he passed.

They continued without looking up.

He gestured to the boys kicking the ball. “You three should attend the other flowerbed.”

“But we are not fighting, sir,” a red-haired boy argued.

“You have never fought?”

The boys took considerable interest in their shoes.

“As I suspected.”

They slowly approached the other flowerbed and one muttered, “Who is he, anyway?”

Malcolm smirked. They would learn about him soon enough.

~

Malcolm rode to the Sharp estate and met with Estelle and Samuel, but neither had information on why Fitz attended their ball. He spent the afternoon with Samuel surveying his extensive property and mending broken fences.

Following dinner, he and Samuel escaped to one of the local pubs. They played cards, both ending the game with more blunt than they brought.

Samuel excused himself and the other men stood and left the table. The time neared midnight and Malcolm considered heading to his inn, but he was not tired. He slept like the dead on the rockiest of seas, but since docking, he'd not rested well. Wishing to blame it on the change of climate, or the steadiness of the earth, he could not. One woman was to blame for his lack of slumber.

Malcolm picked up a newspaper and scanned the headlines. An editorial on workhouse conditions caught his attention and he began reading the article.

“Excuse me?”

He lowered the paper and peered above it.

A man with dark brown hair advanced toward Malcolm. He looked vaguely familiar. “Captain Westbourne?”

“Have we met?”

“No. I don't believe our paths have crossed.” The older man pulled out a chair and sat.

“And how is it you know my name?”

“Mutual friends.” His words were cryptic at best.

“What might I do for you, Mr...?”

“Actually, I’m hoping my proposal will benefit us both.” The man sipped from the snifter in his hand. “My daughter is a spinster. You can imagine how this weighs on a father’s mind.”

Not really, but Malcolm did not comment.

“What will she do when I am dead and gone? Who will protect her? Care for her?”

“A cousin in the line?”

“Useless, the lot of them. I had hoped you might be able to help with my dilemma.”

Malcolm narrowed his eyes. “How?”

“Perhaps you might meet her, get her relaxed around you so she isn’t so frightened of men.” The gentleman, clearly upper class, watched him with wounded blue eyes. “Because of an event in her past, I do not believe she will ever feel comfortable with a man.”

“Why me?”

“I am told by our mutual acquaintance that you are an agreeable sort, and have a way with women.”

Malcolm laughed. This was ridiculous. He waved the man away. “I cannot grant your request.”

“All I am asking is for you to enjoy time with her. She’s a lovely girl.”

“It is not a question of your daughter’s beauty, sir. I have no interest in becoming involved with your daughter.”

The man sat back in the chair. “I am willing to pay you.”

Was his daughter that homely? Disfigured? Maybe at a different period in his life he would have agreed, but not now. The only company he craved was a dark-haired, brown-eyed beauty who fascinated him. “I cannot.”

The older man finished his drink. “I understand.” He set his glass on the table and held a hand out. “It was nice to meet

you, Captain Westbourne.”

Malcolm quickly pumped his hand. “And you, Mr...”

“Kenneth Ashby.”

Malcolm’s stomach clenched and a ringing sounded in his ears. Surely the man was not talking about Katherine. “Is this girl your only daughter?”

“I lost my other daughter while she was in childbirth. An identical twin to my Katherine.” Ashby spoke again, “I will have to find another man.”

Another man? His words ripped a hole in Malcolm’s chest. “You cannot.” He stood abruptly, knocking the chair to the floor.

Ashby spied him. “So, you are taken with my Katherine.” It was not a question.

“Pardon?”

“After speaking with Drake and Emma, I suspected you might have feelings for my daughter.”

Malcolm threw the paper on the table. “And this is how you bloody well determine that suspicion? Why didn’t you simply ask me?”

“We have never met, Captain Westbourne. I had no way of knowing if you were a sincere sort and truly had a strong attraction to my daughter.”

Attraction, obsession, was there a difference?

“Honestly, what would you have said had I approached you and introduced myself? We would have exchanged words, but I would not know how you feel about Katherine.”

Thinking of Katherine’s reaction to men, Malcolm understood her father’s unorthodox way of introducing himself. He ran a hand through his hair. “I do not think this bodes well for our future association.”

“My daughter is most important to me, Captain Westbourne.”

“Malcolm.”

Ashby smiled. “Malcolm. And I will do anything to see to her happiness.”

“I am interested in courting Katherine, but she is not being cooperative.” Malcolm took a deep breath. “What transpired in her past to make her so afraid of men?”

“She must explain.”

“It pains her to even think about it.” And it wounded him to see the terror in her expression.

Ashby’s eyes darkened, his face grave. “You must gain her trust. It is the only way she will tell you.”

“Shouldn’t I be prepared for whatever this dark secret is? Shouldn’t I have knowledge of what happened so I can help?”

“Probably.” Ashby sighed.

“Then tell me.”

“I cannot.” Ashby stood. “You will know how to help her when the time comes.”

If the time comes.

~

Zachary arrived at the Cummings’ residence, the home of Juliet’s sister, to find Juliet out front sitting on a bench, dressed in a yellow pelisse. Her hair would have been deemed fashionable, if not for its rebelliousness—errant red curls sticking out from the pins. “Lieutenant Derby, good to see you again.”

“And you, Miss Young. Are you ready to depart?”

“Eager.” She stood and swiftly walked toward his carriage.

He had not brought a footman and refused to fetch the step like one. So he gripped Juliet around her small waist and lifted her into the carriage. She squeaked and gasped. Once they were both inside, he knocked on the roof.

“Have you learned anything new?” She settled on the edge of the seat.

Zach plopped beside her as the carriage lurched forward. “I have not. I expect Captain Westbourne to return to London soon to tell me of his progress.”

She studied him for a long moment, her blue eyes bright. “Lieutenant, my brother-in-law, Bryce Cummings, informed me you belong to his club.”

“I did not realize that Bryce was the Cummings married to your sister. Yes, he belongs to White’s, and we often enjoy a drink together. An amiable fellow.”

“He and my sister, Ana, have been married two years now. I told him of our meeting the other night, and he assured me you are of good family and a reputable man.”

“You had doubts?”

“Not after...the night...not after our time together.”

“That appeared hard for you to say, Juliet.”

Her skin reddened. “No matter the circumstances, it was inappropriate for us to spend an entire night together.”

“Surely you did not tell anyone.” He might find himself leg-shackled—exactly what he had been trying to avoid.

“Of course not. I told my brother-in-law of your arrival at Celeste’s home, nothing else.”

When the carriage stopped, Zach opened the door and jumped out. He spun back to Juliet and helped her, the same as he’d done to lift her into the carriage. But on her descent, her eyes locked with his. He stilled, holding her aloft. After a second, he eased her down, their bodies brushing.

Her intake of breath matched his.

Not wanting to think about his reaction to her body so close to his, he quickly settled her hand in the crook of his arm and led her to the front door of his family’s townhouse.

They must make a most unlikely couple, he so tall and she so petite.

Sir Roderick had sent a note that he would arrive at Zachary's residence before noon.

Selridge greeted them, and Zach showed Juliet to the receiving room his mother used. The room was painted and decorated the color of a ripe peach, with a settee, mahogany desk, and small side table. Juliet settled on the settee, her hands nervously pinching the folds of her skirts. Zach walked to stand beside her.

She glanced up at him. "Your size is daunting, Lieutenant."

Before he could answer, he heard a knock. "Our guest is here."

In less than a minute, Selridge escorted Sir Roderick into the room.

"Good morning, Lieutenant Derby." Sir Roderick, dressed in formal black attire, held out his hand. His short dirty-blond hair was combed to perfection. When he saw Juliet, a frown etched his features. "Miss Young?"

"Sir Roderick." She rose.

He strode forward. "I did not realize you would be here."

She grimaced. "We need to ask you about Celeste. Can you tell us the last time you had contact with her?"

Roderick stiffened. "Why?"

"She has been missing since Friday last. We hoped you might be apprised of her whereabouts," Zach said.

Roderick clasped Juliet's hand. "Celeste must have told you we terminated our association."

"Yes, she did." Juliet nodded.

"But you were interested in continuing the relationship when it ended," Zach clarified.

"True. But my wife made it impossible for us to be together."

Juliet looked at Roderick, expectant. "We thought you might be apprised of her whereabouts."

“We have not communicated in months.” He tapped his chin. “Any time she leaves town, she goes to her family’s home. I assume you checked there.”

“I did.” Juliet’s voice sounded weak, and Zach itched to embrace her.

“Where was she last seen?” Roderick asked.

“At the orphanage where she offers French instruction,” Juliet explained.

“I am involved in an investigation into missing orphans. We believe she might have been mistakenly stolen as a child.” Zach rubbed his neck.

“Oh, no,” Roderick whispered. “They will find out quite quickly she’s not a child.”

“Which is another concern,” Zach said gravely. “Once the kidnappers realized she was not a child, they should have released her, unless they have other designs on her person.”

Roderick exhaled loudly. “I will kill anyone who harms a hair on her head.”

Juliet dropped onto the settee.

“We could be mistaken. But it is clear Celeste is not free to contact her family, or she would have by now. Can you think of anyone who would hurt her?” Zach inquired.

Roderick shook his head. “Everyone loves Celeste. She has the most gentle spirit.” His words were not those of a lover, but of a man in awe. “One has to enjoy her company mere seconds before one simply falls in love with her.”

Zach remembered how taken he’d been with her each time they’d met.

“How is your father taking this news?” Roderick asked Juliet.

“I have not yet told him of Celeste’s disappearance.” Her gaze locked with Zach’s.

Surprised, he quirked his head to the side.

“I should have sent word, but he has been ill lately and I did not wish him to fret.”

Zach couldn't understand. “You must tell him. Put yourself in his shoes.”

“My sister and I decided it best to wait until we gathered information on Celeste's disappearance before alerting Father. We hoped her disappearance was a trip she didn't tell us about.”

“She would not leave without informing someone,” Roderick said. “Would you like me to send your father a letter? It might be easier coming from me.”

“No.” Her voice strengthened. “I will tell him. In person.”

“Dear. You do not have to do this alone. I will go with you.”

“Sir Roderick, you cannot. Your wife would be furious if she knew you were involved in anything having to do with Celeste. That is why we invited you here to talk instead of coming to your home.” She turned to Zach. “Will you accompany me?”

Her question caught him off guard. Why would she not ask her sister to go? “Of course.”

“Please send word when you hear anything,” Roderick said.

“I will,” Juliet agreed.

What a complicated connection weaved between Roderick, Celeste, and her family.

~

In the carriage while conveying Juliet to Cummings' home, Zach rested his booted foot over his knee. “If we leave for Hertfordshire early enough tomorrow, we can travel back by nightfall.”

“It was unfair of me to ask you to escort me. You have an investigation to continue. I will visit my father by myself or get my sister to attend me.”

Zach leaned forward. “I want to go with you.”

Her stunned eyes searched his face. “Why?”

Damned if he knew. At their first meeting, Juliet acted so proper, so fiery, and so grateful, she confused him. After spending time with her, he found himself anticipating their trip on the morrow. “I can explain what is being done in the investigation to find your sister. That may put him at ease.”

She clutched his arm, her touch reaching all the way inside him. “Thank you.”

They were not attending to a pleasant errand, but if he could spend time in Juliet’s company, he would take it.

What that meant, he did not care to examine too closely.

Chapter Six

Malcolm had finally fallen asleep at four in the morning, too exhausted for his thoughts about Katherine, or meeting her father, to keep him awake. When roused by a scorching dream about Katherine, he longed to see her. He borrowed one of Samuel's curricles and bought some flowers before arriving at Harrington's around two.

Patrick hurried from the front steps.

"Any problems?" Malcolm descended the driver's seat.

"None. Henry kept watch during the night. Everything was quiet."

"Good." Malcolm strode to the back of the curricule to grab a crate. "I brought flowers for the boys to plant in the front beds. You will need to show them how to plant them."

"Will do, Cap'n."

Malcolm dropped the plants by the flowerbeds and entered the orphanage.

"You have no right," a man's angry voice rang out.

He peeked down the hallway toward the schoolroom.

"My lord, I respect your wishes for George to go into the Royal Navy, but he is not yet fifteen."

A jab of uneasiness poked him at Katherine's distressed voice. Malcolm proceeded toward the schoolroom to hear them better.

"He is my son, Miss Ashby, and I will secure his future." The man's deep spoken words stung the air.

"Yes, sir. But George is still a boy. Please allow him to stay until he is sixteen. The other children love him so. They will be distraught if he leaves."

Silence.

Malcolm wished he could see inside the room.

Finally, the masculine voice said, “I will take your words under advisement, but the final decision will be mine.”

“What about what George wants?”

He loved how Katherine did not cower from the man.

“He will want this once he understands the life it will provide for him.”

Malcolm detected heavy footfalls and he backed down the hallway to stand in another doorway. He watched the man stomp the other way, then entered the schoolroom. Katherine stood inside, her head in her hands. The desks and chairs faced one wall.

“Are you all right?”

She raised her head and offered him a weak smile. “Good afternoon. What brings you by today, Malcolm?”

He loved when she used his first name. “The boys did such a good job on the beds, I brought a few flowers for them to plant. The front of the building is in want of color.”

“It is rather dreadful. We do not have the funds for anything that isn’t in drastic need of repair.”

“I see.” That explained the dreary walls. He neared her, wanting to get her used to him being close and her responding in a good way, instead of being scared. “I overheard your conversation. George’s father seems insistent the boy join the Navy.”

“Yes.”

“Is George enthusiastic about the prospect?”

She shook her head. “But he will abide his father’s wishes. He is a good boy.”

“Perhaps in a year things will change.”

“Mayhap, if his father allows him to stay another year.” Katherine motioned to the doorway and they exited the room.

Suddenly, from around the corner, tiny Amelia ran to Malcolm and stopped. “Good afternoon, Miss Amelia. Anything I can assist you with?”

Tears swam in her blue eyes. Her bottom lip quivered, her hands clasped behind her. Malcolm reached down and she jumped into his arms, burying her face in his coat, her body shaking.

He straightened and hugged her.

Katherine rubbed the little girl’s back. “What happened?”

Silently crying, the child clutched Malcolm tightly. He had held his nieces and nephews when they were hurt or upset, but this was different. Poor Amelia suffered in silence, unable to express her needs. He’d encountered a few rescued children who would not respond or speak following their ordeals, and it always poked holes in his heart.

At least Amelia was at the right place to receive patience and love.

A robust woman rounded the corner. “Oh, glory be, thar she is.”

“What happened?” Katherine asked.

“She tried to feed that hound the boys found last week, but the blasted mongrel bit her.”

The child picked her head up, her face red and wet from tears.

“May I see your hand, sweetheart?” he coaxed.

She hesitated before showing him her palm. While he examined it, she tilted her head—inspecting it herself. Blood oozed from a tiny puncture wound on her palm. Malcolm gently turned her hand over. If it had been a vicious bite, there would be more bleeding and matching marks on the back of her hand.

“We must git rid of that dog at once,” the woman complained.

He wiped away Amelia's tears with his handkerchief, hoping the dog hadn't given her rabies. He'd witnessed the horrible effects of a dog bite, more than once. "How about we fix this right up."

The child leaned her head against his shoulder.

Malcolm's grim expression matched Katherine's as they made their way to the kitchen. "Where is the dog?" he asked.

"Out back," the woman trailing them said. "I shooed him out directly after it happened, but when I did, I lost lil Amelia."

He set Amelia on the worktable in the kitchen. "I will be right back. I want to inspect the dog." He spoke softly in Katherine's ear, "Treat it like any other scrape."

"Of course," she muttered.

The dog lay on the path at the back door and jumped up when it saw him. "Down," Malcolm instructed, and the dog backed away. It was a good size, but just a pup. He let out a small exhale of relief. Puppies did not carry the same diseases as full-grown dogs. He patted the pup's head. "I do hope you are healthy, boy."

Most people would kill the animal posthaste, but since the dog showed no signs of being rabid, Malcolm needed to find a way to quarantine it. Samuel's estate would be a good place to contain the animal.

When Malcolm entered the kitchen again, Katherine and the other woman were wrapping a bandage around the moppet's hand. He approached as they finished and Amelia immediately lifted her hands toward him. Malcolm picked her up.

"Captain Westbourne, I would like to invite your men inside when the children are indoors." Katherine swiped Amelia's hair out of the child's eyes.

"I am sure they would appreciate that."

"Mrs. Stanford." Katherine spun toward the other woman. "This is Captain Westbourne. A great friend to Lord and Lady Drake."

“And to you,” he said.

“Well, yes, and to me.”

“It is nice to make your acquaintance, Cap’n.”

“And yours.” He faced Katherine. “I must go. But I will surely see you tonight. The Sharps invited me to accompany them to the Elders’ ball.”

“I will see you there.”

He set Amelia on her feet. “No playing with any dogs.”

She bobbed her head.

If only she would utter a word.

~

All Katherine could think about was Malcolm. After witnessing him treat Amelia with such care and concern, she had to do something to distance herself from him. She was becoming more and more enchanted with this knight in officer’s clothing.

A suit between them would never work. Not only because of her past, but also because he roamed the world with the Navy while her life was here in Oxford. She could never move.

Their lives did not match up.

She would have to do something drastic tonight to make him understand she was not interested in his attentions.

As her carriage pulled to the front of the Duke of Elder’s home, she gripped her reticule, determined to find the most available men in desperate need of her dowry. She had no intention of marrying any of them, but if she held one’s attention and put on a jolly good show, Malcolm would get the message and go along his way.

Waiting for the carriage door to open, a feeling of bereavement settled over her.

Why?

Surely it didn't have anything to do with Malcolm and her plans to flirt with other men.

Yet, that must be the reason.

Heavens, when had she developed this attachment? When meeting him a year ago, she spent a few days in his presence, but had not seen him again until three days last. Her grief was not simply from wanting to trick him into believing she was taken with another man, but also from knowing he would be leaving after her ruse. She'd so enjoyed his impromptu visits to Harrington's the last few days.

She entered the ballroom and pasted a smile on her lips while trying to settle her grieving heart. After greeting her hostess, Katherine shuffled toward the active end of the ballroom, away from the couches and *crones* as Malcolm called them.

Next to the refreshment table, she stopped and greeted a few of the come-outs of the season, but instantly felt out of place. They invited her to join them in the park on the morrow. What dunderheads. This was why she never socialized with the younger girls, their juvenile conversations were a total waste of her time. She would be at Harrington's tomorrow, like every day.

She excused herself and hustled to another group where the occupants were still younger than herself, their chatter about horses. Katherine knew all she wanted about the animals.

Leaving that congregation, she tried one after another, until she finally sat in a chair by the wall, next to the wallflowers. Two of the girls were pretty, but wore threadbare dresses; clearly hoping to catch the eye of a rich man. One girl was dressed in so many ruffles they made it hard to view her face and generous body, but her eyes—if one looked closely—showed an enchanting spirit. And the other girl, dressed in white, with large blue eyes, watched the people around her with a terrified expression.

Katherine did not belong on this side of the ballroom. No, she should be sitting with the elderly women, talking about her

orphans and all that needed to be done to help the less fortunate.

I will not flit around trying to catch some poor bastard's eye while appearing the fool. She would have to find another way to thwart Malcolm's advances.

But he'd made no advances today. He'd only been helpful and caring.

~

Malcolm entered the ballroom and looked around for Katherine. He scanned the divans, but didn't see her beautiful face. After checking everywhere else, he found her sitting with the wallflowers. What the hell? He approached her quickly, before some young buck asked her to dance. "Miss Ashby, I do believe this is my dance."

Clearly startled, Katherine jerked and gazed up at him. "Captain Westbourne?"

"Indeed." He bowed. "My dance."

She had heeded his warning and wore no headpiece. The dark strands of her hair were piled high atop her head, and he itched to pluck out every pin and run his fingers through its shiny softness. He should not know the texture, the silkiness. But he did.

Covetous eyes watched them as he tugged her toward the dance floor.

He'd already searched the ball for Fitz, but the bastard must have got the message, because he was nowhere to be found tonight.

"How about a stroll around the gardens?" he asked Katherine when the music ended.

She nodded.

Enveloping her hand between his arm and opposite hand, he stroked the backs of her gloved fingers. Attendees crowded the paths that snaked around the huge flowering gardens. Statues

marked different sections and around each a plethora of buds bloomed, shadowed in the dark of night. Once down the third terrace the occupants thinned, and they found themselves virtually alone while voices still echoed around them.

He stopped in an alcove hidden by foliage and gripped both her hands. “What the bloody hell were you doing sitting with the wallflowers?”

“They are lovely girls.”

“You don’t belong with them.”

“I don’t belong anywhere.”

Her sadness pierced him. She belonged with him, damn it.

“Thank you for your help with Amelia today,” she said. “She spent much of the afternoon staring out the front window, searching for you would be my guess.”

“While she does not speak, she seems to understand everything.”

“She does. It is quite sad.”

Probably sadder than Katherine imagined.

“The pup does not appear to have rabies, but Samuel’s stablehands are keeping close watch on the dog.” He spoke about the animal, trying to distract himself, but to no avail. Seeing her sitting against the wall, in a dress made to render a male mute, he could not hold his tongue or his body back any longer. “Katherine, I am pleased our interactions have returned to the ease we enjoyed at Westbourne.”

“As am I.”

“So I hope you do not find this forward.” He leaned his head toward her and captured her lips with his. He could not be in her company and sit idly by, not when he wanted, needed, craved her so badly.

She flailed her arms.

Malcolm swiftly broke the kiss. *Hell and damnation*. He was not accustomed to coaxing a woman to intimacy. Not when so many readily gave away their favors.

Katherine froze, but did not back away.

He took that as a good sign and grabbed her waist to pull her closer. "You do not have to do anything." His lips touched hers again. He was undemanding in the kiss and reveled in her suppleness. His hands lifted to frame her face.

She flinched, like a skittish mare. He understood a lot about calming a horse, but nothing about reassuring a woman.

However, he wanted this woman.

He sensed the moment she started thinking about the kiss. Her hands came to his chest, but she did not push him away. He acted like he had not noticed the defensive maneuver and kept his mouth against hers.

And that was when everything made sense. He was pursuing her the wrong way. He would have to let Katherine make the decision to move forward with their relationship. Instead of trying to bombard her and make her forget herself, he would have to awaken the want in her. Gently, slyly, painstakingly patiently.

He released her, and they only touched lips to lips. Nowhere else. He waited, letting her make the decision on whether to prolong the kiss or stop.

She moved closer, her shaky palm rising to his cheek. Triumphant, Malcolm exalted in her eagerness. Adding pressure to his lips, she was obviously curious, but nervous as hell too. She fumbled for his wrist and when she found it, moved his hand to her waist.

He left that hand where she put it and splayed his other on the small of her back and slowly pulled her close with gentle pressure. She sighed when their bodies brushed more intimately. It took all his power not to devour her.

A heartbeat later, she furthered the caress. He clamped down his desire and let her explore and experiment.

As long as he could.

But every man had a breaking point.

His came when she slipped her arms around his neck and rose to her tiptoes to align her body to his. Hip to hip, breast to chest.

Desire thrummed through him, his blood surging to a rhythm she set off inside him. The beat of his heart, blood, and body compounded into dire need.

Malcolm took over the kiss, not forcefully, but he needed to make her understand his limits. Gradually, he pulled away. “Katherine, you cannot deny you are attracted to me.”

She buried her face in his coat and shook her head, her panting music to his ears.

“And you can tell I desire you.”

“Yes.”

“Look at me, darling.”

She glanced up, and he saw his future, for the first time, in her stunned brown eyes.

Malcolm kissed her again, slowly, gently.

When he ended the kiss, Katherine’s lips were red as a rose and passion flared in her eyes. “We must return to the ball.”

Hating to hear those words, he conceded their truth, stealing one last quick kiss. “I caused some of your hair to fall.”

“I will go directly to the retiring room. Will I see you inside?”

“Not if I can avoid it. I plan to relay my thanks to the host and escape.”

She laughed. “Is it really that distasteful to come to balls?”

“It is.”

“Then why did you attend?”

“There is one reason I am here. And she stands before me in a confection of pink that both tantalizes and teases me. I will go anywhere I must to be close to you.”

“You are close to me now.”

“And I would rather be nowhere else.” Except, he conceded to himself, in bed with her.

~

Katherine darted toward the side entrance of the house, the one nearest the retiring room. Once inside, she dashed to the last mirror on the wall and examined the damage.

“Can I be of service?” A young servant dressed in black with a white apron walked up behind Katherine.

“Oh, thank you.” She sat on a stool in front of the mirror.

The girl pulled out a couple of pins to repair the hair Malcolm loosened. Katherine’s heart beat against her chest remembering his kisses.

During all their interactions, he’d been the aggressor, the instigator, but halfway through their time in the garden he’d somehow taken a step back and let her lead. Let her explore to a degree she never guessed herself possible of. And it had been glorious. She could have kissed him for it.

She had kissed him.

A laugh bubbled from within her.

The maid finished with Katherine’s hair and walked away.

“Miss Ashby. I am so pleased you are here tonight.” It was Mrs. William, the woman who’d recently begun volunteering at the orphanage. Her beautiful green eyes lively.

“Such a delight, Mrs. William.”

The elegant woman sat next to Katherine. “Do you enjoy these affairs?”

“Not until tonight.”

The woman grinned. “And what might prove the reason for your sudden change of heart?”

Katherine shrugged.

“Mayhap the officer you were dancing with?”

“Perhaps.”

Mrs. William whispered, “And who might the officer be?”

“Captain Malcolm Westbourne.”

“That is Captain Westbourne? His reputation precedes him.”

Katherine did not like the tone of the words Mrs. William spoke. They were throaty. And her eyes lit like sparkling emeralds when she continued. “One has to wonder if he is as skilled as the gossip mill insists.”

Not wanting to hear more, Katherine stood and checked her face in the mirror. Her reaction to the woman’s words was silly. She knew of Malcolm’s reputation, it was no secret. Hearing it, however, set her afire with fury.

~

Malcolm leaned against the ballroom wall talking with Samuel. The guests circled in motion and whirled on the dance floor, while music and chatter filled the air.

“Captain Westbourne.” Malcolm spun toward the familiar voice.

Silas Green, dressed in his naval uniform, approached with his sister Brianna on his arm. There was only one reason for Green to come all this way. He must have news from London.

“Lieutenant Green. Miss Green.” Malcolm had met the lieutenant’s triplet sisters. Each sister had dark-red hair and green eyes, but Brianna was especially delightful, even with her lack of sight.

“Captain Westbourne.” Brianna beamed. “How lovely to find you in Oxford.”

“Indeed. You too.” He reached for her outstretched fingers and bent to kiss her gloved hand.

Samuel stepped closer. “Miss Green. I am not sure if you remember, we met last fall in London. I am—”

“Of course I remember, Lord Sharp. I never forget a voice. I do hope your darling wife is in attendance this evening.”

“She will be delighted you are here. Shall I take you to her?”

“That would be lovely.” Brianna let go of Silas and stretched out her hand.

After Brianna and Samuel were on their way, Silas tilted his head toward the foyer.

Malcolm followed him out the front door, not stopping until they passed the last carriage on the street. Darkness had fallen, but enough light spilled from the Elder estate to see clearly.

“I have news from London.”

Of course you do. Malcolm scolded himself and was glad he had not voiced his sarcasm. Why was he riled?

Green searched the area. “Since Brianna gained an invitation to this ball, I took the opportunity and we made the journey.”

“So Brianna knows of your purpose.”

“She’s actually part of it. One of the female students at her school has been missing for five days. Last anyone saw of her, she’d ventured outside to sit on the benches and enjoy the sunshine.” A perturbed expression crossed Green’s face. “You and I both know what some people use blind women for.”

Holy hell. Malcolm briefly closed his eyes. For centuries the unfortunate women had been used for prostitution.

But there were schools for the blind now. Ignorant people finally realized the worth in people like Brianna—quick-witted, funny, simply charming. The world was becoming more civilized.

Wasn’t it?

If what he witnessed in Africa and the West Indies was any indication, the answer was no.

“I will not return Brianna to Coleman’s until that student is found and her abductor caught.”

Malcolm would feel the same if one of his sisters attended the school.

“Also, Lieutenant Derby sends word that Miss Celeste Young is missing.” Green explained her disappearance and how no one had seen her since she visited an orphanage.

“Forgive me, but did Zach appear ape-drunk when he told you this? No one would ever mistake Celeste for a child.”

“That was my reaction, but he and Miss Young’s sister argued that in a cape or coat, Celeste might resemble a young girl. From our research, we have determined the kidnappers are abducting children aged ten to fourteen.”

“And the blind child?”

“Thirteen.”

“Oh, hell.” With these new developments came an urgency to visit St. Lucien’s Orphanage and get his arse back to London. A pang wrenched in Malcolm’s chest. He hated to leave Katherine, just when he was succeeding in getting her comfortable with him. But if anyone would understand his responsibilities, she would. “I will leave for Reading at first light.” He filled Green in on why he was still in Oxford hoping to learn anything about Fitz being at the Sharps’ ball, or to catch sight of the bastard again.

“Lieutenant Derby and I have called on all the orphanages on the list, but learned nothing on possible captors.”

Malcolm rubbed his eyes. “Where are they hiding the children?”

“We still haven’t been able to figure that out.”

“The London docks?”

“We have men combing the waterfront every day, but the area is so vast, it seems fruitless. And there has been no activity near Fitz’s ship or other slaver ships we know about.” Green took a cleansing breath. “I do have news from Southampton. *The Greyhound* caught fire.”

Prickles spread throughout Malcolm’s body. “While in port?” He had captained that ship the last few years.

“Yes, in the dead of night. Once the guards saw the flames, it was too late. She sank, sir.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“No one was aboard when it happened.”

“Thank God.” However, someone had to be responsible for the fire. “It did not ignite on its own.”

“No, but no one witnessed anything untoward around the vessel beforehand.”

“Of course not, it was nighttime.” The tingles became stinging nettles inside him. Someone had purposely set his craft afire. Many slavers knew of his ship. Would Fitz, or any of them, dare to cripple him by assaulting his vessel? This changed everything. Someone was not only attacking him, but the Royal Navy as well.

Green and he returned to the ballroom to find Brianna, Estelle, and Katherine in a circle talking with another woman.

Silas murmured to Malcolm, “Brianna is upset about something.”

“How can you tell?”

“Her puckered brow. Yes, something is troubling her.”

As they got closer, Malcolm heard the women’s conversation.

“Mrs. William, are you certain you have never visited Coleman’s School for the Blind?” Brianna asked the unfamiliar woman.

“Never.”

“The timbre of your voice reminds me of a volunteer at my school.”

The woman giggled. “I must have a voice twin.”

“You must.” Brianna laughed. And no one would sense she was overwrought, but Malcolm believed Silas, he knew his sister best.

Katherine interjected, “Mrs. William has recently moved to town and now volunteers at Harrington’s. This week she brought the most delightful clothes for the children.”

Estelle clasped the woman's hand. "How charitable of you."

"Nonsense, the clothes were from my siblings' children, who long outgrew them."

Green's concerned eyes met Malcolm's before he walked around the women to take Brianna's hand. "Dear, we must thank our hosts."

"Oh, yes. Please excuse us," she said to the ladies. Malcolm followed Silas and Brianna as they neared the hosts. Maneuvering Brianna to the wall, Silas and Malcolm stood with their backs to the ballroom, blocking prying eyes.

"What is wrong, Brianna?" Silas inquired.

"That woman is the same who volunteers at my school, except she does not use the name Mrs. William." Her hand trembled as she brushed a red curl from her forehead.

"How can you be sure?" Malcolm leaned closer.

She tilted her head, her eyes staring ahead. "Her voice and scent are the same."

"Are you positive?" Silas asked. "How many times have you met her?"

"She assisted at the school at least half a dozen times." She huffed. "You know I never forget someone after I've met them."

"I know," Green agreed.

"Why would she pretend to be someone else?" Brianna hissed. "When she visits Coleman's she uses the name Willa Fitz."

Fitz? William Fitz. Mrs. William. Willa Fitz.

Panic surged through Malcolm. He spun around and found Estelle in the same spot, but Katherine and the other woman were gone.

Christ.

He craned his neck, searching the assembly, but spotted neither woman. "Bloody hell. Katherine's gone."

“What?” Brianna lifted a hand to her throat.

Silas placed her hand on his arm. “Miss Ashby and Mrs. William have disappeared. If Mrs. William is not who she pretends to be, we must find Miss Ashby posthaste.”

“Oh, heavens.”

“I will bring you to Lady Sharp. Tell no one of this, Brie.”

“Of course not.”

The three of them rushed to Estelle. Malcolm asked, “Where is Miss Ashby?”

“She and Mrs. William spoke of the retiring room.”

He couldn’t bloody well check there.

“Lady Sharp.” Brianna smiled. “Would you mind leading me to the necessary?”

“At your service, Miss Green.” Estelle lifted Brianna’s hand to her own arm. “This way.”

As the ladies walked away, Silas said, “You take the gardens. I’ll check the house.”

Malcolm stormed toward the French doors. Fitz attending the Sharps’ and this woman using multiple names all somehow related to William Fitz spiked fear in him. He did not like this. Not one bloody bit.

Frantic, he searched every nook of the garden, interrupting quite a few tête-à-têtes and lover’s trysts. From the back of the house, he ran around the side to the front and checked the drive, but saw no carriages leaving.

Three deep breaths did nothing to calm him.

He should have kept a better eye on Katherine.

A surge of fear spiked from his stomach to his throat. Where was she?

She cannot be gone.

If Fitz had her, no telling what he would do to her.

Chapter Seven

Katherine spotted Malcolm when she returned to the ballroom. A scowl etched his handsome face. What caused his mood?

With the information Mrs. William presented earlier, Katherine should be angry with him and his public reputation.

He strode with heavy footfalls toward Brianna Green. She'd only met the young woman earlier this evening, but Katherine liked her immediately. Beautiful and witty, she dispelled the misconception that blind individuals were useless. When Brianna explained she was one of triplets, Katherine felt an instant kinship to her. And when Katherine told of being a twin herself and of Elizabeth's death, Brianna somehow found her hand and squeezed it. "God blesses those left behind."

Thinking about the words now made her smile. What a lovely girl.

Malcolm stood next to Lieutenant Green and Brianna, the men scanning the assembly. When Malcolm's glare came to rest on her, he set a path straight for her, a menacing glower on his face.

She retreated two steps when he approached her.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Mr. Elder wanted to make a donation. I have been with him in the study."

"Where did Mrs. William go?"

She shrugged and looked around. "I do not see her." Her heart gave an extra hard pound against her ribs. Why did he wish to locate Mrs. William? Did he have designs on the beautiful woman?

"I will escort you home." He grabbed her arm and pulled her forward.

“Thank you, Captain Westbourne, but I can find my own way.” Katherine stopped.

He tugged her arm again. “I insist.”

She refused to move while narrowing her eyes at him. “I did not ask and do not need your aid.”

“You will have it anyway. We have much to discuss.”

“I don’t,” she clarified.

“Then you will listen.”

Well, she didn’t like this side of Malcolm. It seemed he had personalities aplenty, but the ravisher of kisses was no longer present. At least not to her.

Lieutenant Green and Brianna strolled over. “Miss Ashby, I am so pleased we found you.” The lieutenant kept perusing the crowd.

“Whatever is this about?” she asked.

“I will explain on the ride.” Malcolm gripped her arm tighter. “Lieutenant, Miss Green. We bid you a good night.”

Katherine yanked her arm from Malcolm’s grasp and shot him a look that dared him to touch her again. “Brianna...” Katherine clasped the fingers of the girl’s free hand. “It was a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. I do hope we can meet again soon.”

Brianna leaned forward. “Captain Westbourne is in a temper because he was worried when he could not find you. Please do not be put out with him.”

What a perceptive girl.

“Listen to the reasons for his boorish behavior.” Brianna pulled back a fraction. “I believe I am the cause for it. And I pray I was correct in my assumptions.” Her words were a puzzle.

“Yes, Miss Green.” Katherine curtsied toward Lieutenant Green. “Good night.”

“And to you.” He bowed.

Katherine turned toward Malcolm. “May I retrieve my cloak or are we in such a rush I must catch my death of cold on the journey home?”

Brianna laughed behind her.

The color in Malcolm’s face heightened to a shade of infuriated red as he led her out of the ballroom. He surprised her when he quoted Shakespeare. “*Blow, blow, thou winter wind, thou art not so unkind as man’s ingratitude.*”

“Ingratitude, is it?”

“Your ingratitude for my concern.”

Boorish, indeed.

~

Once in Katherine’s carriage, Malcolm made sure the curtains were pulled over the windows.

“Why are you furious with me?” she asked.

“I’m not. I thought someone abducted you.”

“Abducted me?”

How he wished to pull her into his arms until his heart found its usual rhythm. “We have reason to believe Mrs. William may be involved in the kidnappings of the orphans.”

She snapped her head back against the carriage seat. “What?”

“Brianna, Miss Green, recognized her voice.”

“Yes, Brianna admitted as much, but Mrs. William explained she used to live in Liverpool.”

“Lieutenant Green has never known Brianna to forget anyone after being introduced. Plus, Brianna said the woman also had the same scent as the one who visited her school. Her name is Mrs. Fitz.”

Katherine listened, her gaze never leaving his.

“We have chased after a Mr. Fitz for years, a man we believe to be a slaver.”

“Oh, my.”

“If the woman returns to Harrington’s to volunteer, you must send a message to the magistrate immediately and have my men detain her.”

“I will see to it.” She wiped her brow with a handkerchief from her reticule. “Mrs. William or Mrs. Fitz, whoever she is, spoke of you.”

“Me? Tonight was the first time I have ever seen her.”

“She saw us together and questioned me about who you were. When I told her your name, she mentioned your reputation.”

“So? You learned of my reputation at Westbourne. I have nothing to hide from you.”

“Or from anyone else. The gossip mills are apparently rampant with tales of your...”

“My?”

“Promiscuousness.”

Feeling like a crab flopped on its back, Malcolm decided the truth was his only way to explain. “The women I associated with—”

“Don’t.”

He kept his voice quiet. “Not one of the women I bedded meant anything to me. Not one.” He wished for a way to make her understand.

“Yet you shared the most intimate act with them.”

“I have not bedded a woman since we met at Westbourne.”

She froze, her eyes unblinking.

Was she scared? Stunned? Happy? With the shadows in the carriage, it was impossible to read her expression.

“Why?” she finally croaked.

A thorned-stem, that. He did not answer, trying to figure out what to say.

She did not move. "I daresay, since you have been at sea for a year, you have not had time for a..."

"A man will always make time, if he is so inclined."

"Why haven't you...made time?"

He moved to the spot next to her. "Because for some reason, I am consumed with thoughts of you. I cannot give another woman my attention." He reached for her hand.

She flinched.

Damn it. This evening in the garden, he had finally got her to accept his nearness and now she recoiled again. He would not start the process of earning her trust all over. "Why do you cringe when I get close?"

"I do not care for it when men crowd me."

"Like I do."

"Yes."

"But tonight you allowed me closer proximity to your person. The other night we danced and strolled together. I've been to Harrington's to see you. Have I taken advantage?"

She shook her head and audibly exhaled.

"Then why do I still scare you?"

"Not all gentlemen are who they pretend to be. Some are much different in private than in public."

He began to get an inkling of what happened to her. "I am always the same man. Whether we are in a crowded ballroom, or alone, like now."

"You are capable of great strength."

Her words were like arrows piercing his skin. "I would never use my strength against you."

"Thank you," she answered flatly.

"My words do not reassure you, do they?"

“Not particularly.”

“You must learn to trust me, Katherine.” So her problems with men stemmed from someone she had known, trusted, and who had great strength. How he wished he could solve this riddle, but his time in Oxford had run out. “I am leaving for Reading in the morning. I must investigate the missing children.”

“Of course.”

“Katherine, I hate to leave things unsettled between us.”

“They are not unsettled.”

“Yes, they are. You kissed me tonight. You wanted to kiss me.” He scooped her up and set her on his lap.

She squeaked.

“Just as I wanted to kiss you.” He released her when she sat sideways over his thighs. So that she might trust him not to accost her, he folded his arms over his chest. “I do not want you to go anywhere alone. A woman has been abducted from one of the London orphanages.”

“A woman?”

“Yes, and since you are somewhat petite, you might be mistaken for a child under your cloak.” He would never mistake her for a child, though. Not with her voluptuous curves and luscious body.

She faced him. “I will have our driver escort me wherever I venture. And you already have the other men guarding the orphanage.”

He sighed, glad she did not argue. “Thank you. Your safety is of the utmost importance to me.”

Katherine stared into his eyes for a long moment, then dropped her head against his shoulder. “When can I tell Amelia you will return?”

“I cannot say. The sooner we get this matter under control, the better for everyone involved.”

She shivered.

Malcolm attempted to unfold his arms. Katherine sat up so he could move and waited until his arms dropped and rested on the seat before she replaced her head to his shoulder.

Gingerly, he used one hand to rub her back and his other to caress her cheek. Her tremors eased, and she snuggled closer. He tightened his hold and rested his chin on the top of her head. His racing heart finally slowing.

The carriage stopped.

Damn.

She didn't jump from his lap as he expected. "I will miss you." Sitting up, she ran her hand over his lapel. "I wish you a safe journey."

He escorted her to the door and it opened before they reached the steps. A man in serviceable clothing waited over the threshold.

"Thank you, Captain Westbourne," she said.

"Rest well, Miss Ashby."

She waved to the man at the door and he disappeared. "Malcolm, please be careful. Your safety is of the utmost importance to me also."

His breath released in a rush. Her softly uttered words meant more than she could comprehend. He reached out and clasped her hand, giving it a squeeze, ever mindful of the driver waiting at the carriage. "Until we meet again."

She smiled and entered the house.

He strode to the carriage and unleashed his horse. Swinging onto Endicott's back, he took off toward Harrington's. He wanted to check on Amelia and the other children. His men would be able to give him an update, then he would set out for Reading in the morning.

The eventful night occupied his mind, especially the parts with Katherine—her sweet kisses, his crippling sense of panic when he was not able to locate her, the scent of wine on her lips.

He examined the facts, like he did on his assignments. His days were consumed by thoughts of Katherine. He enjoyed her company more than any other woman of his acquaintance. When she laughed he wanted to join her, knowing whatever brought her joy would do the same for him. Her smile, not to mention her touch, strangely calmed him while exciting him.

Bloody hell. Facts did not lie.

I am in love with Katherine.

Chapter Eight

Malcolm rested the remainder of the night on the sofa in Harrington's office and left at first light. He arrived in Reading by mid-morning and immediately rode to St. Lucien's Orphanage. The building, butted next to the church, consisted of little more than decaying stone with a wrought iron gate in front. Babbling voices could be heard from the open windows.

An old man sat in front of the church with a knife in one hand and a piece of wood in the other. He stopped whittling when he saw Malcolm. "Your business?"

"I am here about the missing child."

The man perused Malcolm's naval uniform as he approached the locked fence. "A relation of yours?"

As a matter of fact he was, but it didn't seem the right time to announce that. "I am here to investigate the boy's disappearance."

The man unlocked the gate. "We are more careful these days. Don't want to lose any other children. Lil' Charles was a good boy."

"It is wise to keep up your guard at all times."

"You will find Tomas inside. He will assist you however you may need."

"How often do you have people patrol the orphanage?"

The stooped older man closed the gate. "We diligently keep watch day and night now. The parishioners help."

Impressive, that a parish would be so concerned about orphans. Malcolm entered the huge oak door and a teenage boy immediately met him. "Good morning, sir. May I help you?"

"I am here to meet with Tomas. I am Captain Westbourne." He held out a card with his information.

“If you will wait in here...” The boy pointed toward a room. “I will retrieve Tomas.”

Malcolm entered the sparsely furnished room. Four open windows emitted plenty of light. With merely a desk and two chairs, this room was surely used only to greet visitors. There was not so much as a piece of parchment on the desk.

“Captain Westbourne.”

Malcolm spun toward the feeble voice.

“I am Tomas.” The elderly man hobbled into the room and settled in the chair behind the desk. “Forgive me, but these ancient legs don’t hold me as steady as they once did.”

“Of course.” Malcolm sat across from him. “Tomas, if you don’t mind my asking, how did you come to St. Lucien’s?”

Tomas’s lips made a grim line. “Following my father’s death, I found myself incarcerated and my neck headed for the hangman’s noose.” His wheezing breaths rattled around the room. “The magistrate miraculously believed in my innocence and investigated to find the guilty party. The kindness he showed me affected me so greatly I devoted my life to helping others. For years I did it as a clergyman, then twenty-five years ago I retired and have run this orphanage ever since.”

“That’s quite a story.”

“I have struggled to succeed with the orphans, but the disappearance of Charles has proven I am too old to manage this facility any longer. Before I relinquish my post, we must find the boy.” The place may not have lots of embellishments, but Tomas obviously championed each orphan.

“I am sure you have heard of the other abductions.”

“Yes. But I did not hear of them before Charles’s disappearance. If I had, I would not have let any of the children out of my sight.” Tomas pounded a fist on the desk.

“I need a detailed account of what happened the day Charles disappeared. Anything you might be able to impart to help us find him.”

“Of course, my son. I will give you all the information I have.”

For the next hour, Malcolm listened and took notes. “Do you have any new volunteers?”

“Not since Charles’s disappearance.”

“And before that?”

Tomas tapped a finger against his lips. “A couple of months ago a new parishioner began helping. What a delightful woman. The children loved her.”

“Is she still volunteering?”

“I have not seen her in a few weeks.”

A chill snaked up Malcolm’s spine. “May I ask her name?”

“Mrs. Fitzroy.”

Damn, Fitz. Malcolm stood, not able to keep still. “Do you have her direction?”

“Well, no. The church registry should have that information. Why?”

“She may be responsible for Charles’s abduction.” He explained about Fitz and the woman using different names volunteering at the blind school and Katherine’s orphanage.

“Oh, no. She was so kind.”

“Did she have green eyes?” Malcolm asked.

“Yes, so vibrant those eyes.”

“I believe that is the woman we seek. If she returns, please send word to the magistrate immediately.”

“I will. I will.” Tomas wrung his blue-veined hands.

Malcolm stepped forward.

Tomas shook his hand. “Please don’t think me forward for asking, but are you Colin Westbourne’s brother?”

“Aye.”

“Your name being Westbourne, I suspected you might be brothers. Plus, you resemble each other a great deal.”

“I regret I did not learn about Charles before now. My brother’s wife, Antoinette, is of the same mind. She will welcome Charles into their home if he wishes to live with them.”

“I am pleased to hear that.”

Now Malcolm just had to find the boy.

~

Zachary stretched his neck as the carriage barreled forward on the bumpy road back to London.

“Thank you for your help in telling Father,” Juliet said. “I am curious why you insisted I tell him though. Why were you so adamant?”

Sadness draped his heart, making it ache. “Parents have a right to know what is happening to their children. No matter the age, no matter the news. But I understand why you did not tell your father until now. He did seem weak.”

“It is sad to see him in such a state of decline.”

She did not ask more about his persistence, for which he was grateful. The carriage jolted to the left, bringing the side of Juliet’s body against his. Her warm, tiny body. His breath quickened.

“Oh, my. This path is abominable.” She bounced, her side again colliding with his.

His body stiffened. His groin hardened. Painfully.

What was he doing having a reaction to this woman? She was nothing like his ideal. But, he wanted to learn everything about her. To uncover her secrets. Share her inquisitiveness. Kiss her pink lips.

He gripped her hand to steady her. Catching her scent of lemonade and sunshine, he rubbed her fingers—their gloves

providing a needed barrier. But oh, how he longed to feel her skin against his.

Their eyes locked.

Her blue day dress matched her eyes, making them appear like a hot flame. Her riotous hair fell from the stylish coiffure in uncontrollable curls.

“Sir. Trouble ahead,” Peter shouted from the driver’s seat.

Zach held her wrist, resting his fingers on the pressure point and felt her heartbeat, before letting her hand go. “I need to see what lies ahead.”

She inhaled, making her chest swell.

“What shall I do?” Peter called.

He had to concentrate to look away from Juliet. He opened the carriage door and leaned his body out as the conveyance kept moving.

“Zachary!” she exclaimed.

He bent over and inclined his head back inside. “I am going to let them see me. Usually my size alone makes thieves think twice about robbing me.” To be honest, he welcomed the distraction and wished for a way to release some of the tension from his body.

“Peter, stop.” Zach pounded on the roof.

The carriage immediately slowed. He jumped out and closed the door. He ambled to the front and stroked the horse’s neck before checking the animal’s leg, all the while furtively studying the three men on horseback. As they approached, Zach straightened to his full height.

The lead man tilted his head. “Afternoon.”

“And to you,” Zach called in a gravelly voice.

They rode by and continued on the road. Peter looked down at him. “You do have a way with people, sir.”

Wispy pink clouds streaked across the sky. In an hour, dusk would fall. “Let us get to London before the real reprobates

emerge from the night.” He opened the door and reentered the carriage. Had it become smaller? He sat across from Juliet this time. If he touched her again, he might do something she did not want. “All taken care of.”

“I saw. They did not even stop their horses. I must admit, you make a girl feel safe.”

When she broke eye contact with him, he finally blinked. “I am glad.”

“How much longer before we make London?” She’d traveled this road to and from her father’s home more than he had. Why was she asking him?

“An hour or so would be my guess.”

She lifted a hand and brushed away an uncontrollable lock of hair from her forehead. “I am so worried for Celeste. I am fearful my father will worsen now that he knows about her disappearance.”

He gripped her hand again, trying to lend her support. “Whatever happens, I will help.”

“Thank you.”

He stared at her lips, aching to taste them.

Wait.

What am I doing?

Dallying with this girl would be inappropriate. She was distraught over her sister’s disappearance.

But he could not deny his growing attraction or this undeniable pull toward her.

~

On his ride to London, the last few days ran through Malcolm’s mind. Love was a complicated proposition. Never one to waffle or have a hard time making decisions, he suffered anxiety pondering Katherine.

What is my life without her?

Empty and incomplete.

His life had always been a complicated tangle. His work put him on the outside peering in at all times, because he must assess every situation to bring about needed results—lives depended on it. And with what he'd survived the last fifteen years with the Navy—he doubted anyone would understand the darkness draping his soul.

He faked his way in ballrooms, at dinners, and with liaisons, but was truly contented nowhere. Except next to Katherine—wherever that may be. She believed she belonged nowhere, but he knew exactly where she belonged. With him.

His siblings did not know he had visited their father since Malcolm's eighteenth birthday. They would not understand so he had not told them. Because of what happened with his mother and father, Malcolm never planned to marry. When his youngest sibling died in childbirth, his mother blamed their father. She insisted he was the reason she lost the babe and convinced all the children to rally behind her against Father. In truth, Mother had complications during the delivery. The doctor went to Father and said he could not save both and made Father choose between his wife and the child. A decision no man should have to make. Mother never fully recovered from the birth and died a year later. His father had loved her so much, that even after her death, he would not say anything against her and continued to be ostracized by his family. Malcolm did not want to love someone to that degree. To give them that much power over him.

But did he have a choice? Was love an all or nothing proposition?

That question scared the hell out of him.

He was tempted to detour to Harrington's, but knew he would upset Katherine if he stopped and proclaimed she belonged with him. He wanted her with him so he could protect her, but what right did he have to declare that? He couldn't make any promises until this investigation was complete.

He remembered her kiss from the night before. Her tentative acceptance that transformed into a soul deep caress. His body ached. Heavens, what sensations the woman aroused in him.

And she desired him, too, he knew it. From somewhere deep, somewhere dark, somewhere in his soul, he wanted to shout, *Take me, Katherine.*

He had waited a long time to find a woman who intrigued him. A woman who cared for others more than herself. A woman he desired both out of the bedroom and in it.

Somehow, he would reach the woman inside. The fun, sweet, witty woman he knew her to be.

He hated leaving things unresolved, but perhaps a little distance would make Katherine miss him. Make her realize she enjoyed having him about.

Or...

He bent over Endicott's back.

Or maybe he would lose her forever.

Chapter Nine

Malcolm arrived in London at dusk. Pain radiated from his backside, down his legs, all the way to his toes. He did not usually ride so long. He brought Endicott to the stable and entered the back door of the townhouse. The scent of roasted duck and potatoes made his mouth water. Barkly was in the kitchen at the long pine table eating. He began to stand from the bench, but Malcolm motioned him back to his seat.

“Finish your meal. I will join you if you don’t mind.” Malcolm washed his hands at the sink.

“Your brothers will expect you to eat with them this evening since they are still in residence.”

“I have too much to do. After I eat, I must visit Zach.”

“Any luck with the investigation?”

Malcolm grabbed a bowl out of the cabinet and scooped some potatoes and meat from the pot hanging over the fire. “Some.” He went on to explain about Fitz and Mrs. William. The juicy richness of the spices exploded in his mouth. “How do things fare here?”

Barkly turned his head toward the door, then back at Malcolm. “Strained. Everyone is upset about Charles.”

“Good,” Malcolm sighed with disgust. “My brother should be suffering.”

“One man cannot judge another, Malcolm.”

“I’m not judging Colin. I simply can’t believe he would...I am judging him. Damn.” Malcolm wiped his mouth with a serviette and changed the subject. “Have you received the glass needed to fix my compass?”

“Not yet. Monsieur Pierre has ordered the glass and could not give a date when it would be delivered.”

He finished his dinner while they talked. Before he’d sailed a year ago, Malcolm had told Barkly about Katherine. He

explained about seeing her again while in Oxford. “She confounds me like no other woman of my acquaintance.”

“It sounds like Miss Ashby needs time.”

“Time I do not have,” Malcolm said under his breath. “Anyway, I am worried we will not find the missing children.”

“You have more at risk since your nephew is one of them.” Barkly tugged at the sleeves of his coat. “We both know you will do whatever is humanly possible to find them. If that proves not to be enough, it will not be your fault.”

Malcolm wished he possessed Barkly’s simple way of seeing things. “You are right.” He put his bowl in the sink. “I must be off.”

As he strode to the stable, Malcolm remembered the day Barkly had been shoved onto the auction block. Malcolm stood at the back of the assembly, buying slaves to deliver them to Freetown. His father had given him thousands of pounds the last time Malcolm visited, wanting to help free as many Africans as possible. Although only a teenager at the time, Barkly stood tall and majestic. Chin jutting out, one would have sworn he was receiving an honor instead of being sold into slavery. Malcolm stepped forward and Barkly’s gaze met his. Shrewdness lurked in his eyes, a type of wisdom young boys did not possess. In that instant, Malcolm knew his purpose for being in the West Indies that particular day was to free the boy.

Malcolm gripped Endicott’s reins feeling like a ship tossed helplessly about the sea, but remembering Barkly’s rescue heartened his resolve to find the children before any of them were subjected to the horrors Barkly suffered.

~

After visiting Zach’s residence and finding him out, Malcolm rushed back to his family’s townhouse and settled in the study with numerous maps of Africa spread across the desk. His brothers and their wives stopped in on their way out

and encouraged him to attend a ball with them. Malcolm refused, begging off that he was too tired from his ride.

In truth, the only balls he wanted to attend should have a beautiful, beguiling woman who entertained his dreams and every waking moment. He missed Katherine already.

A knock sounded at the study door.

“Enter,” Malcolm called.

“You have a guest, sir.”

“Let me in the bloody door.” Drake shouldered past Barkly, headed for the side table, and seized the port decanter.

“Lord Drake began visiting your brothers last week. He arrives about this time each night.” *To drink*, Barkly mouthed.

His chestnut hair in disarray, cravat hanging around his neck but not tied, Drake’s skin was as pale as baking flour.

“Barkly,” Malcolm said. “Please have a couple of plates of roasted duck prepared.”

“None for me.” Drake contemplated the decanter as if he wanted to tear the top off and drink from it. Eventually, he sloshed a hearty amount into a glass and gulped it.

Malcolm glanced at Barkly, who nodded and left.

“I hear congratulations—”

“Don’t. I cannot tolerate one other person wishing me congratulatory praise over the babe.” Drake downed what remained in his glass. “I cannot survive this again.”

Since Drake lost his first wife in childbirth, Malcolm sympathized and understood his distress, but Drake was wallowing a bit deeply in self-pity, especially if he was coming here to get jug-bitten every night.

Malcolm smirked. “There are ways to prevent pregnancy.”

“And I’ve used every one of them. But obviously one failed.”

“Have you tried abstinence?”

“I’m married, not dead.” Drake poured more port into his glass.

Malcolm would give anything to be in Drake’s shoes—to have a darling wife, a precious daughter, and another child on the way.

“I am still befuddled how she became pregnant.”

Malcolm laughed.

Drake slowly faced him with a murderous scowl, his blue eyes piercing. “I have a gun, Malcolm, and I am itching for a reason to use it.”

“What do you want me to say? You’re making this a nightmare. Take it for the blessing it is.”

“You don’t understand.” His friend ran a hand across his face and put the empty glass on the desk, his hand shaking.

Maybe women weren’t worth the trouble. Malcolm’s life was easy and free. Did he want to complicate it with getting married and having a family? One thought of Katherine and complications took on a whole new meaning.

“I apologize for barging in like this.”

Malcolm’s lips made a grim line. “We’re friends, Drake. You are always welcome here.”

“Thanks. Trevor and Colin told me you docked and were off to Oxford and Reading.” He sat in a chair in front of the desk. “Did you see Katherine?”

“Aye.”

“And how is my sister-in-law?”

Malcolm shrugged. “Still terrified of men.”

“Did you expect a year away would cure her?”

“No...Maybe.” He flexed his fingers. “You must tell me what happened in her past.”

“Elizabeth told me in confidence. As much as it may help your cause, I cannot.”

Barkly entered the room and placed a platter of food on the table between the two leather chairs.

“Thank you, Barkly.” Malcolm came around the desk to sit next to Drake, who began eating. “Emma is excited about the baby?” Malcolm asked.

“Overjoyed. She is quite large at this point, but still has a month to go before the baby is due. Samantha keeps running to Emma and talking to her belly like she’s conversing with a playmate.”

“I realize you are afraid what happened to Elizabeth will happen to Emma, but I have witnessed and assisted with many births. We never lost a babe or a mother.”

Drake quietly spoke, a wealth of pain in his voice. “I want to believe she will be fine, but since we arrived in London last week, and the birth is so close, I feel helpless.”

~

Katherine entered the house and rested her back against the door. After two days of non-stop rain, the children were in desperate need of physical exercise and had been particularly trying today. Not bad, just restless.

Amelia’s injury no longer required a bandage and Lord Sharp had visited today, reporting the dog was healthy. One tragedy escaped.

Katherine lifted from the door as their butler approached and helped her out of her cape. “How are you today, Sims?”

His hollow cheeks were concave in his thin face. “Fine, Miss Ashby. Yourself?”

“I would love to see the sun shine.”

“That would be a welcome change.” He folded her cloak over his arm. “Your father is in his study if you would like to join him.”

“And Mother?”

“Mrs. Ashby has not come down for dinner.”

“Is she planning to?”

He shook his head, sadness in his eyes.

Poor Mother. Rain usually sullied her mood—not that she needed a reason to lock herself away, she did it so often. She never breakfasted and rarely ate dinner with them.

Poor Mother?

Why did they tolerate her moods? No matter how she felt, Katherine got out of bed each morning and faced her responsibilities.

“Tell Father I will join him in a minute.” Katherine climbed the stairs with determined purpose. She marched to her mother’s suite of rooms and knocked.

Betsy answered. “Miss Ashby, good to see you.”

“I would like to speak with my mother.”

“She is not receiving visitors.”

“I am not a visitor.” She brushed past the servant and across the sitting room. The rooms were feminine, from the pictures of flowers on the walls to the embroidered pink counterpane. The scent of roses lingered in the air. Two candles burned on the bedside table. “Mother?”

Slowly, her mother turned from the window. “Katherine, my dear, how was your day?”

“Good. Any time I spend with the children is blessed. Are you coming to the dining room for dinner?”

“I plan to have a plate sent up.” Still beautiful with her dark hair and Katherine’s same dark almond-shaped eyes, her mother rose from her chair.

It was high time someone broke her out of her melancholy mood. “Why can’t you eat in the dining room? You cannot continue to spend all your time hiding away here night after night.”

“I have not been doing that.”

“Since the Drakes left you have, like you’ve done since Elizabeth’s death.” There, she’d finally said it.

Mother picked up a crocheted blanket from the foot of the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. “I suppose I miss Samantha being underfoot.”

“We all do. Even the servants miss her. But there is a difference. We go on with our lives while you sit in this room and sulk.” She hesitated, hating the next words that needed to be said. “I miss Elizabeth too. But I do not spend each day mourning her.”

Her mother stared at her.

“Father preaches patience where you are concerned and says that I do not understand what it is like to lose a child. And he is right. But I lost a twin, my best friend.” Her voice rose higher. “The only person in the world who knew everything about me and loved me anyway.” A sniff stopped her tears. “Not a minute goes by when I do not wish she was still alive. But I go on with my life. Elizabeth would insist.”

Clearly stunned, her mother tilted her head toward the ground.

“Do you have any idea what your withdrawal from life is doing to Father? Is it not enough he lost a brother and a daughter?”

Mother looked up. “He did not lose a brother.”

That stung. “Yes, he did. Because of me.”

“Surely you do not blame yourself.”

Katherine closed her eyes and swallowed the tears clogging her throat, willing herself not to cry. “I do not wish to discuss it.”

“You always refuse to talk about it. How is that different from my wanting to be alone?”

“I continue living.”

Her mother winced, as if Katherine slapped her face.

“How long will Father tolerate your moods? What is to stop him from finding someone else?”

“Your father would never stray. He loves me.”

Katherine sent up a prayer of forgiveness before her next words. “Then I am sure my having seen Father and Gwendolyn Turnbow at the side of the Sharp ballroom having a private conversation is of no import.”

She left the room quickly. Once out the door, she leaned against the wall. Her own words echoed in her head, *What is to stop him from finding someone else?*

Malcolm.

Would he find someone else? Had she pushed him away too many times? Did he consider her worth the bother? How rude of her not to return his letters. How immature of her to flinch every time he touched her. She was not a helpless girl and he was not her uncle.

Her heart ached. With heavy footfalls she descended the steps and entered her father’s study. He sat behind the desk, an account book in hand. “Are you all right, dear?”

“No.” She wasn’t ready to share her quagmire of feelings for Malcolm. “I asked Mother to join us for dinner.”

“I see.”

“I doubt she will.”

“I must admit, my curiosity is piqued as to why you asked her.”

She stalked across the room. “She is acting like a child.” And Katherine hated that she acted much the same way where Malcolm was concerned. But she had learned how to avoid and mask what happened in her life. Instead of taking the route her mother chose and hiding, Katherine barreled through life while still distancing herself from others, keeping her heart closed.

Her father did not comment on her words. Instead, he picked up a letter. “We have been summoned to London. Seems Emma will, and I quote, ‘Challenge my husband to a

duel, not to kill him of course, but to maim him so he will not fuss over me one more minute.”

Needing the distraction, Katherine laughed. “No doubt he’s impossible to live with at this point. She only has a month left before the babe is expected.”

“Yes.” Her father grinned. “Also, she says a diversion for Samantha is needed. Can you spend some time away from Harrington’s?”

“I would do anything to avoid Drake being maimed.” Maybe she would have occasion to see Malcolm while in Town. Her heart beat faster.

“Good evening.”

They both spun toward the voice. Mother stood in the doorway. Transformed from minutes before, her hair was now pinned at her nape and Katherine had never seen the gown she wore, but the royal blue was stunning with her coloring.

“Sarah.” Father stood and crossed the room. “You look lovely.”

Katherine watched with fascination while her father kissed her mother’s cheek.

Sims cleared his throat. “Dinner is served.”

Katherine followed her parents to the dining room. Her father stopped at the threshold and waited for both women to enter in front of him.

Mother grabbed her hand. “I raised a clever daughter.”

“You raised two clever daughters.” Katherine lowered her voice. “I did not mean to overstep in your bedroom earlier.”

“Yes, you did.” Her mother winked.

Chapter Ten

Early the next afternoon, Malcolm slid from atop Endicott and handed the reins to a young boy who ran from the side of the Drake townhouse. The cream brick structure with unique arched windows was different than most of the residences in this area.

Jackson answered the door. Light glinted off the tall elderly butler's bald head. "Captain Westbourne. Welcome."

"Thank you, Jackson. I am hoping to visit with Lord and Lady Drake."

"Please come in. Lord Drake and Miss Samantha are currently out, but Lady Drake is in the library. I am quite sure she would appreciate your company."

Malcolm followed the butler, studying the seascape paintings lining the hallway. Since meeting Drake a year ago, he had not visited any of the viscount's estates. The door to the study stood open, and one wall in the room also had paintings with crashing waves and stormy skies.

Jackson knocked on the doorjamb.

Malcolm stepped around Jackson and entered. Emma sat on a settee, a book in her hand. Her golden hair hung in ringlets around her face, the perfect complement to her sparkling green eyes.

"Lady Drake, I presume?"

Her eyes lit up. "Malcolm. Oh, how lovely to see you. Please forgive me for not getting up. I fear I may topple over if I try to stand."

With her belly's protrusion, he wondered how she walked at all, let alone managed to get out of a chair on her own. How would she look after another month of the babe growing? Her face was pale, and he remembered his brothers telling him of her shooting. They explained that her father shot Emma, and in retaliation, Drake shot and killed the man.

He neared her and engulfed one of her hands in both of his. “How are you feeling?”

“Much like an obese monkey.”

He laughed and sat next to her. “I am sorry I was not able to visit after your injury.”

“Do not apologize. I knew your ship was leaving. Remember, it’s the reason you did not escort me to Oxford and confront Katherine about fleeing Westbourne.”

“Yes, but I wish I might have been here to help.”

“Nothing you could have done about my injury. Bother that.” Pain flickered across her features. “I do wish things had been handled differently, but my father made the situation impossible.”

Malcolm patted her hand.

“I am thankful Drake was not injured.” Suddenly, the pain in her expression cleared.

“I understand Drake and Miss Samantha are out.”

“Yes, they set out for the park earlier.” Emma studied him. “How long have you been back?”

“I docked a little over a week ago, but left for Oxford the same day and just returned yesterday.”

“To see Katherine?”

“Not exactly. Orphans are being abducted. I am heading the investigation.”

“Before we left the Ashbys’ estate to travel here to London, Katherine told me some children—Wait...” She gripped his arm. “Does this mean one of Katherine’s—”

“No. No children from Harrington’s have been abducted. And I have men guarding it now.”

“Oh. Thank heavens. I am not sure Katherine would survive one of her children being captured.”

He emphatically agreed with her statement.

“Have you seen her, then?” she asked.

“I have.”

“And?”

“She refuses to explain why she fled Westbourne, and quite honestly, her skittishness prevents me from pressing the issue.”

Emma frowned. “It isn’t you, Malcolm. You realize that, don’t you?”

He shrugged.

“I believe you and she will find an accord.”

“I guess time will tell.” Emma and he had forged a friendship after his father’s death. She had been married to his father the last five years of his life, and was the only person he’d told that he secretly visited Father. “First, however, I must find these missing children.”

“I will pray for your success.” A door slammed, and she jumped. She looked at the doorway, then back at him, her hands restless in her lap.

“Is something amiss?”

“I expected that to be Drake and Samantha, but we would hear Samantha if she were here.” She peeked at the door again. “Drake is driving me mad. He constantly fusses over me, he...”

Malcolm remembered Drake’s visit last night and how frantic the poor man was.

“I try not to show any distress, but it seems every move I make causes him unease. I wish the babe would arrive soon.” Her eyes, a bit panicky, met his. “I...I...”

He leaned closer, never having heard her stutter.

“You told me about working with The West Africa Squadron and how you helped deliver babes aboard ship.” She glared at the door once more. “Did you lose any of the women or babes?”

“Not one.”

“How many births were you involved with?”

“Before I took the post in Africa, I worked with a midwife in London as part of my training. Many births had been reported when slaves were rescued, so as captain I needed to be prepared. I helped the midwife deliver a dozen or so babies. Aboard ship, I assisted with half a dozen more. Why do you ask? Are you experiencing any problems?”

“Oh, no. I am perfectly healthy. Just a tad uncomfortable.”

“That is to be expected.”

“Yes. My doctor assures me everything is fine. Plus, the Lord would not take me from Drake and Samantha. Not with what we suffered through to finally be together.”

Until the babe came, neither Emma nor Drake would rest. Both worried about each other. Such love present between the two.

A longing to see Katherine filled him.

~

Over the next few days, Malcolm scoured the streets of London for the stolen orphans, at times alone, at others with Green or Zachary. But it was like searching for a select few grains of colored sand along a vast beach. Impossible.

He entered the townhouse and Barkly greeted him. “Anything?”

With a tired sigh, Malcolm shook his head. “I need to bathe. Please tell my family I will join them for dinner.”

“Of course.”

He filled his brothers and sisters-in-law in on the investigation while they ate. Anxious for news of Charles, they asked many questions, most of which he could not answer. During dinner, he heard a knock at the door, but no one interrupted their meal. He excused himself from the dining room and found Drake in the study, nursing a brandy.

“You are early tonight. I fear you will become a drunkard, Drake.” He’d shown up every night, usually not until midnight.

“Me, too, but I only drink while here.” Drake held out the glass as if making a toast. “Won’t you join me?”

“I believe I will.” Malcolm served himself a finger of brandy and sat in the wingback chair next to Drake.

“How is your investigation going?”

“Slow, tedious, and unsuccessful. The last lead we had was at a charity ball in Oxford. A known slaver attended, someone who would sell his own soul to the devil for a profit.” He twirled the cut-glass crystal between his hands. “At a different ball, a woman who has been volunteering at orphanages attended. We believe she is helping the slaver by becoming involved in different schools and picking the right time to steal a student or orphan. We have not been able to find either the slaver or this woman since last week.”

“Who would invite people like that to their ball?”

“They were not invited. The woman was only found out because a blind woman recognized her scent and voice as someone who volunteered at her school, but by a different name. Also, a young girl was stolen from the blind school.”

“Someone stole a blind child? Whatever for?”

Malcolm leaned his head back. “We’re guessing she will be sold into prostitution.”

“Holy Mother.” Drake stood and paced the Persian carpet. “There must be a way to draw the woman or the slaver out. Why not put on a charity ball? If they did not have invitations to the balls where you saw them, maybe they will find a way to attend.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Trevor would—”

Malcolm shook his head. “The slaver and I are acquainted. He would never attend if my brother put on a ball.”

“What about my mother? She and Aunt Mildred would love to help, and honestly, we all need a distraction from Emma and the baby. These last weeks will seem like a lifetime.”

“We do not have a lot of time. It is imperative we find the children quickly, before they can be transported out of London.”

“My mother can fill a ballroom with the snap of her fingers. The ball will be the *on dit* by supper tomorrow night at the *ton* members’ dinner tables. She can have the invitations made and delivered tomorrow and host the ball at week’s end.”

“Your mother and aunt are a force.” Malcolm had witnessed their talent for mayhem at Westbourne.

“Come by this evening and we will discuss it with Mother and Aunt Mildred. We’re expecting the Ashbys.”

“Katherine is coming to town?” Something kicked in his chest at the thought of seeing her.

“Yes, and I must leave soon to be present for their arrival.”

“I will visit before nine.”

Drake stood and drained his glass. “Are you positive the children have not yet been put aboard ship and sent to the West Indies?”

“No, but we keep reinforcements where English children have been sold before. I do not believe the slaver has shipped out. We have men watching his ship, and it has had no activity. I’ve watched it myself. Nothing.”

“Could he have purchased another ship?”

“Not likely. The bastard is too cheap to spend any blunt on a better or faster ship. Fitz’s soul is darker than coal. Some of the things he’s...” He cut off his words, refusing to let his emotions take over. “The blackguard must be stopped.”

~

Weary from their journey, Katherine dressed for dinner, letting one of Drake’s upstairs maids freshen her hair. Her

family had arrived in London an hour earlier and settled into their accustomed rooms in Drake's townhouse. Such wonderful memories she enjoyed of her sister and Drake in this house.

She hoped to purchase needed items for the children while in town. As she clipped a bauble on her ear, she checked her reflection. She'd not slept well since Malcolm left Oxford, and the pallor of her skin and shadows beneath her eyes were the telling signs.

Heavens, what was happening to her? At night she considered taking something to help her sleep, but after the incident with her uncle and how she'd not slept without the aid of laudanum for three years, she decided against it. Katherine had not been afraid of the dark, but frightened of the continuous nightmares of the attack she'd survived. At the age of thirteen, she finally refused the medicine. Elizabeth stayed up with her each night while Katherine shook and perspired, until either exhaustion overtook them or the sun rose. Eventually, the dreams lessened and she'd been able to sleep without aid.

Dragging herself downstairs, she found Drake and Emma still in the study where they greeted her an hour earlier. She studied a seascape Elizabeth and she had found at a local market. The sun's rays, filtered by puffy clouds, glistened off the waves in flickering sparks. When they'd seen the huge painting, now hanging behind the desk, both fell in love with it. Elizabeth had remarked how she remembered Father taking them on vacation to visit friends who lived near the sea.

After dinner, Drake and Katherine helped Emma to the study to sit on the settee with her feet propped on a stool. Poor Emma. She must be miserable, her belly unbearably full, but a smile still danced on her face.

"You didn't need to come down, Katherine. We could have sent a tray to your room," Emma said.

"Nonsense. I very much wanted to dine with the two of you."

"Good evening," a familiar voice called.

Katherine's heart tripped at the sight of Malcolm in the doorway. He looked so handsome in his crisp clean uniform that molded to his powerful body. His eyes met hers, before he bowed to the room.

It took all her strength not to run headlong into his arms.

"Malcolm," Emma called from her seat, "so nice of you to stop by."

Drake pumped Malcolm's hand and walked out the door. Katherine heard him and Jackson speaking.

Malcolm approached the settee and kissed Emma's hand. "How are you feeling today?"

Emma patted her stomach. "Blessed."

Malcolm whispered something to her and they both chuckled. Then he faced Katherine. "Miss Ashby." He crossed the room and bent over her hand. Instead of kissing the back, he brought her palm to his lips.

Even with gloves, the gesture was improper. Her body instantly heated.

"What brings you to London?" he asked.

Drake returned to his wife's side and Katherine murmured to Malcolm, "Emma asked our family to intercede before she maimed Drake for his over protectiveness."

"He is not himself these days." He rubbed Katherine's fingers

"How is your investigation going?"

"Not as well as we hoped."

"I hear a ball is to be held."

"Yes. We are hopeful Mrs. William or Mr. Fitz will attend. We are still keeping vigilant watch over Fitz's ship, but there has been no activity around the vessel since our investigation began." He still held her hand in his. "How are the children?"

"Well."

"And Amelia?"

“She’s fine, and the dog is healthy.”

“Malcolm. How wonderful to see you.” Drake’s mother, Claudette, entered the room and rushed toward him, with Aunt Mildred following.

Malcolm dropped Katherine’s hand, and the loss of his touch disturbed her.

He kissed both women’s hands. “Four of the prettiest ladies in London are right here in this room.”

“You always were quite astute, Captain Westbourne.” Aunt Mildred’s voice carried like a cannon shot. Plump, her face round and rosy, Mildred was abrupt, but extraordinarily kind.

Claudette clapped excitedly. “Drake has explained everything, and the invitations are to be delivered first thing in the morning. We will have them in the post by noon.” Elizabeth had felt so blessed having Claudette as a mother-in-law and Katherine understood why. Claudette was a woman you could count on. Her graying brown hair and pale blue eyes didn’t take away from her beauty.

“My sisters-in-law will arrive at first light to help,” Malcolm said.

“If only I might attend,” Emma remarked wistfully.

Drake stiffened. Katherine had never seen him so nervous.

Claudette neared Emma and put a hand on her shoulder. “Another time, dear.”

While Claudette, Aunt Mildred, and Drake fussed over Emma, Malcolm leaned closer to Katherine. “Did you travel alone?”

“No. Mother and Father begged off dinner. They were weary from our journey and retired when we arrived.”

He rubbed his thumb under her eye. “You look exhausted yourself.”

“I am fine.” No longer shying away from his touch, she now reveled in his gentle caress. “Would you consider spending the afternoon with me tomorrow, Malcolm?”

He hesitated, as if he was thinking.

“I need to get shoes for some of the children. I was going to ask Drake to help me shop, to get him away from Emma, but with the ball I’m sure his mother and aunt will monopolize his time. If you would escort me, I would be grateful.”

“Forever at your service, Miss Ashby.”

Shocked, she stared straight ahead. *Forever?*

Chapter Eleven

Drizzling rain and fog produced a haze about the afternoon, making Malcolm wish he was escorting Katherine to his bed instead of around London. To hold her whilst they listened to the rhythm of the rain. Naked, of course. And there would be occasion for them to listen to each other from time to time—perhaps not coherent words, but pleasure filled sounds. All the while, keeping the world at bay.

Such thoughts only tormented him. God, how he wanted her. And as much as he desired her body, he wanted her trust more.

He should probably have refused to accompany her around town when she asked. A niggling part of his mind wrestled with the notion that being seen with her might put her in danger since he did not know who set fire to his ship. But the last week, Zachary, Green, and he had shadowed each other and were convinced no one was following any of them. Plus, he knew a district of town where more affordable wares were sold, so they would not need to shop the merchants on Bond Street. The chances of an acquaintance seeing them were minute.

Jackson answered the door, his bald head gleaming. “Captain Westbourne. Miss Ashby asked that you wait here.” He motioned to the foyer. “She is fetching her cloak.”

“Thank you.”

Hearing voices from down the hallway, Malcolm smiled when Antoinette, Margaret, Claudette, and Aunt Mildred bustled toward him.

Claudette beamed. “We have finished addressing the invitations. The ball is to be held at my dear friend Lord Harold Nelson’s home. He invites you to visit anytime between now and the ball.”

Lord Nelson was a well-known parliament member. An outspoken man, but deemed fair.

“Everything is set.” Claudette handed Malcolm a card with Nelson’s address, before she thanked his brothers’ wives. “I am so grateful for your help this morning.”

Antoinette squeezed Malcolm’s arm. “It is for a good cause.” That was when he realized no one, save Margaret, knew of Antoinette’s worry over Charles. He had not even told Katherine about the boy yet.

A tingling tickled his nape, and Malcolm twisted his head and glanced up. Katherine descended the large staircase, a shy smile on her lips and a sparkle in her eyes. “Afternoon, Captain Westbourne.”

“And to you, Miss Ashby.”

At the bottom step, she clasped Claudette’s hand. “Please inform my parents of my plans to spend the rest of the day shopping. I do not wish to disturb their time with Samantha.”

After saying their goodbyes, Katherine and Malcolm escaped out the front door.

“Oh, what a dreadful day.” Katherine flipped the hood of her cape over her head.

“You are mistaken, Miss Ashby.” Malcolm opened an umbrella and smiled at her. “With you by my side, it promises to be quite lovely.”

“You are quick with words.”

“And accurate,” he said.

She laughed, making him smile.

They visited a cobbler’s establishment and spent much of their time there. Malcolm escorted her into a sweet shop, made an order, and handed two bags to Katherine.

“You will spoil the children, Malcolm. They do not need this.”

“They deserve the treats.”

She held up the bags. “This is too much.”

He retrieved a bag from her. “One is in case we must set sail.” He opened the shop door and they stepped onto the sodden sidewalk. A light sprinkle still fell, but they remained under the awnings as they walked. Malcolm reached in his coat pocket for his compass, then shook his head. He wondered when Barkly would get it fixed, it was as if a part of Malcolm was missing.

“If you do not mind, we will visit Lord Nelson’s home before returning to Drake’s townhouse.”

“I would enjoy that.”

Malcolm discussed their direction with the driver, and minutes later, the carriage pulled to a stop. He descended and helped Katherine down. “It is splendid,” she said.

The three-story home was decorated with colored glass windows. A butler opened the door and Malcolm handed him his card.

“Captain Westbourne, please come in. Lady Drake explained you would come to inspect the hall and grounds.”

“Is Lord Nelson in?”

“No, sir. He’s standing in parliament today.” The butler nodded toward the corridor. “If you’ll follow me.” They entered a huge ballroom. “Please stay as long as you wish and view the gardens. I’ll be waiting at the front foyer.”

“Thank you,” Malcolm replied.

The white marble flooring included elaborate scrollwork with black and gold crosses and crowns. Windows overlooking the side and rear of the property accented two of the light yellow walls. Katherine and he ambled across the hall, his booted feet thudding on the tile. They exited a pair of colored glass doors.

“Oh my,” Katherine whispered.

The sunken gardens were filled with blooming flowers of different colors, resembling a kaleidoscope. He helped her

down the steps to get a better view. An elderly gardener snipped two red roses and stripped the thorns. “For the lady.”

“Thank you.” Katherine accepted the flowers. “Your gardens are heavenly.”

“Blessed ground.” He pointed toward a tiny chapel at the back of the property. “Please go inside. The windows are even more beautiful from within.”

Katherine held on to Malcolm’s arm, and he escorted her to the building. He eased open the creaky wooden door and silence greeted them—silence and a welcoming awareness. Perhaps it was the way the colored windows glistened in spite of the overcast sky, or the pleasant scent of incense, but whatever the reason, the place felt hallowed.

They sat in the pew facing a tiny stone altar. “This is a special place,” she said.

“I feel it, as well.” He’d been on blessed ground before, spots steeped in history that had a life, as this chapel did, but he had not experienced the same connection to the other places. Calm, happy, content sitting in the chapel with Katherine next to him, he slowly slipped his arm around her shoulders and let his burdens and responsibilities fade away. Minutes slipped by as they sat together, peaceful and relaxed. If only they might stay here forever.

But Malcolm had to report to Admiral Tisdale’s office soon. He rubbed her shoulder. “We must take our leave.”

Dusk began to descend when they left the chapel. The already gloomy sky had taken on the appearance of a muddy loch.

The day had been the most delightful mix of banter, smiles, and laughter. She no longer shied away every time he was near. They had achieved so much, but how far did they still have to go?

He did not have time to contemplate that now. “I will be busy the next few days preparing for the ball.”

“I understand.”

Grasping her hand, he linked their fingers. “You no longer jump when I touch you. You must know how that pleases me.”

“Me too.”

He tugged the glove off her hand and kissed her palm, as he’d done last night, this time without anything between his lips and her skin. He placed her hand on his chest. “You cause my heart to race.”

Wide-eyed, she gazed at him.

He could look into those eyes forever. “It has never raced this way for any other woman. Please understand that.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder and rested her palm on his heart—her touch a soothing balm.

The carriage stopped.

He alit from the door while the footman brought around a step. Malcolm held Katherine’s hand while she descended. Once at the townhouse door, Malcolm kissed her hand. “Thank you for your company today, Miss Ashby.”

“And for yours, Captain Westbourne.”

He knocked, and after Jackson opened the door, Katherine entered. When she waved, his heart sank in his chest. Leaving her, when everything inside him screamed to keep her near, did not seem right.

~

Zach was sitting in a chair outside of Admiral Tisdale’s office when Malcolm arrived. “I am late,” Malcolm said.

“Lucky for you, the admiral is still in a meeting.” Zach reached inside his coat pocket and handed Malcolm a hand full of pound notes. “I keep forgetting to give this to you.”

“What is this?”

“The blunt you paid Celeste. Her sister Juliet gave it to me the first night we met.”

Malcolm studied the notes. “Celeste and I never exchanged money.”

“Well, this money was in Celeste’s book with your name on it.”

The door to the admiral’s office opened, and Malcolm stuffed the notes into his pocket.

“Miss Young?” Zach sounded surprised.

A petite red-headed woman looked dumbfounded at his friend.

“What are you doing here?” Zachary asked.

“I came to ask the admiral what is being done about my sister’s disappearance.”

Fury etched Zachary’s features, and he let out a loud exhale. “How did you get here?”

The woman raised her chin. “A hackney.”

“Bloody...” Zach’s hands fisted.

Having heard a lot from Zach about Miss Juliet Young, Malcolm asked, “This is Miss Young?”

“Aye.” Zach motioned between the two of them. “Miss Young, I would like to introduce Captain Westbourne.”

“Nice to meet you.” This girl didn’t share one feature with Celeste. Where Celeste’s dark beauty intrigued and enchanted, this woman’s tiny features were light and fresh.

Before she could respond, Zach huffed. “Did you have the sense to bring a maid or footman with you?”

“The hackney I hired is waiting out front.”

Zach snorted. “Not likely.”

“Of course he is. I paid him to wait.”

Rage blazing in his eyes, Zach mumbled something under his breath before he turned toward Malcolm. “Please give my regrets to Admiral Tisdale, but I must escort Miss Young home.”

“I will take my hackney,” she argued.

“Your hackney is miles away by now.” Leashed fury in his voice, Zach grabbed her by the arm.

She stiffened. “Unhand me.”

Malcolm spun away from the pair to keep from chuckling. Zachary had his hands full.

He marched inside Admiral Tisdale’s office. The place appeared sterile—nothing hung on the newly painted white walls, one stack of papers sat on the desk, and two straight-back chairs faced the admiral.

“Where’s Derby?”

Malcolm stood at attention. “He’s escorting Miss Young home. Evidently she traveled here by herself.”

“She’s a feisty one. Came in here with the attitude of a hellcat.” Tisdale nodded to one of the chairs. “Sit. Anything new to report?”

“No, sir. But I would like to discuss what happens if we must give chase after Fitz’s ship.” Malcolm sat. “We will need two ships, small vessels that move fast in the water. You can staff them, or I can hire crews.”

“Why two?” the gray-haired man asked.

“Fitz would never suspect the Navy to be patrolling the waters with two non-naval ships. We will not fly flags or wear uniforms. If we are to surprise him, we must use any means necessary.” Malcolm’s chest tightened. “And one vessel is not enough for what will happen when Fitz realizes he’s been caught.”

“Bloody fuck.”

“Yes, sir,” Malcolm said. “If you cannot provide the ships my brother, Lord Easton, can secure two vessels for our use.”

“Not necessary. Two French luggers will arrive in port the morning of the ball.”

Luggers...small, fast, perfect. “Thank you, sir. I will also need a crew of at least fifty for one vessel and twenty for the

other. Preferably excellent swimmers.”

The admiral squinted. “Do you really believe you can stop Fitz from slave trading?”

“No,” Malcolm conceded. “Our mission is to save lives.”

~

Blast the driver. Zachary was right; her hackney was gone. She wanted to pout, but knew her efforts would be lost on Lieutenant Derby.

“My carriage is second in line.” Hand around her arm, his grip was firm, but not hurtful.

After the carriage door shut, Zachary began an inquisition. “What in blazes did you think you were doing? I promised to send word if we had any new information into Celeste’s disappearance.”

“I have not heard from you in three days.”

He glared at her as if she was speaking in a different language. “There is nothing new to report.”

“Well, it is taking too long. I want assurances my sister is unharmed.”

“We all do, but we have not found her or any of the orphans. What was said between you and Admiral Tisdale?”

“Nothing of import. He understood my concerns, but had no solution.”

She glanced away from his furious dark gaze. They traveled in silence for a while, then the carriage jostled to a stop.

“Trouble ahead,” the driver called.

“Stay here,” Zach commanded before opening the carriage door.

Juliet strained her neck to see out the window. They were still near the waterfront, but not near the docks. A cluster of men stood glaring at something in the grass. Zach talked to the

men, then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and hunched down. The other men blocked her view.

What is he doing?

Passersby stopped, shock on their faces, and formed a crowd while she waited for Zachary.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she opened the door to the carriage. Zachary stood, his tall frame loomed over the other people, but he faced away from her. She passed many of the men and had almost reached Zachary when she looked down. She saw the legs of a man lying on the ground. Why didn't someone help him up? Was he sick? Hurt?

She dodged more onlookers, and when she was a few feet from Zachary, she spied the man on the ground again.

Blood covered the man's neck, his unblinking eyes staring at nothing.

Bile rose in her throat, and she raised a trembling hand to her neck.

Oh dear.

She must have spoken the words aloud, because Zachary spun and rushed her way. He put his large frame between her and the dead man. "Let's get you to the carriage."

Hearing his words, she could not obey.

"Juliet, come with me," he tried again.

Her body would not move.

Zachary tugged her arm, but her legs gave way and she stumbled. He picked her up. Inside the vehicle, he set her on the seat, knelt in front of her, and chafed her hands between his.

She saw only the blood and the empty, lifeless eyes of the corpse. "I am so cold."

"Damn it." Zachary yanked off his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. The heat from the garment engulfed her. "You will be fine. Why didn't you stay in the carriage like I requested?"

She blinked. Zachary's face came into focus. "I wanted to know what was taking so long."

"So you disregarded my request and are now in shock."

"I am not in shock."

"Women," he uttered.

"Who was that man?"

"I have seen him around the docks, but never met him." He rose from the floor and sat across from her.

Her shaking subsided, and she was no longer cold, but she kept his coat around her, loving the freshly pressed scent.

"Could he have anything to do with the people who abducted Celeste?"

"I cannot say with any certainty."

"Stop it," she cried. "Stop trying to keep information from me. If my sister is dead, tell me. If she has been—"

He moved to the seat beside her and put an arm around her, pulling her head to his shoulder. "Don't. This negativity does no one any good. Not Celeste. Not you."

She closed her eyes and held on to him. For the longest time, he embraced her as the carriage swayed.

"I am sorry," she finally said. "I do not know what came over me. I understand you are doing everything possible to find my sister."

He released her. "We are."

"And I am sorry I disobeyed your order."

"Danger surrounds the work we do, Juliet. I will not make you a party to that." His eyes darkened. "Many innocent people have been killed." His words were spoken with sorrow.

She leaned toward him. "People close to you?"

He looked away, but she could see the hurt in his eyes.

She wished for a way to take away his pain. "Please tell me."

Lifting his chin, he turned to meet her gaze. “Over a year ago, I was in charge of a voyage to the West Indies. My crew and I were attacked and six young officers were killed.”

“Oh, Zachary. I am so sorry.”

“When we made it back to England, the first thing I did was visit my men’s families and explain what happened. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but they had a right to know as soon as possible. That is why I was so insistent you tell your father of Celeste’s disappearance.”

“I understand. And I am sorry for going to Admiral Tisdale today, but...I need...please promise...”

“Promise what?” he asked in his deep voice.

She could not tell him she missed him, how she waited every moment of the day for word, or for him to arrive with news of the investigation. “I would appreciate you sending word once a day or every other day. I realize you are busy, but this is my sister’s life.”

He regarded her for a long while. “Juliet, there is no news.”

“Well, you must be doing something.” She meant for her tone to sound sarcastic, but ended up sounding like she was grumbling. She cleared her throat. “Just seeing you and knowing you are doing everything possible to find Celeste will set me at ease.”

“Seeing me?”

“Yes.” She bent her head.

His soft voice reached her. “I will do my best to either send word or visit you each day.”

“Thank you.” Worried he would be able to read her expression and understand she was developing feelings for him, she kept her eyes averted from his.

~

When Malcolm arrived at his brother’s townhouse, Barkly met him at the rear entrance. “Lord Drake arrived early this

evening and Mr. Ashby is with him. They are in the study.”

“Thanks, Barkly.” Malcolm strode to the study.
“Gentlemen.”

Ashby and Drake were seated in chairs in front of the desk.

Mr. Ashby stood and held out his hand. “I hope you don’t mind, but we needed to discuss a private matter with you.”

“Of course.” Malcolm sat behind the desk

Drake frowned. “We just learned your ship was set afire.”

“Yes, it happened when I was in Oxford.”

“Malcolm, it is our belief that you being seen with Katherine puts her at risk from whoever is after you.” Drake crossed his arms.

“Since arriving in London, my men and I have been exceedingly careful. No one is following me. I weighed the consequences of being seen with Katherine, but we visited merchants away from Bond Street.”

“We are not fools. We understand what you do is dangerous. And our country needs men like you.” Drake’s tone was respectful, but determined. “However, we will not have Katherine in the fray.”

“I would never let anything happen to her.”

“Not when she is with you, but what happens when you are not around? Your life is unpredictable, and you deal with unsavory characters. She should not be a party to that.”

Drake’s words were like arrows penetrating his skull.

Ashby nodded. “We plan to make certain Katherine does not leave the house unescorted.”

Between the investigation and the upcoming ball, he had so little time to be with her. “I still plan to visit her each day.”

“I expect no less.” Ashby motioned Malcolm to the side of the room and spoke quietly. “Have you informed Katherine of our prior meeting?”

“No, sir. As far as I am concerned that meeting did not happen.”

“Excellent.” Ashby grinned. “And I must say, this evening when she returned from your excursion, she was the happiest I have ever seen her.”

Malcolm’s heart jumped. “I plan to make her happiness my mission in life.”

“See that you do.” Ashby headed out the door. Drake slapped Malcolm’s back before following.

Minutes later, Barkly and Zach entered the room.

Barkly was loaded down with a tray of breads and cheeses in his arms. “Drake has already left?”

“He and Ashby are concerned about my taking Katherine out today. They heard of *The Greyhound* catching fire.” He ran a hand over his face. “They are right. I should not have been seen with her.”

“Don’t, Malcolm.” Barkly set the tray on the small table between the guest chairs. “Obsessing will not solve anything. What’s done is done.”

Too upset to sit, Malcolm paced in front of the windows.

Barkly and Zach sat and started eating from the tray.

“We have another problem.” Zach heaped more food onto his plate. “On my way to escort Miss Young home, we came upon a crowd gathered at the waterfront, about a mile from the docks. A man’s throat had been slit.”

“Damn it.” Malcolm stopped pacing. “Did you know the man?”

“No, but I have seen him around the docks.”

“Any leads on who killed him?”

Zach scowled. “None. What happened with Tisdale? Did he agree to acquire two ships?”

“Yes. Now we have to ensure we have the proper supplies.” Malcolm exhaled. “We will purchase everything we need

tomorrow morning.”

“My sister insists her home be a holding place for the children when we find them.” Zach picked up a piece of bread. “Her staff is on alert and ready for any orphans we need to house. Jimmy is eager to help.”

Jimmy would be able to talk to the children and understand exactly what they were going through, having lived their nightmare himself.

“Everything hinges on the ball,” Malcolm said. “And the attendance of either Mrs. William or Fitz.”

Chapter Twelve

Katherine sat on a bench overlooking the garden at Drake's townhouse. The past days had been filled with playing with her niece Samantha, time with the Drake family, and cherished hours with Malcolm. Anticipation caused imaginary stones to tumble in her stomach. Malcolm usually arrived about this time. Thinking back on the last few days, she tried to calm her racing heart.

The day following their shopping trip, Malcolm had arrived mid-afternoon and joined Katherine and Samantha in the garden. Samantha had not remembered him from their introduction at Westbourne over a year ago, but quickly warmed to him. Before retiring inside, Samantha rode on his shoulders giggling with delight as he paraded her about in the afternoon sunshine. They eventually settled in the library for tea and everyone joined them. They talked of the upcoming ball. She introduced Malcolm to her parents and told them how she met him during Emma's ordeal with her father, but Katherine gave no indication she and Malcolm shared more than polite company.

The next day, while they enjoyed a stroll about the garden, Malcolm said, "Lieutenant Derby's sister has offered the use of her home in the event we are fortunate enough to find the children. She adopted the first workhouse child we rescued in the West Indies. His name is Jimmy."

She had heard him speak of Lieutenant Derby many times. "Lieutenant Derby works with you in the Royal Navy?"

"He does, but we first met at Eton. We became fast friends and I am closer to his family than my own." His Adam's apple bobbed. "At Westbourne, I'm sure you learned of my siblings' estrangement from my father." At her nod, he continued, "I was not alienated from him. On my eighteenth birthday I visited him and continued to do so whenever in port. But we kept our visits a secret from my family. We were unsure how they would react to the truth."

Her heart buoyed at him sharing that information with her. “You have led a fascinating life, Malcolm.”

“Not really. My years with the West Africa Squadron may sound intriguing, but in truth they were long, tedious, and miserable. It is considered the worst post in the Royal Navy. We lost many men to tropical diseases. But I felt drawn to stopping the slave trading.”

She squeezed his arm. “Just as my calling to work with orphans.”

“Speaking of orphans, I would like to share something with you.” He explained that the missing child from St. Lucien’s Orphanage was his nephew, but Malcolm had not known about the boy until he was reported missing. “Colin and Antoinette are frantic to find him. If he desires, he will live with them.”

A thrill passed through Katherine. How she wished for her orphans to have a loving family, a stronghold, a home.

Malcolm kept walking. “Do you want children of your own?”

Her step faltered.

He clutched her arm to steady her.

“Since Elizabeth died in childbirth, I believe my mother might be distressed if I conceived. But my father has remarked how he wants me to enjoy a family of my own.”

He stopped and faced her. “What do you wish for, Katherine? No one else. You.”

“I have never considered having children of my own.”

For the longest moment he stared at her, before he began walking again, around the plethora of flowers. The silence between them stretched.

As they approached the house, he finally said, “You would make a splendid mother.”

She smiled now, recalling his words. For some reason they comforted her. And if she were honest with herself, she would have to say *he* comforted her. Even when all they did was sit

beside each other and talk of the weather or gossip. His presence set her at ease.

This morning Katherine woke after a dream about Malcolm. It started out sweet, where they were walking, talking, and holding hands. Suddenly, they were inside the Westbourne library again, like the night she panicked and left him. Malcolm's kisses consumed her. His soft caresses and whispered words caused her nerves to jump, her body to come alive. She allowed him to untie the laces on her dress and tug layer after layer of clothing off of her. When he pulled the shift over her head baring her naked body, Katherine woke. The desire was so acute, sweat drenched her nightrail. Heavens, how she wanted him.

As she sat waiting for Malcolm to arrive, clouds darkened the sky admitting sparks of sunshine in their patchy openings. Malcolm had acted the gentleman to the hilt the last days, his *ton* upbringing evident in every proper move he made. But when they were alone, he showed his playful side she so loved. He did not try to kiss her, which both relieved and frustrated her. Although a part of her craved to engage in intimacy with him, another part of her still feared it.

Her heart pounded harder in her chest.

A jumble of their time together passed through her mind—Malcolm's lively eyes, his respectful treatment of her and anyone he encountered, his steadfast vow to the missing children.

How could she still be afraid of him?

A heartbeat passed and she finally admitted, she didn't fear intimacy with him.

Calmness slowed her hammering heart.

Malcolm had proven himself trustworthy, genteel, and courteous. In her heart, she knew she could trust him.

With that revelation, came tremendous hope in what they might share.

She glanced to the sky. The time must be nearing four. He never arrived this late. She lowered her head, disappointed he

had not been able to visit today.

“May I sit with you?” Malcolm’s deep voice asked.

He’d come.

She looked over her shoulder. “Here? On this tiny bench? So scandalously close?” Her voice sounded more breathless than her attempt at teasing.

“Yes, as shockingly close to you as I can be.” He skirted the bench and sat beside her. “What were you contemplating so seriously?”

My feelings for you. His clean, sandalwood scent reached her. “I was wondering if you would visit today. With the ball the day after tomorrow, your time to prepare shortens.”

“I would not miss an opportunity to see you.”

At his words, her heart pounded. She glanced at the house, but from where she sat, the back door was not visible. With a flick of her head, she checked the stable. No one shuffled about. “I am pleased you did.” Before changing her mind, or giving anyone time to interrupt them, she said, “I would like to explain why I ran away from Westbourne.”

“Not if it is going to cause you pain.”

“None of my remembrances from Westbourne cause me distress, except for my childish behavior.” She smiled into his caring eyes. “Our first meeting confused me. I had never been so taken with a man. I wanted to learn everything about you. To spend each waking moment in your presence.”

“As did I.”

“Yes, but I had never encountered those feelings before. When we were in the study, my hair falling about my waist, and you unlaced my gown, something inside me fractured. I didn’t recognize myself. My desire for you frightened me.”

He reached out and fingered the ribbon tied in a bow around her waist. “I should never have asked so much of you. An innocent. But I, too, never experienced such an all-consuming yearning. You were all I thought about. Then and now.”

She leaned toward him. “Since we had just met, I was uncertain what kind of man you were. When things proceeded at such a fast pace, it made me wonder if you often enjoyed such liaisons. Your sisters and sisters-in-law continually warned me about your reputation.”

“If only there was a way to take those reckless years back.” He lifted his hand to her cheek. “I would erase the other women if I could.”

His words set off hot sparks inside her. “No matter your past, you are the finest of men.” She gripped his hand and stood, urging him to follow. Quick steps brought them around to the side of the stable, under a huge oak tree. She stopped and faced him.

“Does this mean you trust me?” he asked.

She lifted on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling his head down. At first, he did not react, simply matched the pressure of her lips without touching her. Then one of his hands lifted to her nape and the other to the small of her back. Katherine went weak from the devastating gentleness of the caress.

~

She trusted him.

Finally.

All it took was a patience Malcolm never knew he possessed.

The last three days had been a combination of joy and despair. Joy at spending time with Katherine walking the gardens, laughing, sitting beside her in the library and visiting with Drake’s family. Despair when the urge to throw away all pretense took over him and his every instinct was to ravish her. But he’d gritted his teeth, smiled—while specific parts of his body became increasingly painful—and did his very best to gain her trust.

Every second of discomfort had been worth it.

He nuzzled her ear and kissed his way to her neck. He wanted to revel in her response, to enjoy his spoils, but his damn conscience wouldn't let him. One thought kept running through his mind. *What now?*

He wanted to ask her to marry him, but couldn't, not with the uncertainties ahead. He lifted his head. "Is that a yes to my question?"

She laughed. "I believe so."

There was more to her fear of men, but what right did he have to ask about that now when he could not make her promises? They would be missed soon if they failed to arrive in the library for tea. He kissed her one last time, holding her close.

Later, when he stood to leave Drake's library, Katherine followed. The servants busily shuffled in the corridor from room to room. Malcolm ached to reach for her, but instead said, "I need to revisit Lord Nelson's estate tomorrow, would you like to accompany me?" At least they would enjoy being alone in the carriage.

"I would go anywhere I must to be close to you." Her words, ones he'd said to her at the Elders' ball, splashed his heart with warmth.

~

Malcolm fastened the last gold button on his coat and checked his reflection in the looking glass above the chest of drawers. He'd spent the morning observing the docks, more specifically Fitz's ship, but detected no signs of life from the vessel. Where the hell was the bastard? And the orphans?

He also asked around about the dead body identified as Gregor James. The men working the docks were closed-lipped, but terror clouded their eyes. Whether they were withholding information from him or not, the workers seemed disturbed by the murder.

He set aside his concerns. The time was close to noon already. He wanted to arrive early to get Katherine for their

visit to Lord Nelson's. Remembering her innocent kisses in the garden yesterday fired his blood.

He trotted down the stairs and heard a knock. Since it was the servants' half day, he answered the door.

Dismayed, he blinked, making sure his eyes were not deceiving him. "Emma?" She was pale as an eggshell. He checked the street, but no carriage waited. Malcolm held out a hand. She grasped it tightly, and he helped her inside.

"I hoped to catch you before you left for your daily visit to see Katherine. It seems you and she are of one accord these days." A grimace contracted her face muscles.

"What is wrong?"

"I am in labor."

She still had a month before the babe was due. "Shouldn't you be at home?"

"Most likely." She hissed between her teeth and her shoulders rose to her ears. "Oh, the pain. When does it stop?"

"Dear, I hate to point out the obvious, but I've never given birth."

"But you've helped deliver several babies." She clutched his forearm, her nails biting into his flesh. "Please, Malcolm, you must help me."

He reached to open the door. "Let me request a carriage and bring you home."

"No. I cannot do this with Drake about. Or his family. Or the Ashbys. They hover, waiting for me to..." Her eyes met his, a mixture of anxiety, desperation, and resolve on her face. "I came here for your help." A gasp sputtered from her lips as another cramp struck her.

She should be at home and with her doctor, but he couldn't scold her—she was in too much pain. Hoping this to be false labor, as happened to many women, he would let her rest awhile, and when she felt better, escort her home. "Dear, you need to get off your feet."

“I believe that would be best.”

He placed a supportive arm behind her back.

“Something happened in the carriage. I feel wetness on my legs.”

Damn, she is truly in labor.

A screech escaped her lips. “And the cramps became much worse.”

“It’s fine, dear. Perfectly normal.” Lifting her into his arms, he felt the wetness from her skirts. He carried her up the stairs and to a guest bedchamber.

He leaned over to deposit her on the bed, but she held on to him. “Remove the coverlet, Malcolm. I would hate to ruin it.”

He set her on her feet and threw the counterpane onto one of the chairs. “Only you would be concerned about coverlets at a time like this.”

She whimpered, her green eyes darker than their normal emerald.

Malcolm’s throat went dry. The babes he’d delivered before had been to strangers. He had too much to lose with this birth.
I must send for a doctor.

Suddenly her hands fisted. A growl erupted from deep in her throat. She puffed until she relaxed again. Tears in her eyes, she gripped his hands. “I apologize for intruding.” She swallowed. “The babe and I will be fine. But Drake would not survive the labor.”

“You’re underestimating him. Drake loves you and this babe.”

“I cannot bear the anxiety in his face. It has been my constant companion for months. He has not been himself since learning I am with child.” She exhaled loudly. “Since our arrival in London almost two weeks ago, he leaves our bed, and the house, when he believes I am asleep. I suspect he visits a brothel each night or has employed a mistress since he has not touched me since—”

“He comes here, Emma.” He couldn’t let her lament on.

“Here?”

“Yes, he shares a drink with me or my brothers.”

“Oh, thank heavens.” Her words morphed into a cry of anguish.

No wonder Drake was in such horrible shape. He was scared to death and living the celibate life of a monk while sleeping in the same bed with his wife. That would send any man to Bedlam.

“The doctor assured us it was perfectly safe to share a marriage bed...but he...” She didn’t need to say more. “Malcolm, what will he do after the baby is born? I doubt he ever touches me again.”

“Dear, you are his wife. He will not be able to resist you.”

“He resists me now. Probably because I am so fat.”

“You are not fat, you are pregnant. And not for long.” He frowned. “Most of the staff is off this afternoon.”

“That is fortuitous. They do not need to see me thus.”

“Yes, but there are no women about. I’ll have to help you undress. After this I will know entirely too much about your person.”

She laughed. “At this point, I do not care if you learn all my secrets.”

He lifted his brows. “Your husband would think otherwise.”

“My husband cannot even think these days.”

Uncertainty balled like a fist in his gut. He unbuttoned her dress when she turned her back to him. They dropped her layers of clothing on the floor until only her shift remained. He helped her sit on the bed. “I will return shortly.”

“I have no plans to move.”

He left the room and ran down the stairs. At Barkly’s room, he knocked and entered.

“Please do come in, Malcolm.” Barkly slammed the book in his hands closed. “No reason to wait for an answer to your knock.”

“My apologies. I need two messages sent immediately. One to Dr. Shelby and the other to Lord Drake. Tell them to come posthaste. Lady Drake is in labor.”

Barkly jumped up. “Here?”

“Yes. I realize this is everyone’s afternoon off, but find someone and send him with the messages.” Malcolm rubbed his forehead. “Come up immediately afterward. I will need your help. And bring water and linens.”

Malcolm scaled the steps two at a time and hurried into the room. Emma appeared small and helpless lying on her side, a pillow under her cheek.

“Let’s check where we are, shall we?” He helped her onto her back. When he lifted her shift, he froze.

A tiny portion of the baby’s head showed. He’d believed they would have plenty of time to wait for the doctor and Drake to arrive...Damn. “How long have you been experiencing the pains, Emma?”

“Since last night.”

“And you told no one?” He unbuttoned his coat.

“When Drake got out of bed this morning, I explained I felt fatigued and needed to rest.”

“How did you get here?” He slipped off his coat, waistcoat, and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt.

“Hackney.”

“How did you get out of the house, much less hire a hackney?”

“A couple of untruths to my servants.”

He placed his hands on his hips. “When I met you a year ago, I would never have guessed you had a talent for deception.”

“I don’t.” She held out her trembling hands. “Drake is going to be furious with me.”

He gripped her hands. “No time to worry about that, my dear. The babe is ready to be born.”

She had clearly come to the same conclusion. “I, too, am ready.”

Barkly barreled into the room with a bucket of water and linens tucked under his arm.

Emma greeted him with a smile. “Barkly, I am so sad we’ve never met. While Lord Easton and I were married, he was always too ill to make the trip to London, but I want to thank you for your service and dedication to the Westbourne family.”

Pride in his dark eyes, Barkly slightly bowed. “I consider it an honor, Lady Drake.” He then faced Malcolm. “I’ve sent the messages.”

Malcolm grabbed the bucket and poured the water into the pitcher on the washstand, then cleaned his hands. He tried to remember what he’d learned from the previous births. “Barkly, you will need to sit behind Lady Drake to prop her up to help her deliver.”

Barkly’s black eyes rounded with shock. “What?”

“Come,” Emma pleaded. “I am in need of your help.”

Barkly threw off his coat and scooted behind her on the bed, his thighs outside of hers. She groaned.

“Did I hurt you, my lady?”

Patting his shin, she said, “Tis the babe, not you.” She leaned back against him.

Malcolm crouched over the foot of the bed and said a quick prayer. He wiped a trickle of sweat off his temple with his shoulder.

“Malcolm, I trust you.” Confidence rang in her words.

He couldn’t tell her how awful this was going to be, he didn’t know.

If only the doctor would arrive.

~

Twenty-five minutes later, Malcolm cursed to himself. Why wasn't the baby making more progress? It wasn't Emma's fault. She'd been pushing so hard tiny red spots developed on her face. At first, she complained of back pain, so Barkly massaged her between cramps, but the contractions were almost constant now, and she barely had time to catch her breath before another would hit her. Malcolm had tried different things, attempting to help the babe along, his every effort to no avail.

"Emma, with the next pain, I need you to push as hard as you can," Malcolm coaxed.

"I cannot. Too tired."

"Nonsense, my lady, you can do this," Barkly encouraged her. He and Malcolm had shared more than a few anxious glances.

She leaned back against Barkly's chest.

The door banged open. "What is the meaning of this?" Drake's voice demanded.

"Drake, darling." Emma greeted him as if they were in a normal setting. Then her shriek filled the air.

"It is too early for the babe to be born," Drake argued from the doorway.

"The babe does not realize that," Malcolm answered sarcastically.

"I lied." Emma stroked circles on her belly speaking quickly, her words running together. "I believed if I told you a later date you would not have as much time to fret, and the baby would come and everything would be fine." She spoke over her shoulder to Barkly. "It did not work."

Barkly rubbed her arm.

“How did you get here?” Drake asked, still standing by the door.

“Deceptions. Lies.” She sighed.

“But why did you come?”

Her body shuddered in agony. “Malcolm’s delivered many babies.”

Malcolm listened, but kept his concentration on the baby. When Emma tensed, he said, “Once more.”

She exhaustedly waved her hands, panting. “I cannot. Too tired.”

He must get the baby out now. He strode over to Drake, stood with his back to Emma, and spoke through clenched teeth. “It’s taking too long. Help her.”

Drake’s angry expression changed to panic, then quickly to determination. He rushed to the bed and gripped Emma’s hands. “Sweetheart, you can do this. Remember what the doctor said, the end is the worst.” He tucked some of Emma’s hair behind her ear.

“All this time...” Her breaths came in short gasps. “I’ve been pregnant...” Emma closed her eyes, pain visible in her tight face. “I assumed you were overacting because of Elizabeth’s death.” She choked. “Women have been having babies since the beginning of time. But it’s difficult. You were right to worry so.”

Drake framed her face with his hands. “You are actually admitting I’m right about something? Dear, you know better. Now I will never let you forget it.”

A laugh escaped between Emma’s sobs, before her body bowed with another cramp. “God,” she cried.

“You are not alone. We are here to help.” Drake brushed the tears from her face. “But we cannot do this for you.”

She sniffed. “I am sorry I lied.”

“Me too.” Drake touched his lips to hers. “You can beg for forgiveness later. Right now, let’s get a look at this babe, shall

we?”

A fresh look of fortitude crossed her face. “Barkly, push me forward.”

Barkly sat forward, bringing Emma to more of a seated position. She bore down with the next pain.

Thankfully, the push moved the babe’s head and Malcolm immediately realized the problem. The babe faced upward instead of downward. “Don’t push, Emma,” he instructed.

She tilted her head back, blowing out breaths.

“That’s it, sweetheart. That’s it,” Drake crooned.

Malcolm gently turned the babe. “Now, one more push.”

Emma gave a loud groan. Malcolm easily drew the infant out and set him on Emma’s stomach, the newborn curling with a cry.

Relief swamped him and his knees weakened.

“I was informed we have a babe ready for this world,” Dr. Shelby called from the door, a woman with him—most likely his assistant.

“Good to see you, Doc. I’ll let you take over,” Malcolm gratefully offered.

Dr. Shelby, forever in a jolly mood, laughed. “Happy to do so, my boy.”

Malcolm washed his hands while Emma and Drake stared at the babe, both awestruck. The doctor’s assistant wrapped the baby in a cloth and picked him up after the doctor cut the cord.

“I need Lady Drake to lie flat,” the doctor instructed.

Barkly slowly slid from behind Emma and gathered a few pillows for her head as he and Drake eased her body down.

Her fingers clutched Barkly’s arm. “Thank you.”

“Of course, my lady.”

Emma’s gaze caught Malcolm’s. *Thank you*, she mouthed, her eyes filled with gratitude.

Malcolm bobbed his head and followed Barkly to the door.

“Wait,” Emma’s hoarse voice called.

They spun around in unison.

“I would like you to meet our son. Westbourne Barkly Drake.”

Something in Malcolm’s chest caught. He couldn’t respond—too touched by her words—so he bowed, as did Barkly.

He left the room and treaded to his bedchamber. Without the staff around, he couldn’t ask for a bath, so the cold water in the pitcher would have to do. Once clean and clothed, he descended the stairs, shocked to find Katherine standing at the bottom. Wringing her hands, she appeared anxious and downright delightful. He’d never seen such a welcome sight. A feeling of possessiveness swamped him. But she wasn’t his, not until his assignment was complete and he was free to marry her. He hurried down the stairs and clasped her hands. “Mother and babe are fine. And Drake will survive.”

She laughed and threw her arms around his neck.

He needed her exuberance, her excitement in his life. “Why don’t you go up?”

“I will.”

In desperate need of a drink, Malcolm marched to the library. After a swig of brandy, he took the first deep inhalation he’d been able to manage since Emma landed on the doorstep that morning.

~

Katherine frowned at the closed door Malcolm shut behind him. His eyes, usually full of life, were dimmed, shocked. She wanted to console him, but knew he needed a moment to himself.

When she made it to the top stair, Drake ducked out of a room with a bundle in his arms. “Katherine, I would like you

to meet Westbourne Barkly Drake. Emma already calls him West.”

How lovely, they named the babe after Malcolm. “Drake, how are you?”

“Furious with my wife, but she’s gifted me with a healthy son. I think I am obliged to forgive her.”

She took West from him. “He’s beautiful.”

Drake leaned against the wall, appearing grateful for the support. “I cannot live through this again.”

“Oh, Drake. How did you survive it?” She bowed her head and put her forehead to West’s.

“I didn’t have a choice.” Drake’s voice sounded deep, thoughtful.

She glanced at him and moisture glinted on his lids. They gazed at one another. “My sister...Elizabeth would be so very happy for you.”

He shut his eyes for an instant. “Yes, she would.” He smiled. “Samantha is going to be excited.”

Katherine laughed. “I daresay, you must watch she doesn’t treat West like one of her dolls.”

The baby let out a squeak as if he understood her words.

Drake chuckled. “Don’t worry, West. I will not allow your sister to dress you in petticoats.”

The woman, who arrived with the doctor, came from the same door Drake had exited. “The doctor would like to inspect the babe.”

“I’ll bring him right in,” Drake said.

The woman reentered the room.

Katherine kissed West’s forehead and handed him to Drake. “Be a good lad.”

He hesitated. “Thank you for being here. I realize it is difficult for you to be away from the orphans, but your

presence in London the last few days was truly comforting to both Emma and myself.”

She smirked, remembering the letter Emma had sent asking them to visit. “Well, I could not let Emma maim you.”

“Maim me?”

“You will have to get that information from your wife.”

He cradled the baby, a confused dent to his brow as he slipped inside the room.

Seeing Drake so joyful brought back memories of her sister and the happiness Elizabeth expressed while married to Drake.

A yearning to see Malcolm overwhelmed her. A need to explain everything, to make him understand her actions at Westbourne and her refusal of his suit while in Oxford.

She rushed down the stairs and found the door he’d entered still closed. After a quick knock, she grasped the handle and turned it.

Malcolm stood at a wall of shelves, a book in one hand, a snifter in the other. “Katherine. Do come in.”

She closed the door behind her and sidled up to him. The red walls and books stayed in her peripheral vision as she took the glass from his fingers and downed the brandy, the liquid leaving a trail of fire down her throat. Her eyes watered.

“Brandy is better savored.”

She held out the glass and coughed. “So is a woman, as I hear it.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“You might be surprised at the things discussed on those divans at balls.”

“No doubt.” He poured more spirits. “Would you like your own snifter, or do you plan to keep drinking mine?”

“No need.” She grabbed the decanter and tipped it to her lips.

Malcolm appeared shocked, and then laughed. “Why are you in need of so much fortification?”

“I would like to say something to you, and I feel the need to buttress myself first.”

“Is it as bad as all that?”

Her pounding heart echoed in her ears. “I was nearly raped.”

Chapter Thirteen

“I was ten years old when it happened.” Katherine’s pulse pounded in her ears. “In the night, I woke to someone running their hands over my body. At first I believed I was dreaming, but as the touches became more intimate, more purposeful, I came fully awake screaming and struggling against the body draped over mine and groping me.”

Malcolm’s concentration focused on her, his jaw muscles tight.

Her vision blurred and unbidden tears clogged her throat. She rubbed her hands down her arms, trying to remove the memory of the touch. “I...I...I could not understand what was happening.” She closed her eyes, reliving the confusion and disorientation as a creature from the night attacked her.

“I heard a man’s voice say *Paulette*, my aunt’s name, and that’s when I realized my uncle was the one pinning me down. My very own uncle, who hours before had let each of us take a ride on his back.”

Taking a gulp of air, she continued, “His hands were everywhere, as if he’d grown the arms of an octopus. He ripped my gown down the center.” She ran a hand down her skirt. “Shocked, I couldn’t move.

“When his hands and mouth didn’t stop their assault, something in me unleashed. I screamed, slapped at him and kicked out with my legs, trying everything to make him stop. But he caught my face and held me still while he crushed his mouth over mine. The stink of spirits on his breath nauseated me. When he finally lifted his lips away, I screamed again.”

She waited for the terror to consume her as it did every time the nightmare came to mind. But panic didn’t overpower her this time. She was safe. Here, with Malcolm, the memory didn’t consume her like it had since that awful night. “Suddenly a gunshot blasted in the room. My uncle’s body collapsed and imprisoned me against the bed. He screeched

the loudest I have ever heard anyone in my life. Then others were shouting—my mother, my aunt, my father. After a minute, my uncle's weight lifted.

“Elizabeth rushed to the bed and wrapped the counterpane around me, hugging me close. But I couldn't feel her. I was numb, both my mind and my body. I curled into a ball with my head on my knees and rocked back and forth. Why would he attack me? I felt completely baffled by what happened. Humiliation and shame besieged me and I had no idea why. I was so young, I didn't understand.”

Tears dripped down her face. “Elizabeth never left my side. She continually talked to me. I couldn't respond for the longest time, but finally her words began to register. She told me how much she loved me. How brave I was.” Her bottom lip trembled. “I miss her so much. She had such strength.”

Strong arms engulfed her. Katherine buried her face in Malcolm's coat. “My uncle did not die, but I have never seen him after that night. Poor Father, I'm still not sure what shooting his own brother has done to him.”

“He hates the bastard.” Malcolm kissed her forehead and held her close.

“Father explained that my uncle was drunk and thought I was Aunt Paulette. When he told me that, I guess he thought it would make things better, but his words just made me think that if men treated their wives in such a way, I never wanted a husband. Since then, I have refused to discuss that night.” She gave him a half-smile. “We used to spend holidays and summers with my uncle's family, he had children of a similar age to Elizabeth and me, but we never saw them again.” The wetness under her eyes cooled and felt refreshing, as though the tears washed away the pain, the agony she'd lived with for so long. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

Arms around his waist, she squeezed him tight. “For making me face my memories.”

“You did that yourself.”

“No. I would never have done it myself. I found trusting a man impossible, save my father and Drake. But by treating me with such care and gentleness, you made me stop fearing men. You’ve given me back the trust I needed. And in doing so, I want you to know everything about me.”

“I plan to spend the rest of my life learning about you.”

Her heart leapt.

“But, Katherine, my immediate future is uncertain. I have no idea what tomorrow holds.”

She lifted a palm to his face. “Then give me tonight. Show me what we will have when your assignment is over.”

~

Katherine’s offer went straight to Malcolm’s heart, then directly to his groin.

Take her. Claim her.

Gazing down at her, he knew only taking her to his bed was not good enough. She deserved more. Much more.

He eased her hand from his cheek. “Come.” He led her through the house. They entered the kitchen and found Barkly preparing a tray of breads and fruits.

“Barkly, I don’t believe you and Miss Ashby have met.” Malcolm’s chest expanded as two of the most important people in his life smiled at one another.

He bowed. “Miss Ashby.”

“Barkly.” Katherine beamed.

“If anyone asks, Miss Ashby is with me,” Malcolm said. “I’ll drive the phaeton.”

“I’ll help you hitch it.” Barkly strode to the door and held it open while Malcolm and Katherine rushed outside.

Malcolm was surprised the sun still shone. The afternoon had seemed to last an eternity with Emma and the delivery. He expected night to have fallen, but dusk was still hours away.

Katherine waited outside the stable while Barkly and he worked as one to hitch the phaeton to Trevor's prized black. Malcolm hopped into the carriage and clutched the reins. Barkly gripped the horse's bridle, led the horse and phaeton through the door, and helped Katherine onto the seat. She held on to Malcolm's arm and waved to Barkly.

"Where are we going?" she asked as they rolled down the lane.

"Lord Nelson's estate."

"Oh, yes, with all the excitement I forgot we were supposed to visit his home today."

He kept his face impassive. That was not his reason for wanting to go there now, but she would understand soon enough.

At Lord Nelson's home, the butler escorted them inside. Malcolm said, "If you do not mind, I would like to inspect the grounds once more."

"Of course."

Malcolm's sure steps didn't stop until Katherine and he were at the tiny chapel entrance. He opened the door and tugged her inside. Colors splashed across the walls and floor from the sun striking the windows. He led her to the altar and genuflected, as did Katherine, then he faced her. "And now, for the real reason I brought you here. When you and I first came here, you felt His presence, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"Since we have not had banns read, we cannot marry, but I want to make my vow to you here, in front of Him."

"Oh, Malcolm."

He clasped her hands and lifted them, kissing each. "I promise to love you forever, cherish you every day of our lives, and I will do everything in my power to ensure your safety, your happiness, and that of your orphans." He chastely kissed her, his lips sealing his promise.

“My turn.” She squeezed his hands. “My dearest Malcolm, into your keeping I place my life, my faith, and my trust. You have owned my heart since I first saw you in the Westbourne nursery.”

They knelt in front of the altar, both with their heads bent in prayer.

Within minutes, they were on their way back to the townhouse. Two of Drake’s carriages were in front of the house.

“I suspect Drake sent word to his family that Emma delivered the baby,” Katherine said. “The doctor probably insisted she stay here for a couple of days.”

He drove the phaeton to the stables and lifted Katherine from the seat. “They believe we are out, so if we can make it to my room without being seen, we should not be disturbed.” Damn, instead of a man wanting to spend time with his betrothed, he felt like a teenaged lad trying to hide away in the loft with a neighbor lass. He looked up; the loft might not be a bad idea.

Shaking his head, he tried to think as a gentleman. They hurried toward the house and scaled the servants’ stairs. Halfway up, Katherine giggled.

“What is it, darling?” he asked, holding her hand.

“This sneaking around is silly.”

“Yes, it is. I am cursing myself for not having my own lodgings.”

She laughed.

Making it to his bedroom without seeing anyone, he locked the door and backed her against it, kissing her the entire time. A semblance of reality rushed into his brain. He ended the kiss. “It is not always pleasant for a woman her first time.”

A sly smile tilted her lips. “If the divan gossip is true, a man can take a woman more than one time a night.”

He chuckled, trying to hide his excitement. Her thoughts definitely ran in the same vein as his.

She enthusiastically unbuttoned his coat.

How many times had he wished to have her like this? Pliant, accepting, eager. Finished with his buttons, she smiled. The wealth of trust and adoration in her expression made his heart skip a beat.

His fingers passed over her hair, finding the first pin. He gently tugged and searched for the others. He took his time and she did nothing to help him. She must have understood how much joy it brought him to take it down himself. When the final pin dislodged and her hair fell in waves around her, he sucked in a breath.

The only way she could possibly be more beautiful was if she was naked.

Which he planned to make happen soon. Very soon.

Slowly, he tenderly ran his fingers through her hair. Her head tilted backward, her lips parted, and her eyes fluttered shut.

A loud knock sounded at the door.

Katherine jumped.

“Not now,” Malcolm called.

Another knock.

“I will get rid of whoever it is.” He marched to the door and opened it the tiniest bit.

Barkly stood on the other side, an apologetic frown on his face. “Captain Derby is downstairs. They have found the woman posing as Mrs. William.”

Now? Malcolm closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “We will be down shortly.” There was no reason to hide the fact that he was with Katherine. Barkly knew everything that happened in this house.

He closed the door.

Katherine was already braiding her luxurious hair.

He watched her while he set his clothes to rights. They gazed longingly at one another, neither saying a word. Before Malcolm opened the door, he leaned down and kissed her. Their lips clung, their breaths mingling. For the briefest minute, they stood with their foreheads together.

If Zachary was shocked to find Katherine on Malcolm's arm, his friend did not show it when they descended the stairs together.

"Lieutenant Derby, may I introduce Miss Ashby."

"A pleasure." Zachary bent over Katherine's gloved hand. Once he straightened, he said, "Lieutenant Green has sequestered Mrs. William at an orphanage. She arrived and offered to volunteer, but the manager recognized her from the description we sent out and notified the Bow Street Runners, who alerted Admiral Tisdale. Green was in Southampton checking on the ships, and he and Tisdale traveled to the orphanage to investigate. They are waiting for us. I brought a carriage."

Malcolm considered leaving Katherine here, but one look in her eyes and he knew she would argue until he agreed to let her come. They stepped outside to the waning sun readying for its descent, the western horizon blazing with yellow fire. The carriages that had been in the front minutes before were gone. Only Zach's waited. Miss Young peeked out of a window.

Zach opened the door. "Miss Ashby, please meet Miss Young. Juliet is Celeste Young's sister."

When the four of them were seated in Zach's carriage, Katherine told Miss Young how sorry she was about Celeste's disappearance. Malcolm watched out the window, but nothing passing them by registered until a young boy dressed in rags on a street corner came into view. The child's face was gaunt, deep shadows rimming his eyes. Why would someone take orphans when so many street urchins would be easier to kidnap? They had asked the same question dozens of times while investigating the workhouse disappearances.

Many carriages and horses crowded the street in front of the orphanage. The tan brick building was old, but in good

condition. Green met them at the door and ushered them to a room where Mrs. William was pacing before a huge window. When they entered, she froze, her green eyes unblinking.

Admiral Tisdale sat at a table near the windows. He waved Miss Young and Katherine to the sofa, while Green, Zach, and Malcolm stood by the door with three Bow Street Runners and the orphanage administrator.

“We know your aliases are many, but may I ask your real name?” Tisdale said.

Mrs. William bit her bottom lip.

The windows behind her were dark, the east horizon dim.

“Are you in partnership with Mr. William Fitz?” Malcolm asked.

“It is not what you think. Mr. Fitz approached me five years ago. He explained he hoped to release youngsters from the workhouses and give them a better life. He paid me to help him rescue the children. He promised he had friends who wanted to adopt them. I would befriend the children at different workhouses and convince them I would help them.” Her hands moved as she spoke, slicing the air in front of her. “When I learned instead of finding homes for them he was shipping them to The West Indies, I refused to gather more. He told me he would kill me if I didn’t help him.”

Malcolm wondered of the woman’s earnestness or if she was meant for the stage. “Why did you not go to the Bow Street Runners or the magistrate?”

“I tried to escape once.” She shivered. “When Mr. Fitz found me, he put me on his vessel and brought me with a shipment of children to the African coast where he bartered for prisoners of war. They boarded Fitz’s ship before he sailed to The West Indies. The entire time my neck, arms and legs were in shackles.” After a tense moment, she continued, “He made me watch the auction of the children and the Africans. At any moment I expected to be sold off, but after a while, he glared at me and said, ‘If you ever try to run away again, you will wish I had sold you today.’”

Zach walked to stand behind where Miss Young and Katherine sat. "Fitz's ship has not sailed for weeks, yet he has taken many orphans."

"He has partners. Lately, he has become suspicious of them. As a matter of fact, I have not had contact with any of them in days. The problems began when the workhouses started being watched. That is when Fitz came up with the idea of me volunteering at different orphanages and schools to again lure children away."

"Where are the youngsters?" Zach asked.

"I'd be putting my life in jeopardy by telling you."

Miss Young stood. "Do you have my sister? Celeste Young."

"Miss Young is your sister?" Mrs. William tilted her face to the ceiling. "Another man who works for Mr. Fitz abducted Miss Young believing she was one of the girls at the orphanage."

"Why wasn't she released once he realized she was not a child?" Juliet's voice rose with each word. Zach put his hand on the small of her back.

Mrs. William rubbed her nose. "When Fitz discovered the mistake, he formulated other plans for your sister."

Juliet gasped. "What did he do to her?"

Katherine stood next to Miss Young in support.

"He plans to auction her off in India with some of the other abducted girls."

"She's in India?" Zach rubbed Juliet's back.

"Not yet. Yesterday I saw her in the warehouse with the children."

"When is Fitz or his partners expected to ship out?" Tisdale rose.

"I'm not certain of the exact day or time, but soon. He says he cannot hide the children in the warehouse much longer."

“How could you do this to innocent children?” Juliet’s tone was filled with scorn.

“He threatened to kill me. What was I to do?”

Malcolm stepped forward. “We will deal with your involvement later. Right now, we must get to that warehouse.”

The men surrounded Mrs. William. Tisdale looked pointedly at her. “You will show us where the warehouse is.”

“I cannot.” Mrs. William shook her head.

“You truly have no choice in the matter,” Tisdale explained, his pale blue eyes sympathetic, but resolute.

Mrs. William’s gaze shifted from man to man, as if searching for an ally. She should have known she would not find one.

Zach signaled Malcolm and Green to the side of the room. “I will have one of the Bow Street Runners take the women to my sister’s home and wait for us there.”

“Please ask him to retrieve my sister Brianna from my residence.” Green added, “If we find the blind child, she will wish to be present.”

“Of course,” Zach agreed.

Malcolm walked over to the women and addressed Katherine. “One of the Bow Street Runners will convey you to Commodore Abbot’s home. His wife is Lieutenant Derby’s sister. We will bring the children there after we find them.”

She squeezed his arm. “Be careful.”

“I will. I always am.”

Taking Mrs. William by the arm, Malcolm escorted her to one of the carriages waiting out front with Tisdale, Green, and Zachary on their heels. As they rode, with three other carriages following to transport any rescued children, Malcolm hoped Mrs. William wasn’t bringing them into a trap. He studied her, noting her nervous fingers clutched in the folds in her skirt. “What is your real name?” he asked.

“Miss Petry. Simone Petry.”

“Miss Petry, what does your family think of your association with a blackguard?”

“I have no family. Mr. Fitz found me in one of the workhouses. I’d lived there my whole life. I never knew my mother or father.”

The poor girl had lived a life of hell. And after being promised she would help others in her same situation, she found herself caught in the ugliness of slave trading.

Christ.

“I do have another question I hope you can help answer.” Perhaps she could shed some light on the question that had plagued them since rescuing Jimmy. “Can you explain why Fitz doesn’t kidnap children living in the streets? Seems they would be easier to abduct.”

“One of his men suggested the very same thing.” She slapped a hand over her mouth, her breathing labored. “After Mr. Fitz explained that he grew up on the London streets...” Her voice choked. “He slit the man’s throat.”

“Bloody hell,” Green cursed.

Zach’s eyes met Malcolm’s before Zach said, “The body at the waterfront.”

“I have seen him show kindness to the street ragamuffins. He gives them food, clothing, and money.” She sighed. “But since he believes the workhouse children and the ones living at orphanages are treated better than he was as a child, he holds them in contempt.”

They were dealing with a madman.

Silence reigned again while the men mulled her words over. When the carriage finally stopped, they were near the coast, the winds strong and a salty tang hung in the air. Yet, they were surrounded by woods. Miss Petry descended from the carriage and hurried forward. The way she moved in the darkness with quick strides, it seemed she possessed the eyes of an owl. She halted suddenly and whispered, “It is close now. We need to be silent. Guards are stationed at the front door.”

Green spied around the corner. “One guard.”

Malcolm took Green’s place and saw a man propped back in a chair, his hat over his eyes. Zachary, gun poised to shoot, approached and had the unsuspecting guard on the floor, gagged, and tied with a rope within seconds. The man secured, Zach stood up.

From the depths of the dark forest behind Zach, Malcolm caught sight of a flash of a sword’s blade. “Behind you,” he yelled.

Without a second’s hesitation, Zach spun and kicked the legs out from under a shadowed figure, throwing the abductor off-balance.

A gunshot rang out.

Zach gripped the man, using him as a shield.

Malcolm yanked out his pistol and knelt beside Green whose gun was already out. Searching the forest, Malcolm could not make out anything. “Where are they, Zach?”

Another shot blasted. Smoking gunpowder came from the forest’s gloomy edge on the other side of the building, silhouetting three large men’s bodies.

Malcolm, Green, and Tisdale each discharged their weapons. The three men fell like trees being chopped down.

Zach let the limp man he held fall to the ground and rushed to the shot men.

Malcolm hurried over. “Are you all right?”

Zach looked up from tying up the only man still alive. “All in a day’s work.” Zach’s blasé attitude was the same as it had been for fifteen years, well more than twenty-five if Malcolm counted Eton. Not even flying bullets shook the man up.

While a Bow Street Runner stayed on alert with his gun out and watching the injured men, the others quietly entered the dark warehouse. A foul stench curdled Malcolm’s stomach before he bumped into something on the floor. “We need light.”

Seconds later, Green lit two candles. It wasn't enough to illuminate the entire place, but just enough to make out the pallet at his feet. The runners lit more candles, and Malcolm saw dozens of pallets littered the floor. A few had children on them, terrified expressions on their faces, ropes binding their wrists and ankles.

“Captain Westbourne? Lieutenant Derby?”

Malcolm turned toward the voice to find Celeste Young lying on her side, tied up.

Zach rushed toward her.

“Is that really you?” she asked.

“Thank God we found you.” Zach knelt beside her. “Your sister will be so relieved.”

“What were those shots outside?”

“Nothing to worry about,” Malcolm said.

“I cannot believe you are here. Many of the children were taken earlier, but the men who took them said someone would be back for us. They blathered something about us having a different destination from the others.”

Those must have been the men they'd just encountered. Malcolm hated to think what would have happened if they had not arrived when they did.

Zach cut her ropes with a knife. “How many were taken?”

“Around fifty.”

Malcolm examined the room, not able to discern the dozen or so children's faces.

“Captain Westbourne, are you searching for someone?” Celeste's voice sounded slightly hoarse.

“A boy named Charles.”

“Oh, sweet Charles. They took him.”

Damn.

The men released the children from their confines. The boys and girls ran to Celeste, embracing her. She spoke to each

child by name, hugging them close.

Green hurried toward a young girl, her hands and feet still bound. She flinched when he neared.

Celeste started toward them, but stopped when Silas said, “Do you remember me, Gretchen? I am Silas Green. Brianna’s brother.”

A high pitched voice came from Gretchen. “Lieutenant Green. Is Brianna here?”

Green touched her shoulder with an encouraging squeeze. “No, but she anxiously awaits your safe return.” Gently, he cut the ropes off the girl.

Once free, Gretchen let out a sob. Silas stayed on his knees and pulled her close. “Everything is all right now. You are safe.”

After a few minutes, Malcolm checked the shadows and heard Celeste’s voice. “Lieutenant Green, thank you for your gentle treatment of Gretchen. Fitz’s men have been so rough with the poor dear.”

“My sister Brianna has been blind since birth. She has a strength and confidence I hope all blind individuals, and those with sight for that matter, are able to attain.”

Celeste stared at him. “I’ve never heard a man speak quite so passionately about others. Most men do not think the way you do.”

“I am not most men.”

Malcolm felt like an intruder, but they needed to get the children somewhere safe. Plus, they each required a bath to wash the stench of this place from their bodies, and a meal to fill their stomachs.

“Celeste?” he called.

“Yes?” Her beautiful hair was matted and her ragged clothing that of a boy.

“Lieutenant Derby’s sister has set up her townhouse in London to house the children.”

“I would like to go with them. I do not wish to leave them yet.”

At that moment, two children ran up and hugged her. “We are free. We are free,” they chanted, making her laugh.

“Yes, we are, dearies.”

Admiral Tisdale marched over to Celeste. “Let’s get you and the children in the carriages.”

“Oh, yes.” She followed him, the children at her heels.

“How can she find anything to laugh about?” Silas watched her leave.

“She probably laughs to keep from crying.”

They were the last two left in the warehouse and grabbed candles to search inside the facility. Rats scurried between the pallets. As they approached the rear of the building, Malcolm’s eyes watered from the foul smell. They each pulled out a handkerchief to cover their noses and mouths. “This unholy stench cannot be from the privy behind the structure.”

“What is that door?” Green tilted his head to the back corner.

The disgusting odor strengthened the closer they got to the door. Green hastily withdrew his gun as Malcolm reached for the door handle. Still breathing through the linen, he quickly flung the door open.

A body thudded to the ground.

Then another.

And another.

Chapter Fourteen

Gun still in hand, Green gagged. “Bloody hell.”

Malcolm leaned closer for a better view of the bodies. They were men the Navy suspected of slave trading, each with his throat slashed. He swallowed hard, quelling the need to retch.

Green and Malcolm reported what they’d found to Tisdale, Zach, and the Bow Street Runners. The storage-like room opened to the outside of the building as well as the inside. And with the way the bodies toppled out, they must have been shoved inside from the outside door. That explained why the children and Celeste did not have knowledge of the dead men.

Admiral Tisdale instructed the Runners to stay with the dead bodies, the guard, and the injured men to report what happened to the magistrate.

Malcolm busied himself helping load the children into the carriages. To relax them, he asked questions as they rode. At first reluctant, the children soon talked of their experiences. As far as he could tell, Fitz had fed them well, while keeping them bound.

When they arrived at the Abbots’ townhouse, Jimmy ran to each one of the carriages and opened the doors. “Welcome,” the young boy called with exuberance.

Juliet Young and Katherine, with Brianna holding her arm, rushed out the front door.

“Celeste,” Juliet called. Both women hurried toward each other and met together, hugging and crying. Zachary watched the sisters, a satisfied smile on his face.

Silas led Gretchen to Brianna, who wrapped the girl in her arms.

Katherine hurried toward Malcolm, smiling at each child in her path. “Did you find Charles?”

“No. He was moved from the warehouse earlier today, along with other children. We believe he’s on his way to Africa.”

“Why would he take only some of the children?”

“We suspect Celeste and the others left behind were intended to be sent elsewhere.”

“Dear God.” She lifted her arms around his neck and held him tight.

Propriety be damned, he buried his face in her neck and held on to her. His time with her grew ever shorter by the second.

“You will find him, Malcolm.” She rubbed his nape, her touch soothing.

He tamped down every emotion—from frustration to never-ending love—bombarding him. “We should get the children fed and bathed.”

“Yes.” Katherine helped the other women gather the children inside.

Malcolm, Green, and Zachary stood together on the front lawn. Tisdale, Miss Petry in tow, joined them. The admiral pulled a cigar from his pocket. “The ships will dock at first light. The crews are already aboard, along with the supplies you purchased. I expect you three to meet the crews.”

“Aye, sir.” Malcolm faced Miss Petry. “You have proven you care about the children, but we need the name of the settlement in Africa Fitz brought you to before he sailed to the West Indies.”

“Accra.”

“Thank you.” Accra, located on the African coast, was well known for trading prisoners of war to the slavers. “You are under arrest with the Navy.”

“I expected no less,” Miss Petry said.

Tisdale stepped forward. “When my men return, if you helped them locate the children, I will speak on your behalf.”

Miss Petry gasped, clearly shocked. “After what I’ve done?”

Tisdale pointed at her with his cigar. “As you explained, you did not wish to partake, but Fitz threatened your life.”

~

While the women tended to the children’s needs, the men met in the study planning for the morning. The Abbot study was filled with paintings and models of ships, a room to do any shipmate proud. One of the models, with vast sails and masts, was the length of an entire wall.

After a knock on the door, it opened. Celeste entered, her hair wet, combed away from her face. She wore a simple white day dress. “Might I have a word with you in private, Captain Westbourne?”

Malcolm rose, as did Zachary and Green. The two other men left the room and closed the door. “Is something amiss, Miss Young?”

Her eyes were rimmed in red. “I wanted to thank you for rescuing us.”

“I wish we had arrived sooner.”

“Me, too, but I am confident you will find the others.” She caught her bottom lip in her teeth as she walked closer to him. “Captain, I must apologize. We were scheduled to meet twice now and I have not attended either time.”

“There is no need to talk about this now.” With what she’d just survived, their agreement should be the last thing on her mind. He shifted from foot to foot.

“Please. I would like to explain.”

He paused at her pleading tone and sat on the edge of the desk to listen.

“Sir Roderick is not and never has been my lover.”

Unable to hide his surprise, Malcolm folded his arms over his chest.

“His attentions were strictly for his wife’s sister. Shortly after he married, he contacted me and explained his conundrum, offering me a mighty sum to parade as his mistress. At the time, his wife suspected he was having an affair. He concocted the ruse so she would think it was with me, instead of her sister. I supported my family from his generosity.”

Generosity? What an odd way of thinking about things.

“His wife knew about me for a while before she became jealous and had Roderick followed day and night. He was forced to end his affair and our association. Afterward, I found myself without an income, and more importantly, without skills. You were always kind to me and your reputation is that of a generous lover.

“The first night I requested your company, over a year ago, I simply fled from fear. I wasn’t sure what to say or how to explain my...unique situation, when you expected me to be experienced.”

“I see.”

“When my savings dwindled, I asked you for the second night. I believed the only way to support myself would come from gaining an arrangement as a mistress. I hoped you would agree to tutor me in the pleasurable pursuits. I was prepared to pay you.”

Ah, the blunt Juliet had found with his name on it.

“I am sorry if you feel used in all of this,” she said.

“Celeste, I must confess, I did not plan to attend you either night. My father’s death intervened the first time, and my feelings for Miss Ashby the second. Please do not take offense, but I offered those nights to Zachary Derby.”

“I would have welcomed Lieutenant Derby to my bed. However, I no longer wish to be any man’s mistress.”

“Your sister found two hundred pounds and gave it to me, thinking she was repaying my money.”

“Naïve Juliet would never guess I would pay you.”

“What will you do?”

Shrugging, she said, “I’m not sure, but I will need to find work soon.”

“I wish you happiness and success.”

“And I you, Captain.” She reached out and Malcolm kissed her hand. “Have a safe journey. I pray you find the children quickly.”

“Thank you.”

When Celeste exited the study, Green entered. “I must depart to make plans for Brianna during my absence. She insists Gretchen spends the night with us, and she will take the child to her parents in the morning. Since my father and sisters have not responded to my letters, I am unsure when or if they will arrive in London any time soon.”

Malcolm pondered his words. “You are searching for a companion for Brianna?”

“Yes. She has never needed one since she spends most of her time at school. But I do not want to send her back there until we are certain she will be safe. However, I may not have another option.”

“Why don’t you ask Miss Young if she would like the position? She is in need of work.”

“Juliet?”

“Actually, Celeste.”

Confusion passed behind Green’s eyes. “She is looking for work? Why? She could acquire any man in London as a protector.”

Malcolm chose his words carefully. “After this ordeal, she no longer wants to pursue that path in her life. She’s very kind. You can see how the children like her. She might be a perfect companion and helpmate to Brianna.”

Green looked uncertain, but said, “I will ask her.”

~

Zach found Juliet in the kitchen, clearing tarts from a platter. Her pinned hair had loosened and unruly tendrils cascaded around her face. Glancing up, she smiled. "Lieutenant Derby, would you please help me dump this dirty water in the back?"

With servants aplenty, why would she ask him to do it? "Of course." He picked up the pail and followed her out the kitchen door.

"Set it right here."

He put the bucket down, then his eyes met hers.

"Thank you for freeing my sister."

Zach thrust his hands into his pockets to keep from pulling her into his arms and discovering how thankful she was. "You are welcome." Even though they'd located Celeste, his work was not complete.

"You leave in the morning?"

"Aye. First light."

She wrapped her arms around her waist, a visible quiver passing through her body.

He bent over to bring them face to face. "What is wrong, Juliet?"

"I am confused about everything. My father's health. My place in life."

He leaned forward. "And me?"

She bobbed her head.

"If it is any consolation, I feel the same way."

"You do?"

He traced her bottom lip with his thumb. "The urge to kiss you has overwhelmed me at least three times today. But I was unsure of your reaction if I were to take such a liberty." His gaze fastened on her luscious lips as he closed the distance between them. "I will stop any time you ask."

She breathed his name before his lips touched hers. Obviously untutored, she kissed him with fervor, but not expertise. He deepened the kiss, wanting to teach her more.

What am I doing? He pulled back.

“Did I do something wrong?” She shyly covered her lips with a hand.

Her words picked at his insides like a vulture on his prey. Wrong? Hell no. But dallying with this girl would not be right. Not now. “No, my dear, you did everything right.”

“Why did you stop?”

He stepped back and tried to make his body behave. “If I continue to kiss you, more will happen. Are you prepared for that?”

“I am not certain.”

“That is why I stopped. We both need to want the same things, if we are to go further.”

“Yes, little more than a week ago you set out for a night of debauchery with my sister.” Her tone mirrored that of the first night they met. Hearing the pain in her voice should have softened him toward her, instead he became infuriated. Who had he been protecting and helping the last couple of weeks? Not Celeste.

Juliet would need to learn to watch her mouth.

He felt compelled to make one thing perfectly clear. “Your sister is not the woman I want to debauch right now.” Lightning fast, he grabbed her and pulled her toward him, crushing her lips with his. She did not push away or fight him. Her acceptance relaxed him and he kissed her like he was tasting a delicate sweet.

She responded with enthusiasm, putting her arms around his neck. “Oh, Zachary.”

He kissed her temple. “Your tongue is going to be your ruin, my dear.”

“Or my rapture.”

Zach laughed. “No. If we’re going to go about this, we will remain respectable and both desire the same things. I have an assignment to finish. Afterward, we can discuss what is growing between us.”

She brushed her lips against his. “You are right. And I understand if you change your mind or if you—”

“Juliet, do not goad me.”

Turning her head, she set her cheek against his chest. “I will try not to.”

~

Katherine found Malcolm in the study with Zachary. “Are you ready to depart?” Malcolm asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Should I retrieve Juliet?”

“She doesn’t want to leave Celeste, so she is staying here tonight.” Zachary picked up something from the desktop. Together, the three of them left the house. Once at the Westbourne townhouse, Malcolm and she descended from Lieutenant Derby’s carriage and bid him a goodnight.

When they approached the door, Malcolm gripped her arm. “Katherine?” They stopped on the walk. Lamplight from the street barely touched his face. “I will get a carriage and convey you to Drake’s townhouse.”

Confused, she searched his eyes.

Apologetic expression on his face, he sighed. “We were reckless earlier today. It would not do for us to be caught together.”

She nodded in agreement, but her heart ached.

“Barkly will accompany you to Oxford.”

That shocked her. Miss Petry had been caught and the men were leaving to chase Mr. Fitz. “Surely I am safe now. I do not need—”

“Much has happened. The two other men in the world I trust enough with your safety will be on the voyage with me.

Barkly will guard you with his life.”

“But—”

“Katherine, it is already killing me to leave you. I need the assurance you will be protected while I’m gone.”

It was killing her, too, but she detected more to his words—a desperation she had never heard from him. She realized the desperation was his love for her.

She rubbed the crease between his brows. “If it will put you at ease, Barkly is welcome to come to Oxford.”

“As I’m sure you can tell, he is much more than a servant. You can trust him.”

“Malcolm,” Barkly’s deep voice called from the doorway. “A messenger arrived hours ago to relay the message that William Fitz’s ship set sail. I have been sending messages to every place you might have gone.”

Malcolm explained all that happened to Barkly. Thirty minutes later, the carriage, with Katherine, Malcolm, and Barkly aboard, stopped in front of Drake’s house. While Jackson showed Barkly around the home, Katherine and Malcolm joined her parents, Drake’s mother, and Drake’s aunt in the library. They were sitting around a small square game table playing cards.

Explaining what happened that evening, Malcolm added he would be leaving in the morning. “Lady Drake, I appreciate what you have done in preparation for the ball, and I hope your efforts are not wasted.”

“Of course not. It will be a grand affair and hopefully garner contributions aplenty.”

“Good. If you will excuse me, I must prepare for my journey.”

Malcolm leaned over Katherine’s hand and kissed it. “I will see you soon.”

Is this how he’s saying good-bye? In a room filled with people?

“Mr. Ashby, a word?” Malcolm pointed to the door.

“Have a safe journey,” Aunt Mildred called.

“Godspeed,” Claudette chimed in.

Malcolm bowed to those in the room.

Dejected, Katherine went over Malcolm’s words, *I will see you soon*. Soon? What was a sailor’s definition of soon? Not knowing how long she’d be able to hold back her tears, Katherine said, “If you will excuse me, it has been a trying day and I am in desperate need of a bath.”

“Of course, dear,” her mother called.

Katherine entered the hallway, hoping to catch sight of Malcolm one last time. But he and her father were nowhere in the house. She trudged up to her room and requested a bath.

She washed and the maid stoked the fire so Katherine would not catch a chill while washing her hair. Letting a couple of tears fall, she remembered all that happened that day. West being born. The faces of the rescued children. She and Malcolm speaking vows to each other. Her heart tripped. He loved her. He truly loved her.

After her bath, she sat next to the fire dressed in her robe and combed her hair as it dried. Dismissing the maid, Katherine watched the flames dancing in the hearth. Loneliness engulfed her. If she went downstairs, someone would still be awake to talk to, but she wanted Malcolm.

The clock in the hallway struck twelve times, and Katherine could not muster the strength to stand, put on her nightgown, and get into bed. While her body bordered on exhaustion, her mind was aflutter. Would Malcolm’s journey be safe? Successful? How long would he be gone?

How am I going to get any sleep in his absence? She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. At hearing the turning of her door handle, she didn’t bother to open her eyes. “I am not in need of anything else.”

“A pity,” Malcolm’s deep voice rumbled.

She jolted forward and spun her head. *Am I dreaming?*

Dream or not, joy welled in her heart.

Malcolm turned the key in the lock. “I said I would see you soon.”

“Oh.” She ran to him and jumped into his arms.

He held her close. “How I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The scent of sandalwood and soap clung to him and his hair was damp. It wasn't raining so he must have come from a bath.

“How did you get in the house?” she asked.

He gestured with his fist, as if knocking. “I roused the entire house by banging on the front door.”

She giggled at his antics, too happy to ask more. It did not matter how he got in or how he knew which room was hers. “I must say, I have been somewhat put out with you since you left earlier.”

“Was I supposed to give you a good-bye kiss in front of everyone?”

“Well...”

“To be honest, we're lucky our earlier escapade in my room isn't common knowledge. Neither of us was thinking clearly.”

She laughed. “And you being here in my room now is better?”

“Well, no. But I had to see you one last time, my wife.”

Wife. Truly, in their hearts they had married that afternoon. With a flick of her hand, she untied his cravat.

Malcolm gripped her hands. “Katherine, we should wait until we properly marry.”

“We made our vows today, to each other and to God.”

“Yes, darling, but...” He tugged her toward the chair she'd just vacated and sat with her in his lap. “There might be consequences of us being together. I do not want to chance

getting you with child. Especially since we have not yet discussed children.”

A twinge twisted in her stomach. “Malcolm, I am not sure I want to have a child.”

“I understand. We can discuss the matter on my homecoming.”

“What if you do—”

“Katherine, love, your wants and desires are mine also. I would never ask for more than you can give, willingly and with love. I understand how important your orphans are.”

“I never considered having a child, but quite honestly, I would do everything in my power to give you whatever you might desire.”

“Words every man wants to hear,” he breathed against her neck and kissed her collarbone. “But tonight is your choice. I can hold you here in this chair until I must leave, or we can make love and I will use a French letter.”

“A French letter?”

“Don’t try to convince me you did not learn of them during your conversations on the divans.”

“I admit to having heard the term,” she teased. “But only when one described a rake.”

“I am a rake.” He placed a fist over his heart. “A reformed rake.”

She grinned. “Then truly, let’s put your expertise to use.”

He sobered. “I can wait.”

Leaning forward, her cheek brushed his as she whispered, “I cannot.”

Malcolm pulled back and searched her eyes. “Are you sure, darling?”

“For so many years I have feared intimacy, but now all I want is to be in your arms. To be yours.”

~

At her words, Malcolm's blood surged. On the ride to Drake's townhouse, he'd schooled himself into believing Katherine would refuse him in hopes of controlling his desires. But now, after her softly spoken words, he felt himself coming apart. "I have dreamed of having you like this."

"I've dreamt of you too."

"I am positive my dreams were different than yours."

"Show me."

His stomach dropped. Lord, he hated that he would hurt her. He remembered an Eton classmate explaining how to make love to a virgin so the experience wasn't terribly painful for her and hoped his friend had told the truth, because he was about to find out.

"I plan to." He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. He set her on her feet in front of him and sat on the bed to shed his boots. "Darling, I would be most grateful if you would do something for me."

"And what would that be?"

"Take off the robe."

"My robe? Without my robe, I would stand here naked. What am I to do then?"

He never guessed she could be so playful. No, that wasn't true. He knew her nature and if she conquered her anxiety she would be very spirited. And passionate, he guessed. "Aren't you wearing a nightgown?"

A blush flushed her cheeks. "I am not."

"Are you sure you were not expecting me?" He smiled.

"No. I lacked the strength to move earlier."

He pulled her between his legs. "Let's work on my clothes then."

"That would be a pleasure."

It took all his strength not to laugh. “You are a dutiful woman.”

She kissed his neck as she slid the buttons on his coat and shirt from their loops. “I cannot always promise to be such. But tonight, you may have whatever you wish from me.”

She had no idea what she was saying. In her innocent mind that meant kisses and love making in a conventional sense, which honestly was all he could properly take tonight. But he longed for the days when he would tutor her in the many ways of lovemaking.

A spasm wrenched his stomach. He hated to leave her, hated the idea of not seeing her every day.

Finished with his buttons, she pulled off his coat, waistcoat, and shirt. She stilled.

“You can touch me, darling.”

Her gaze flew to his. “I apologize for staring, but you are so very well proportioned.”

If she only knew. Well, she would find out soon enough.

He grasped her hands and pulled her close. He pressed his ear against her bosom, hearing the beat of her heart racing.

Untying the belt on her robe, he opened it. He looked into her eyes, wanting to make sure she was not distressed, before slowly sliding the robe from her shoulders and letting it shush to the floor. He expected she might shy away, but no. Not his Katherine. She didn't move. Didn't protest as he once again placed his head on her bosom, now against her bare skin.

If he died now, he would never have been happier. Hands at her waist, he lifted her and swept her across his lap to lie next to him. “I can't wait any longer, Katherine. I simply cannot.”

He leaned her back on the bed, her luscious body an offering from the gods. He drank in her beauty as he made quick work of disposing his trousers. When he reached for her, he steadied himself. If it killed him, he would make this enjoyable for her. Painstakingly slowly, he kissed her.

Everywhere.

From head to toe, he left no part of her body untouched by his mouth and hands. When he rose over her, she wrapped her arms around him and smiled.

“I am blessed to love you and have your love in return.”

Her words undid him—reached all the way to his soul. “We are blessed, darling.” His concentration centered on Katherine’s face as he entered her the slightest bit. He watched her every expression. He was expecting this to be difficult for her given what happened with her uncle, but she surprised him. Her caresses, her words, her soft sighs, were music to his ears. Nothing sounded better, or exhilarated him more, than a passion-filled Katherine. And he wished to see what heights he might take her, but right now they had to dispense with her virginity. He moved inside her, fighting the urge to breach her maidenhead until the right moment. At last, she called his name and flew into ecstasy.

Malcolm entered her fully, not able to stop moving as he quickly found release. He would savor her later tonight, but was too fearful of hurting her to linger this first time. He rolled and tugged her along until she stretched out on top of him, her head on his chest.

She lifted her head and those sweet eyes met his. “It was so much more than I expected. You said there would be pain, but I felt none.”

“I waited until you were peaking before I entered you fully, hoping you would experience less pain that way.”

“You succeeded.” Her smile transformed to a frown. “I would ask where you learned such a thing, but I am afraid of the answer.”

He chuckled. “A friend at Eton. You are my first virgin, darling. I may have shared my body with other women, but you are the first to whom I have given my soul.”

She kissed his chest. “Am I to be your soul-keeper?”

“From this day forward and until death us depart.”

~

Katherine and Malcolm spent the night talking, touching, loving one another. She wished for a way to keep him with her, but his assignment was too important.

Malcolm held her hand and led her to the bedchamber door. “I would put you in my breast coat pocket if I could. Keep you close to my heart.”

She opened his coat and kissed him where she believed his heart to be, then rubbed the spot. “I am always here with you, wherever you go.”

How was her heart going to survive being married to a sailor? Having to say good-bye often and to spend endless days without him. He’d promised to do anything in his power to see to her orphans, but how might he do that being at sea? She threw those questions out of the way; she had plenty of time to contemplate them later.

He nibbled her ear. “Promise me you will have the banns read in my absence.”

“I promise.” With a tight hug around his neck, she breathed in his scent one more time. “I will miss you.”

“Hopefully not for long. Tell the children they will have a surprise when I arrive back.”

“You are bringing them presents?”

“I am not giving the surprise away.”

It was time to let him go. Her heart squeezed. She felt bereft already, but refused to shed a tear. “Please come home to me.”

“Nothing can keep me away.” He kissed her one last time. Chastely, his lips gentle, not like the searing caresses during their lovemaking. “I love you.” He opened the door and rushed toward the servants’ stairwell without looking back—and, she understood—before he changed his mind. His life’s work could not be forgotten because they were in love. She would not want him to abandon his mission or the Navy.

With a final prayer for his safety and success, she closed the door.

Chapter Fifteen

With the sky still dark, Malcolm slipped from the back door of Drake's townhouse and took off through the mews. As instructed, Trevor's driver waited on the corner with a carriage. Once inside and on his way, Malcolm ran a hand over his face and caught the lavender scent of Katherine's perfume. He closed his eyes remembering the magical hours they'd shared. How perfectly she fit in his arms. How totally fulfilled he felt after making love to her each time.

Within minutes, the carriage jolted to a stop and broke Malcolm from his reverie. He opened the door and jumped out.

Harbor lights illuminated the busy waterfront. He hesitated, and put a hand over his chest, where Katherine had kissed him. Yes, he would take her love with him, but his focus had to be on the voyage. If she was constantly on his mind, he risked not keeping his wits about him. He could not cockup this assignment if he wanted it to be his last. And that was his goal, to come home having completed his mission, and begin their life together.

He looked up and beseeched the dark heavens, *Please keep her safe.*

He grabbed his bag and waved to the driver. The two luggers waited where Admiral Tisdale promised. The white square sail on each ship was up, flapping in the breeze. The other riggings hung loose, ready to hoist the other sails.

Determined steps brought him to the docks where Zachary, Green, and Captain Underwood stood in a circle. Captain Nigel Underwood, whom Malcolm had once served with in the West Africa Squadron, held out his hand. "Morning, Malcolm."

"Nigel. As we discussed, you will captain one vessel while I command the other. I need both Derby and Green with me." He set down his bag. "No matter what happens, stay with

Fitz's ship. He will never expect two luggers to be procured by the Navy. We will fly no flags, nor wear uniforms. The only way he will be able to identify us is when we are close enough that he can make out our faces with the aid of a spyglass, and by that time he will be within our grasp. I trust you can run him down. We will help, unless there are other contingencies."

Nigel's eyes narrowed. "You expect other contingencies?"

Malcolm looked each man in the eyes. "I believe we all do."

~

Determined not to crumble and weep after Malcolm left, Katherine had gone back to bed and tugged the sheets still holding his musky scent around her. Exhaustion from the night must have won out, because as she woke, full sunlight beamed into the room.

Her heart weighed heavy in her chest.

I already miss him.

She sat and stretched, remembering the night. Her body tingled, sore in her most private places. How could so much pleasure devastate her senses, her being? How could so much joy radiate from one soul to another, even when they simply held each other and talked?

Not bothering to call a maid, she washed her face in the washstand and dressed for the day. She opened the bedroom door to find Barkly waiting. "Good morning, Miss Ashby. Breakfast is served."

"Barkly, would you be terribly put out if we left for Oxford on the morrow?"

"Not at all. Malcolm believed you would be ready to return to the orphans."

Malcolm was always thinking of her. Tears blurred her vision and she dropped her head to fight her emotions.

Without a word, Barkly held out his hand. She glanced into his eyes. So trusting those eyes. She placed her hand in his and

let him lead her to the study, where he tugged her over the threshold and closed the door. He pulled a small wooden box from his coat pocket. “Malcolm usually keeps this on him at all times, but it was in need of repair. The replacement part was delivered and then sent from the Westbourne townhouse this morning, but not until after he had left. I may be overstepping my position, but” He opened the box and something glinted in the light.

He handed her a small, gold pocket watch, polished and of the finest quality. She pushed the button on the side and the top flipped up. It was not a watch, but a compass. The most beautiful instrument she’d ever seen, with colored gems and elaborate painting on the face. “Where did he get this?”

“It was a gift from a rescued slave. The man who gave it to him was a tribal king who had lost his family and been captured by another tribe, then traded to a slaver.”

“Thank you, Barkly.” She closed the compass and held it against her chest. “I will treasure it.”

“Do you understand why I gave it to you?”

“To have something of Malcolm’s?”

“Partly. But also, when you look at the compass and see it pointing north, you can take comfort that Malcolm is most likely studying a compass himself, pointing the same way.” He smiled. “If you are both pointed in the same direction, you will end up in the same place.”

“Oh, Barkly.” The tears she’d been battling began to fall.

He held out a handkerchief. “Do you have a chain sturdy enough to hold the compass?”

She wiped her eyes with the linen. “I do.” She rushed up the stairs and rummaged in her satchel until she found her jewelry case and a chain. Hurrying back to the study, she handed the chain to Barkly and he laced the compass through the loop next to the spring mechanism that opened it.

“Shall I?” he asked.

She nodded and turned her back to him. The compass touched her skin, dropping on her chest, not quite to the top of her bodice. She held on to it and breathed a heavy sigh. *I will carry you with me, Malcolm.*

“Good morning,” her father’s deep voice rang from the open door.

“Sir,” Barkly said, then left the room.

“Have you breakfasted?” Father asked.

“Not yet.” But she was famished. “First, I would like to ask what was said between you and Malcolm last night.”

“He explained that he proposed and you accepted.”

Not able to stop herself, she ran toward him. He opened his arms and engulfed her. “My sweet Katherine.” He hugged her tight and pulled back, his eyes alight.

“I guess you got what you wanted, Papa.”

“Sometimes fathers know best.”

“As much as I may wish to argue with your statement, I cannot.” Holding his arm, she let him lead her to the dining room where she plated some eggs and ham and poured herself a cup of tea.

Her father served himself and sat across from her. “Did Malcolm give you any indication of his plans to return?”

“No.”

“Do you wish to stay here and wait for him?”

“Of course not. I would like to leave early tomorrow morning. I would consider leaving today, but we must be at the ball tonight in support of Claudette and Mildred.”

“Tomorrow then.”

“Have you told Mother of my impending nuptials?”

“I have.”

Katherine set down her fork. “How did she take the news?”

“Rather well, although she was distressed to see you troubled last night after Malcolm left. She and I both worry for his safety.”

“As do I.” But she would not stop her life and wait for him. He would not wish her to do that.

“I would like to ask you a question, Katherine.”

“Yes?”

“Did you tell your mother I was being unfaithful?”

She felt like a young girl in trouble for telling a fib. “Why do you ask?”

“Katherine,” he chided.

“I did not. However, I did impart to Mother that I witnessed you spending time with Gwendolyn Turnbow at the Sharps’ ball.”

A frown took over his expression. “I have not spoken to Gwendolyn Turnbow in years.”

“Yes, well, be that as it may, I remember Mother being in a fuss over Mrs. Turnbow when Elizabeth and I were young. Mother made it clear they were rivals their come-out year. She told us how jealous she would get when you danced with her adversary.”

“You should not have lied.”

“I had to do something. And how can you be sure you would not stray one day if she kept up her melancholy?”

“Do you love Malcolm, Katherine?”

“With all my heart.”

“And can you imagine yourself with anyone else?”

Her cheeks burned, and she tried to hide her distress by drinking from her cup. Did he know Malcolm spent the night in her bed? Had he let Malcolm in the house last night? How did Malcolm know which room she was using? Heavens. Instead of focusing on those thoughts, she addressed his

question. Could she see herself with anyone else? So intimately entwined, so open and accepting?

“No,” she finally answered.

“Then, even though you concocted this farce for your mother’s sake, I hope you understand I would never betray her.”

In that moment, she realized love was a delicate blend of caring, trust, hope, desire, compassion, and faith. Love, quite simply, was reverence.

“Not many men would be as tolerant as you, Father. Of Mother. And of me.” She leaned over the table and kissed his forehead. “What an exceptional man you are.”

~

After she breakfasted, Katherine and Barkly rode to the Westbourne townhouse. Barkly finished packing his things while she visited with the Drakes. The baby slept as she held him. Emma and Drake were both thrilled to hear about her betrothal. After talking with them for an hour, she proceeded down the stairs.

Voices drifted from the study.

“Why did Malcolm not say anything?” a man’s deep voice asked. That was either Colin or Trevor. The men sounded so alike she wasn’t sure.

Another masculine voice said, “I am sure he did not want to worry us.”

“Do you think Katherine knows?”

“If I were in his position, I would not inform Antoinette.”

Silence.

She took the needed steps and made it to the doorway. “I hate to interrupt, but I wanted to say goodbye.” And ask what she should be worried about.

“Dear, do come in.” Trevor stood. “And may I be the first to say, welcome to the family. Malcolm told us of your

impending nuptials and we are all excited for you both.”

Colin stood by crossed sabers on the wall. “Yes, our brother is a lucky man.”

“Thank you.” They both resembled Malcolm with their coloring and features, but neither brother possessed Malcolm’s playfulness and spirit. “Colin, Malcolm told me about Charles. We were both so disappointed he was not with the other children in the warehouse last night.”

“Thank you. I have every confidence Malcolm will bring him home.”

Pride lightened her heart like a buoy in the water. But as the men’s conversation replayed in her mind, the buoys sank. “Gentlemen, please forgive me, but I overheard your conversation. Can I ask what you were discussing about Malcolm?”

The men exchanged a glance. Trevor motioned to the chairs in front of the desk. “Please have a seat.”

She crossed the rug and sat.

“Did Malcolm discuss his vessel *The Greyhound* with you?” Colin took the seat beside her and Trevor sat back down.

“No.”

Trevor rested his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers. “It was set afire and sank.”

Alarm jolted her nerves. “His ship caught fire? The one he was to take today?”

“No,” Colin interjected. “It caught fire a week or so ago. He made other arrangements for the ships he’s using now. We are not apprised of the details. We had not heard about it before he sailed this morning.”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“People against stopping the slave trading. People who make their living selling other humans.” Anger punctuated Trevor’s words.

Terror skittered through her. She stood. “He’s in danger.”

Trevor splayed his hands out in front of him. “You must understand his duties are not without risk.”

She had guessed as much, but hearing someone deliberately set his vessel afire filled her with a type of dread she’d never experienced before. “Yes. I do.” Why didn’t Malcolm tell her about the ship?

“Miss Ashby?” Barkly called from the doorway. “Are you ready to depart?”

Was she? She was confused, and furious with Malcolm for not sharing this news with her.

Barkly’s gaze flickered from her face, to the compass, and back to her eyes.

She gripped the gold around her neck and calmed herself. “Trevor, Colin, I am traveling to Oxford on the morrow. I pray Malcolm has a fast and successful journey.”

“As do we all,” Trevor said.

Both men watched as she backed toward the door. “Please give my regards to your wives.” She barely contained her anger as Barkly escorted her to the carriage. Once they were both inside, she lit into him. “Why didn’t Malcolm tell me about his ship?” She slapped the seat.

“Your anger confuses me. What would you have done if you had known about the vessel? What would be different between you and Malcolm?”

She stared at him. “Nothing.”

“Then why does his not telling you wound you?”

Her mind processed his words slowly. She concentrated on the scenery outside the window. Her anger quickly changed to hurt. “He should have trusted me, shared that vital piece of information with me.”

“You wanted him to give you reason to fret?”

Malcolm would do anything to avoid her being hurt. He’d proven that when he stopped pushing for explanations of her

skittishness and in how he patiently and gently coaxed her into falling in love with him.

Barkly's lips made a straight line. "He did not inform you about the ship for the same reason he did not tell his brothers. You are his family now, and he will do anything and everything to protect you."

Chapter Sixteen

After two long weeks at sea, they had not caught up with Fitz, but yesterday they made the shore at Accra and locals reported that Fitz had left a couple of hours before Malcolm's luggers docked. Knowing they were closing in, Malcolm instructed both ships to immediately set sail again. He spotted a ship on the horizon at dusk. The speck of light from that vessel grew larger during the night.

As dawn woke the sky, Malcolm lifted a spyglass to his eye. Fitz stepped onto the deck and glanced behind the ship, but must not have considered the luggers a threat, because he waddled around appearing not to have a care. Dressed in a robe, his short arms rested against his punchy stomach. The man acted as if he was on holiday. Soon he disappeared down the hull.

Triumph quickened the beating of Malcolm's heart as they sailed closer. With the smaller luggers clipping over the waves, they would overtake Fitz in mere minutes.

Fitz appeared on the deck again and scanned the horizon behind the ship, halted, and raised a telescope to his face. They were close enough that he would be able to clearly see the people on the luggers. The telescope's lens glinted in the sun. It trained on Malcolm, then to the helm, where Zachary was at the wheel. Fitz jerked around and raced toward the main deck.

"All hands on deck," Malcolm shouted while keeping his attention on the vessel in front of them.

Six men ran up behind Fitz, guns in their hands.

"Incoming," Malcolm yelled and hunched down. A bullet shattered part of the gunwale right above his head. He crawled behind one of the trunks positioned around the bow.

Return fire rang from Nigel's ship. Bullet after bullet pierced the quiet morning.

Zach stayed at the helm, guiding the ship while on his knees. Two shots blasted the mast to his left.

The gunfire ceased.

Malcolm peered from around the trunk.

Something was thrown overboard from Fitz's ship.

Dear God. No!

His worst nightmare was happening. All the times he'd dreamed and thought that this happened, he'd been right. But nothing could have prepared him to see it.

To actually witness such a heinous act was beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

Bile rose in his throat.

Fitz and his crew were tossing people into the water.

Malcolm would kill the bastard.

"Dear Christ," Green uttered in disbelief.

Men crouched around him and gawked in horror.

"Prepare," Malcolm yelled, breaking the men's shocked stares. They scattered, each focusing on his duty. The outer two sails were dropped, leaving the mainsail on the rigging.

Green and Malcolm opened the trunks on the deck. They yanked out hundreds of pieces of light wood with rope attached to throw to the men, women, and children.

Malcolm hoped the individuals knew enough not to fight the water. But he was certain many of the slaves had never even seen the ocean until captured and put aboard ship.

The West Africa Squadron had been his calling. They caught some crafts full of slaves, while others had been vacant. And what was happening before them confirmed the slavers had thrown their passengers overboard to avoid being fined for slave-trading.

So many drowned souls.

The green-blue water glistened in the morning sun to the point of blinding a man. Nigel's ship continued at a fast speed

to overtake Fitz's ship, while the lugger Malcolm commanded slowed.

Shrieks of distress pierced the air like frightened birds.

Zachary handed the wheel over to another crew member, then called out, "Friend," in English and every African language he knew as they continued to fling the wood into the water.

As planned, crew members strategically jumped from the gunwale to help the individuals in the water.

Many of the bobbing men, women, and children clutched the buoys, learning quickly the light wood would hold them above the water's surface.

When the ship glided into the middle of the melee, Malcolm shouted, "Drop anchor."

Rattling chains filled the air as four anchors with extra-long links plunged into the water and slowed the ship's forward motion. The vessel pitched and rocked before coming to a stop. The heads of young English boys and girls and slaves bobbed in the waves. And Charles? *Please let him be found unhurt.*

Malcolm wrenched off his boots and dove into the water. The warm sea welcomed him, the water refreshingly cooler the deeper he went. Screams greeted him when he broke the surface.

Many clutched the wooden buoys, but others floundered, fighting the water as if it were the enemy.

A young African boy's scream muffled as he submerged. Malcolm swam over and ducked under the water where the boy had disappeared. He gripped the boy's arm and pulled him to the surface, then wrapped the boy's hands around a piece of wood. Sputtering, the boy held on for dear life. Malcolm made sure he was steady, before he rescued the next person.

He and his men worked to secure everyone they could find while the crew on deck directed the swimmers to those still struggling in the water. In the shadow of the boat, Malcolm

and his men showed each how to hold onto the rope of the person next to them to keep them tethered.

Gunshots pierced the air again, but the other two ships were far away and Fitz could not do harm to the rescued or this lugger.

Four long ropes dropped over the gunwale. Zachary helped a man tie a rope around his body. As the man was lifted, the others watched, their eyes glued to the chap ascending.

It did not take long before all four ropes were active.

“Help,” a small voice called.

Malcolm spun around.

An English child with his chest on a board waved his arms. “Help.”

Malcolm swam toward the boy. The lad was safe on the plank, but the current was dragging him farther and farther away.

When close, Malcolm lifted his head. The young boy had Malcolm’s same reddish-brown hair and brown eyes. “I...” Malcolm swallowed to clear the lump in his throat. “I am Captain Westbourne. Need a hand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Charles?” Malcolm asked.

“Yes, that is my name. How did you know?”

“I met Tomas. He is very worried about you. Hold on tight.” Malcolm grasped the rope on Charles’s board and tugged while he swam.

His men lifted person after person out of the water. On the other side of the vessel, Silas would be working with other men the same way. The lugger would be crowded until Nigel returned with Fitz’s ship.

When only Malcolm remained in the water, he prayed for the souls they’d lost. He believed their number to be few—but even one lost soul was one too many. On his side of the ship, at least a hundred men, women and children were saved. He

gripped the rope and climbed while his men pulled. He was on the deck in no time.

Not an inch of the wood surface was visible with the many people aboard. Water dripped from their tattered clothing.

Charles stood beside him, wide-eyed, staring at the others.

“Charles, why don’t you help me serve the food and drinks?”

“Yes, sir.”

They navigated around the swarm of bodies and down the steps. There were people everywhere. Once in the galley, they found many of his crew already handing out fruit and hardtack.

He glanced at Charles and put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. It wasn’t until then that Malcolm let relief settle over him.

~

Nigel sailed up in Fitz’s slaver ship long after nightfall. Dropping a plank between vessels, Malcolm boarded Fitz’s ship. He didn’t stop until he made his way to the helm, where Nigel stood. “Where is Fitz?”

Nigel’s face was barely visible from the moonlight and a lamp flickering in the wind. “We exchanged fire until dusk. Then he and his crew jumped.”

Malcolm exhaled through his nose and released the anger that had been ready to erupt. It was better this way. If he had found Fitz aboard, he probably would have strangled the man with his own two hands. “You are sure?”

“Aye. We saw the silhouetted bodies plunging into the water, and found no one when we searched the ship.”

Malcolm scowled. “Too easy a death for the bastard.”

“Indeed,” Nigel added.

~

Fitz's ship sailed toward Freetown betwixt the luggers. Everyone aboard had found a spot to rest. Malcolm, Silas, and Zachary perched on the slaver sail rigging, searching the coast for signs of civilization.

"You are jesting?" Zach said to Silas.

"I am not. Since my father and mother never told us which triplet was born first, I must escort all three sisters to Scotland."

"To marry one off?" Malcolm had been half-listening, his thoughts on Katherine. A hollowness plagued him without her, but he'd been busy until now and hadn't let himself dwell on how much he missed her.

"Yes." Silas glared. "Silly as it sounds. Evidently, to gain permission to marry my mother, my father promised his firstborn daughter to whoever is leading my mother's clan now."

"Sounds archaic," Zach said.

"Very," Silas agreed. "I plan to relinquish my naval post so I can travel to Scotland with the girls and get this straightened out. I have no plans to adhere to this ridiculous agreement, but for my father's sake, I will go to the laird. I am sure he will agree that our ancestors were top-heavy drunk when the agreement was signed."

"What a web," Malcolm remarked. "All I wish is to arrive back in London and marry my betrothed."

"Betrothed?" Surprise laced Zach's words.

"I asked Miss Ashby to marry me before we left." Malcolm smiled remembering their vows. In their hearts, they were already one.

"And you're just now telling us?" Silas scolded.

"I could not allow myself to think of her and our future until this mission was complete."

"I am happy for you." Zach slapped his back.

Silas nodded. "Best wishes."

Malcolm glanced at Zach, “You don’t have similar news regarding Miss Juliet Young?”

A slight smile tipped his friend’s lips. “Not yet.”

Malcolm tugged a compass from his pocket and strained to see the needle. He gazed at the horizon where the shore of Freetown should appear by sun up. “My single regret while assigned this duty, besides the lost souls of course, is that I never located one of Barkly’s tribe.”

“I believe he was correct when he said all of them were dead.” Zach frowned.

“But still. He is a king. He should be leading his people.”

“That is not what he wants. He spent years watching everyone he loved die from the battles. Then he became a prisoner of war and was sold to a slaver.” Zach tightened a rope on the rigging in front of him. “Why would he want reminders of that?”

“How did you meet him?” Silas asked.

“I bought him off the auction block.” Malcolm ran his hand over the canvas sail. “I had no idea who he was and I definitely didn’t know he was a king, but there was something indefinably regal about him—and he was only fifteen years of age at the time. I’m not sure if it was his build, or how he held himself, but I realized I had to save him. I brought him to Freetown where I introduced him to other Africans, but he argued he did not feel comfortable there and that he owed me his life for rescuing him. So he accompanied me back to London. Silas, I ask your discretion. Zach and I are the only two he has told of his heritage. He refuses to tell anyone else.”

“Of course,” Silas said. “I cannot imagine what his life must have been like.”

“I am going to ask him to go into business with me.” Malcolm jumped down. “His talent with jewelry and compass-making will earn a fortune. Do you two want in on the venture?”

“I’m in.” Zach joined Malcolm on the deck. “I’ll run the shipping end of the business since I already own a vessel.”

“Great.” Malcolm rubbed his hands together. “Silas?”

“When I return from Scotland, I will give you an answer.”

“Very well.” Malcolm pointed to the ladder leading to the hull. “I haven’t slept since night before last. If no one is in the captain’s quarters, I plan to rest there until we dock tomorrow. Someone wake me if I’m needed.”

Lamps lit the cavernous hull. Some individuals had fallen asleep and others were sitting together talking in hushed whispers.

Charles sat with four other boys. Two English and two African. Malcolm wasn’t sure how the children were communicating, but each wore a huge smile on his face and every once in a while they would snicker quietly. Charles noticed him and waved. Something kicked in Malcolm’s chest. The boy spent most of the day at his side, helping the others aboard ship. Tomas had raised Charles to be a fine young man.

Once at the captain’s cabin, he twisted the handle and entered the room.

Sharp pain pierced the back of his skull.

He stumbled, not able to stop himself from plummeting into nothingness.

~

Consciousness slowly returned to Malcolm. With the rocking of the ship, and the throbbing from his skull, he had to take in short gasps to fight the nausea tormenting him. His entire body ached, especially his head.

He tried to move, but couldn’t.

Panic struck through him.

Pain radiated in his skull, his arms, his legs.

Blinking, he finally managed to keep his eyelids open. Vision wavering, he struggled to focus. He was on his side with cold metal shackles encircling his neck, wrists, and ankles. All tightly connected with chains.

Flickering light from a candle splashed around the room. He was in the captain's quarters where he planned to rest, but had no idea how long he'd been out.

He looked forward.

His heart stopped.

Fitz sat on the floor across from him leaning against the door, a gun in his hand, his shadowed eyes wild.

Bloody fuck.

Is this to be my fate?

Fate or not, he would not die a coward. He may not be able to move, but he could bloody well talk. "I would never have guessed you would take the coward's way out."

Fitz's eerie sneer was what Malcolm imagined Lucifer's looked like.

"Where did you hide?" Malcolm asked.

"In that godforsaken hole. The closet has a hidden door to a tiny fucking space." Fitz waved the gun toward the corner of the room. "You have plagued me, Captain. Even setting *The Greyhound* on fire didn't stop you. Why do you take my business personally?"

"How can you ask such a question? Every life you sold, every soul you threw overboard, was an act against me as much as the victims."

"No. *Now* the act is against you." Fitz nodded to the shackles restraining Malcolm. "How does it feel? To be imprisoned?"

What a perverted bastard. Malcolm studied the pistol in the man's trembling hand.

"Have you ever been at the mercy of someone, at the mercy of your fellow man?" Fitz grunted. "Of course not. You have led a privileged life."

Malcolm held silent.

“Well, let me tell you, your fellow man is not charitable. He stares at you when he should clothe, feed, and shelter you. Do you believe those shackles are the only way to be imprisoned? They aren’t. Society can do it. The people you valiantly protect and serve are cruel, Captain Westbourne.”

His panic disappeared. If Fitz pulled the trigger, at least Malcolm had known the love of a woman, of a family, of devoted friends.

“Have you ever had to fight, steal, or cheat to eat?” Breathing erratically, Fitz hunched forward, letting the gun dangle from his hand. “You don’t understand what it’s like to battle another urchin for the rotten remains in the garbage.” He swallowed hard, ripples moving along his throat. “Until you’ve killed another person over a morsel of food, you cannot comprehend what I endured as a child living on the streets of London.” The echoes of his fitful pants caromed off the walls.

Barkly’s words, *You cannot judge another man*, ran through Malcolm’s mind.

“It was never my decision to be left on the streets. To struggle to...” Fitz’s voice trailed off.

So his childhood had driven Fitz to such madness. “If you identify with the children on the street, why did you capture orphans and workhouse children? They were abandoned just as you.”

“Oh, no, they were not. They knew the better side of life. They slept in a bed each night with a roof over their head. Food in their bellies.”

Malcolm looked away. He did not want to feel compassion toward the man. “What about your partners?”

“What about them?”

“What happened? We found three bodies in the warehouse.”

Fitz gripped the pistol between both his hands and scratched the barrel against his temple. “Those infernal idiots had to be stopped. They were collecting waifs and strays to bring to the West Indies.” Standing abruptly, Fitz paced the small cabin. “It

is bad enough the street urchins are left to their own defenses. Should they suffer the torment of slavery too?"

"No one should be a slave."

"You speak of a perfect world, Captain. One that does not exist."

"Perhaps, but I have faith in the goodness of mankind. One day men will not own other men."

"I will be dead and gone before then." Fitz rolled his eyes.

"You are a dead man now." Another wave of nausea hit him. "You cannot believe you will get off this ship alive."

Fitz smirked. "I have survived circumstances worse than this." He crouched down and knocked his gun against Malcolm's chains. "You, however, will not live to leave this room."

He tilted his head so they were face to face.

Malcolm stared back, knowing empathy showed in his expression.

"Pity, Captain? I do not want your pity." Fitz growled and shoved the barrel gun against Malcolm's forehead.

Realizing this was his end, Malcolm's life flashed in his mind. His time with Katherine, his father, his family, his friends, the people he rescued, the lives he saved. What a blessed life he had lived.

Hearing the gun cock, Malcolm stared into Fitz's face.

A deafening discharge echoed in the cabin.

If I am dead, would I hear the echo?

Fitz's black eyes stared through him, unblinking, lifeless, dead. Fitz's body tottered to the floor.

Behind him, Silas stood, his gun still smoking.

Zach ran up next to him in the doorway. His eyes were bloodshot, he must have been sleeping. "Are you all right?"

"All in a day's work," Malcolm said, trying to make light of the situation. "How did you know he was in here?"

Green holstered his pistol. “Charles found me just minutes ago. He and his friends passed the room and heard voices.”

Other crew members shuffled in and reached down to pick up Fitz’s body.

“Wrap him in a blanket,” Malcolm said. “Treat him with respect.” It was the least they could do for the torment the man suffered during his life.

Zach rushed over. “Let me get these blasted things off of you.” He knelt in front of Malcolm, his hands shaking as he concentrated on his task. Zach had always been there. Watched Malcolm’s back and recognized the loneliness he tried to hide all those years at Eton and while on assignment with the Navy. And although he’d only known Silas for a couple of years, they worked well together and now he’d saved Malcolm’s life.

A key unlocked the manacles and when they fell away, Malcolm clutched the back of his head and felt sticky wetness—blood.

“Here.” Silas handed him a rag. “You might need a stitch or two. I am handy with a needle and thread. Growing up with accident prone sisters I had to be.”

Malcolm glanced at Zach, then Silas, and wondered how one survived without such friends?

Chapter Seventeen

“Captain Westbourne, are we almost to our destination?” Charles shifted in his seat for the thousandth time as their hired hackney barreled down the London street.

“Is there a problem?” Malcolm asked.

“No, sir.”

Since the rescue, he noticed Charles preferred being on the deck of the ship and rarely ventured into the hull until nighttime. Memories probably frightened him. Malcolm pulled him from the opposite seat and sat him by the window, hopefully giving Charles a less cooped in feeling.

It seemed to work, the boy stopped fidgeting. “Are we traveling to Reading?”

“No. We are going to my family home. There is someone I would like you to meet.”

The boy continued gazing out the window until the carriage stopped.

“Here we are.” Malcolm opened the door, then hesitated. “Charles, I have brought you here to meet your father.”

The boy glared at Malcolm. “Father?”

“Yes. Your father is my brother, Colin Westbourne.”

“Why did you not tell me before now?”

“Because I wanted to be your friend most importantly.”

“So, you are my uncle.”

“Yes. I have been searching for you since I found out you were missing.”

Charles sat back in the seat, his gaze on the carriage floor.

Malcolm peeked out the door. Antoinette and Colin stood at the study window. The message he’d sent last night, detailing

the ship had docked and he and Charles would arrive this morning, must have been delivered.

“My brother is a good man, Charles. But I believe he made a mistake when he let your mother bring you to St. Lucien’s.”

The boy didn’t move.

“Your father is married to a warm and loving woman. It is my understanding they would like for you to live with them.”

The boy jerked his head up. “Why?”

“So they can claim you as their son.”

“But she is not my mother?”

Malcolm shook his head. “She learned about you when you were reported missing. As did I.” He put his hand on Charles’s shoulder. “You do not have to make a decision today. But I believe after you spend a short amount of time with Colin and Antoinette, you will come to like them.”

Charles shrugged, clearly still shocked.

“And the best part is you have three sisters.”

“Sisters?”

“Yes. And what is better than having three sisters to tease? I have two whom I torment unmercifully.”

The boy grinned. “Tomas says girls are easy to tease because they are short on humor.”

Malcolm laughed. “That can sometimes be true. But, of course, you mustn’t tell a girl that.” He sobered. “Would you like to meet my brother and his wife? It is your decision. If you would rather ride straight to Reading, we will leave without getting out.”

Charles glanced out the window. “Will you come with me?”

“I will not go until you are comfortable or wish to leave.”

“Then I would like to meet them.” Charles stood. His clothing was in tatters and his feet bare. He appeared every bit a poor orphaned boy. He wanted Colin to realize what the boy had suffered. His brother had much to atone for.

Malcolm descended the carriage and Charles jumped down on his own. The front door to the townhouse flew open, and Antoinette rushed out the door, practically running down the walkway. Colin followed behind her.

“Oh, thank heavens.” She reached them before they stepped onto the pathway. Her ringlets bounced, tears glistening on her face. “You’re home, safe.” She hugged Malcolm. She pulled away from him and smiled at the boy. “You must be Charles. I am so happy you are here.”

“Thank you.” Charles bowed.

The color in Colin’s cheeks was high. “My wife is a bit theatrical. You will get used to it. You have three sisters who are the same.”

Antoinette slapped Colin’s arm. “I am not theatrical, I’m excited.” She turned back to Charles. “Please, call me Antoinette.”

The boy nodded.

“And I am Colin.” His brother’s voice was tight with emotion.

Charles eyed his father. Malcolm suspected the boy had hundreds of questions—he never stopped being inquisitive about everything while aboard ship—but he held silent now.

“Are you hungry?” Antoinette asked.

Motioning with his hand, Charles clearly wanted to ask a private question. Malcolm bent to listen.

“I cannot go in their home dressed as I am.”

Malcolm straightened. “Antoinette, we need a bath and a change of clothing before we eat.”

“Of course.” She rushed toward the house. “Charles, we will have clothes made for you soon, but in the meanwhile, let us see what we can find for you to wear.”

“Go along,” Malcolm encouraged. “I will meet you inside.”

The boy jogged to catch up with Antoinette, while Malcolm stood beside Colin and watched the two enter the house.

“He has a great likeness to you, Colin. To all us Westbournes. A good lad, he is. Tomas reared him to be clever, witty, and inquisitive.”

Colin smiled. “And now Antoinette will turn him into a gentleman.”

“He will need a father for that.”

“He has one.” Colin swiped at his eyes.

Trevor exited the front door and joined them. “What a fine boy.”

“Yes, and a quick learner.” Malcolm shook a finger at his oldest sibling. “No teaching him gambling, I fear he will beggar us all.”

The men laughed.

Malcolm said to Colin, “I do not want to pry, but you never explained your problems with Antoinette.”

“She believed I was depriving the girls of a grandfather, so she secretly visited Father many times with the girls. When I found out, I felt betrayed. She only stopped visiting him when he married Emma.”

Malcolm and Antoinette had much in common.

“She never understood my hard stance against Father,” Colin admitted.

“Neither did I,” Malcolm finally said aloud.

Trevor scowled. “You were there when Mother died, Malcolm. She pleaded with us to believe Father murdered our sibling.”

“I was ten and robbed of a family.” The words came surprisingly easy. Before his final encounter with Fitz on the ship, Malcolm might have spoken the words in anger, but there was no bitterness in him now. Simply a desire to explain.

“We kept in touch,” Trevor argued. “All of us made a point of writing to you.”

“I am convinced you did your best, and I never doubted you loved me, but you had families of your own by then. I was at Eton, but when the rift with Father began, I found myself alone. I spent summers and holidays at the Derby estates. Save my time with them, I never felt contented anywhere.” He still wasn’t at ease, unless he was with Katherine. “I not only lost a mother, I lost a father and a home.” He looked hard at Trevor. “When I turned eighteen, I met with Father.”

Both brothers appeared shocked.

“I visited him any time I made it into port.” His throat tightened. “Stubborn man was so set on honoring Mother, he asked me not to tell any of you of our association.” He tilted his face and gazed toward the gray skies, then back at his brothers. “When I spoke of you, or of your children, you would have sworn I graced him with a precious gift. He loved us very much.” He wanted to say more, but entered the house instead. After all he’d endured on his assignment, he could no longer control his emotions.

~

Zach rode to the Cummings’ residence. Morning mist hung heavy in the air like noiseless whispers. He should wait until later in the day to visit Juliet, but quite honestly, he couldn’t wait to see her. He dismounted and tied his horse to the post in front.

The door opened. Juliet stepped out, her red hair escaping the braid down her back. Why she attempted to harness the beautiful mass was unbeknownst to him. Glorious as her tresses were, they didn’t outshine the woman. Intelligent, feisty, loyal, and most decidedly loving, she was exactly what he wanted in a wife.

She rushed toward him. “Was your voyage a success?” The white day dress she wore clung to her svelte curves.

Zach tried to force his brain to work properly. “We were able to find the orphans and rescue many slaves.”

She clapped and threw her arms around him. So unreserved. So completely Juliet.

His Juliet.

“I missed you,” he admitted, holding her close.

“As I did you.” Her azure blue eyes were happy.

He waited for a rush of nerves to assault him, but he remained calm when he said, “I wish to discuss our future.”

She frowned. “Zachary, are you certain you want to marry me? I am not the great beauty my sister is. I am cantankerous when I want to be. My tongue, as you have pointed out on numerous occasions, has a tendency to get me into trouble.”

“First of all, I have not asked you to marry me.”

She gasped, covering her face with her free hand.

“Only a cad would ask a lady before gaining permission from her father,” he clarified. “And Juliet, you must stop comparing yourself to your sister. Your beauty radiates, it shines forth from your soul.”

She beamed.

“And...” He lowered his voice and focused on her lips. “As for your tongue, I plan to keep it and your mouth very, very busy.”

“Oh heavens.” She blushed and buried her head in his chest. After a few seconds, she looked up at him. “And do you know what will be the best thing about marrying you?”

He shook his head.

“I will never lose you in a crowd.”

With a laugh, he remembered saying those words to her the first time they met. He could not be more thankful Juliet had been at Celeste’s home that night.

~

Silas climbed the steps to Celeste’s townhouse and knocked on the door. He’d already gone home, only to find his father

and two other sisters had not arrived in London. And when he inquired about Brianna and Miss Young, his butler informed him they were staying at the companion's residence. So he bathed and set out for Miss Young's. It was too early to call, but he needed to retrieve Brianna so they could get his other sisters and start the long, tedious trip to Scotland.

A click sounded and the door opened slightly. A sleepy-eyed Miss Young answered, her hair still braided and the ribbon on her day dress not yet tied. She smiled when she recognized him.

She is stunning.

His body immediately came to life. Every part of it. Every uncomfortable part of it.

When he'd first seen her in the warehouse, she'd been filthy, but her loveliness could not be hidden. Later that night, after she'd bathed, she entered the study and he realized he'd never seen a more beautiful woman. Her russet hair, sherry-colored eyes and olive skin set her apart from any woman of his acquaintance.

Damn. How he wished to carry her to her warm bed and learn what she liked, what excited her, and what made her lose control. He took a deep gulp of air.

"Lieutenant Green. How wonderful to see you." She motioned him inside.

"Miss Young. I pray my sister is well." He looked around the foyer, trying to focus on anything besides Miss Young's beautiful face and luscious body.

"She is well and still abed this morning. Please tell me you found the orphans."

"We did. Many asked about you on the voyage back. They are to stay at the Abbotts' for a few days if you would like to visit."

"I will do that. I have come to care for them."

He stared at her, unable to stop himself. Her sculpted features were those of an angel.

She glanced away, her cheeks turning pink.

He had met many mistresses and never seen one blush from a man's perusal. And, damn, but she should not do that—it made him want her even more.

“Silas?” Brianna's voice broke his trance.

He turned toward the doorway. “Brianna, how are you?” He strode toward her and pulled her into a hug.

“Very well.”

“If you will excuse me,” Miss Young said. Silas watched her retreating back, wishing to follow and help her out of her clothing and—

Brianna grabbed his arm. “Let us go into the receiving room.”

He led her, the mundane task a duty he'd performed so many times before. “Can you close the door, Silas? I would like to discuss something with you.”

Once he escorted her to a chair, he closed the door and sat on the settee next to her. “It is just you and I now.”

“I could not help but overhear your conversation with Celeste. I am so pleased your voyage was successful.”

“Yes, we were fortunate to find them when we did. The mission was not completed without some casualties, but we consider it successful.” He stretched his tired neck. “When will you be prepared to leave? We need to go home soon.”

“Why?”

Damn his father for not telling the triplets about the trip to Scotland. “I have business to attend with Father.”

“He is not well. I have received many letters from Lorna and Jean. He gets weaker each day.”

“Then we must leave soon.”

“I am prepared, but I must beseech a favor.” She folded her hands in her lap.

“Dear, what is it?”

“I would like Miss Young to accompany us.”

He let out a long exhale. Miss Young traveling with them would be a living heaven and hell for him. “Why, Brie?”

“She is the best companion. Entertaining, helpful, she never tires of my questions and talking.”

“At least not to your knowledge.”

She attempted to slap him, but he ducked away with a laugh.

“She doesn’t treat me like a child or act any differently to me than anyone else. When I am with her, she treats me as an equal.”

“You are an equal, dear.”

“I know, but besides you, the others at school, and a select few of my friends, everyone else never seems to be relaxed around me. I sense it. I can feel it.”

They had discussed this many times. Even his sisters treated her differently, thinking they had to take care of her.

“If it is your wish, I will ask Miss Young to accompany us.”

“Thank you.” She waved her arms for him to come closer and give her a hug.

He obliged, loving her exuberance. He hoped her happiness was not diminished after they arrived home and she learned of their father’s antiquated agreement with a clan in Scotland.

Bloody hell. What if Brianna wanted Miss Young to accompany them to Scotland? How would he be able to see her each day, talk with her each day, want her each day, and hold his desire in check?

~

Katherine laughed as Amelia struggled to hold the wooden paddle, waiting for a ball to be tossed. George slowly threw the ball. Amelia swung with all her might. After having tried the same action at least a hundred times before, she made contact.

Everyone yelled and clapped.

The children loved the daily cricket game. Both of Malcolm's guards would play with them, as would Barkly. The paddles and balls had been delivered a couple of days after Malcolm left, with a note that said the guards would teach them the rules and he would expect a match with the children when he returned.

What a wonderful gift. They could not have enjoyed anything more. Except him being present to play.

Her heart squeezed. How she missed him. Each day, when she and the children took their noon meal, they included prayers for Captain Westbourne's safety.

It had been two months since he'd sailed, but it seemed like forever. She clasped the compass around her neck. Her only link to him.

"Miss Ashby, there is a visitor in the office," Mrs. Stanford called from behind her.

Katherine rose from the bench. "Thank you."

Barkly ran over to escort Katherine inside, but Mrs. Stanford waved him off. Something she did often if she knew the visitor.

Once inside the building, Katherine hurried to Mrs. Stanford's room and slipped out of her dress, the one she kept at the orphanage to work in or for when she spent time out of doors with the children. She washed herself with a cloth and soap, then donned her day dress. Fresh, clean, and much cooler, she hurried up the stairs to the office. She opened the door in a rush. "I do hope I didn't keep you waiting—"

The breath left her lungs.

Malcolm stood by the window. Dressed in cream-colored trousers and a gray waistcoat, he was the most handsome sight she'd ever seen. The sun streaming in the window caught the red streaks in his hair in glinting winks.

She couldn't move.

Malcolm's gaze swept her as he slowly approached.

Rooted to the spot, she watched him move closer and closer.

He reached out and tenderly grasped the compass around her neck. “If only I were lucky enough to be this compass, to lie upon your skin and soak up your warmth, to feel each breath you take.”

His words heated her entire body.

“But, I am a mere man.” He let the compass fall against her skin and brushed her cheek with his fingers, as soft as a butterfly’s flutter. “Before we met, I never considered anywhere home. The sea is too unpredictable. I never spent enough time on land to find a place to settle. I wandered hopelessly. But I have learned in recent months that you, dear Katherine, are my home.”

She moved forward and buried her face in his neck. “Welcome home.”

“Oh, my sweet.” He pulled her body against his. “I am never leaving you again.”

Never leaving again? He was a sailor, for heaven’s sake.

He held her for the longest time, whispering how much he loved her, how much he missed her, how much he ached without her the last months.

Katherine held his words in her heart. “Was your trip successful?”

“Extremely. We can discuss that later.” A shadow passed behind his eyes, making her wonder what happened on his journey, but he blinked and the dimness vanished. “Right now, I simply must kiss you.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss, chaste at first, swiftly transformed into need. Both his and hers. Malcolm’s demands were clear and on the same path as hers, but...

She pulled away and peered at the door. Slowly, she spun back to him. “Not here.”

“I didn’t mean for the kiss to be so...”

Katherine ran her thumb over his lower lip. “Captivating.”

“Your word is more proper than mine.”

She giggled and hugged him again. He smelled of sandalwood and uniquely Malcolm. “Come, the children will be excited to see you.”

He kept his arms around her. “One more kiss.”

Obligingly, she lifted her face to his. The sensual assault was not forthcoming this time. She felt certain he was holding himself in check.

“Tonight you are mine. I refuse to share you.”

She grabbed his lapels and pulled him closer. “All yours, Captain Westbourne.”

“I am Mr. Westbourne now. I resigned my commission before I left Southampton.”

He really meant he was never leaving her again. “But your work is so important.”

“I have done it for the better part of my life. I have done my duty to my country. Now my duty is to see to your happiness.”

Her heart soared. He was home to stay.

“I have a surprise for you and the children.”

“Yes, your surprise.” She wagged a finger at him. “I had not forgotten.”

“I have a couple of carriages waiting.”

Excitement strummed through her. “The children will be thrilled.” She gripped his hand. “Shall we?”

“One more kiss, love.”

She scooted away, but he wouldn't let go of her hand. “One more kiss and we will wind up on the floor in a puddle of clothes,” she said, seriously entertaining that scenario.

He seductively lifted a brow. “The desk would be a better choice.”

“Shameless.” She yanked on his hand and he followed her with a low laugh.

~

An hour later, Katherine sat beside Malcolm in one of the two carriages he'd brought as Amelia perched on his lap. The older boys stood on the backs of the carriages like footmen. The youngsters had a twinkle in their eyes. None of them were used to trips away from Harrington's, especially in well-appointed carriages. She noted the turn they took. "Are we visiting the Sharp estate?"

Malcolm shook his head. Amelia tapped on the window pointing to a cow in the meadow. Malcolm playfully said, "And a cow says?"

Amelia's face lit, but no words came from her mouth.

Malcolm kissed the top of the girl's head. "Moo."

"Children," Katherine called and pointed out the window, "Lord and Lady Sharp live here while in Oxford."

"It is lovely." Celia sat on the edge of the seat to watch as they drove past. Not a half-mile down the road, the carriage veered left, onto a grand estate. One with trees aplenty and a three-story home. Lively flowers bloomed in the front garden.

"Oh my," Celia exclaimed. "This is the most beautiful estate I have ever seen. Who lives here, Captain Westbourne?"

"I am no longer in the navy, remember, Celia."

"Yes, sir. But who lives in this grand home, *Mister* Westbourne?"

"We must go in to find out." He opened the carriage. Handing Amelia to George, Malcolm helped Katherine and the other children out.

The troop climbed the stairs. Malcolm tugged a key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

The children marveled at the foyer. The polished wood floors, floor-to-ceiling windows—open with a breeze wafting in—and a grand spiral staircase curving along the inside wall, were exquisite. The scent of fresh paint lingered in the air.

“If you will follow me into the study.” Malcolm beckoned everyone down the hall. Still holding Katherine’s hand, he kept her beside him until the children walked ahead of them, then stole a kiss before following. “I could not resist. You are too much of a temptation.”

Once everyone entered the study, Malcolm closed the door. This room was royal blue with gold brocade curtains. The walls were filled with nautical decorations, a huge ship’s wheel on the wall behind the desk. Mrs. Stanford sat on the settee, Celia beside her. George, still holding Amelia, stood against the back wall with the other boys, and the girls took up the chairs in the room. Such gentlemen, the boys.

Malcolm tugged Katherine and sat her in the chair behind the desk. “This estate will be called Westbourne Abbey. I purchased the home for myself and my soon-to-be bride.”

Katherine’s breath caught. *Their home?*

His eyes met hers. “I hope it pleases you.”

Her vision blurred. “It is lovely.”

“Glad you approve.” He studied the children. “This estate is quite far from Harrington’s. And I am afraid Miss Ashby will not be able to come into town every day.”

She stood, her ire rising. “Malcolm—”

“And since that is the case, I propose you all live here with us.”

Dumbfounded, she dropped back into the chair. Did he truly mean it?

The children gaped at Malcolm in disbelief.

“There are plenty of bedrooms. You will have to share, but seeing as how you share one room to sleep in now, I do not believe it will be a hardship.” Malcolm walked to the door. “Why don’t you scout about?” The children filed out quietly, but soon their excited chatter filled the corridor. “Mrs. Stanford, I hope you will consider staying on with us. We have a room especially for you.”

“Sir, it would be an honor.”

He gave her a pat on the shoulder as she hurried out the door.

Katherine stared at him, but his attention centered on the far wall. She finally broke her trance and followed to where Malcolm was looking. George, still holding Amelia, had a stoic expression on his face.

Malcolm spoke to the boy. "Is something wrong, George?"

"Sir, I appreciate the offer to live here, but I must decline."

Amelia spun her face toward George, no doubt understanding his every word.

"My father would not like for me to leave the orphanage."

Malcolm studied him. "George, while in London I paid your father a call."

"You did?"

"Yes. I told him how helpful you are with the children and how they are your family more than he is, no matter how much he contributes to Harrington's."

"I am certain he did not care for your words."

"I suppose not, but he understood them. He explained how his wife did not accept you, but he still planned to pay your commission into the Navy."

George nodded.

"Is the sea the life you want?" Malcolm candidly asked.

"I never believed I would have a choice."

"You do have a choice. And I suggest you stay with us until you decide."

Katherine's heart filled her chest to bursting.

"I will move here, Mr. Westbourne. You're right." George kissed Amelia's head. "This is my family."

"Good. You two go explore the house."

Katherine remained seated behind the desk.

Malcolm closed the door and looked at her. “I know I should have asked you, but I wanted to surprise—”

She bolted from the chair and into his arms. He lifted her off the ground as she planted fervent kisses on his nose, chin, and lips. “Oh, Malcolm. I cannot believe you would do this for me.”

He laughed and held her close. “This is for both of us, darling. And the children.”

Epilogue

Six months later

Glistening sunshine streamed from the open study windows where Katherine sat behind the desk. A ray of sunlight sparked the pendant around her neck. She lifted a hand to the compass, an exact match to Malcolm's. Barkly had given it to her for a wedding present. When he presented it to her, she'd realized he had been the tribal king he spoke of. He explained all his family had been killed and beseeched her to keep his heritage a secret, so they had never spoke of it again.

Katherine concentrated on the correspondence on the desk. Royal Compass, the business Malcolm, Barkly, and Zachary started months ago, was successfully obtaining orders each day. Barkly traveled to London weeks ago to gather needed supplies for the extraordinarily crafted pieces. He was an exceptional craftsman and a shrewd businessman. She missed him. They'd become great friends in Malcolm's absence.

Shouts and screams reached Katherine's ears. Laughter erupted. She stood from the desk and looked out the window. Malcolm—with Amelia on his back, Simon on his left arm, and Bridget hanging from his right—surged forward and the children shouted again. She had no idea what the game was, but the older boys each carried a child on their backs and they appeared to be racing toward the pond.

"Mrs. Westbourne?"

Katherine would never tire of hearing her name. "Yes, Mr. James?" They had interviewed many for the butler position, and hired Mr. James when they learned how compassionate he was to children. He'd taken in two of his sister's daughters to raise after she and her husband were killed in a carriage accident.

"A delivery just arrived."

She scowled. The man knew where to send deliveries. “What is it?”

He splayed his hands in front of him. “You must come to the front drive. I cannot explain.”

Katherine followed the older man. Once out the door, she stopped short. In front of her were no less than fifteen horses. “Where...who...how...” She couldn’t form a proper sentence. The array of horseflesh was unlike anything she’d ever seen. Everything from white to brown to black. Purebreds to be sure.

“Good afternoon, Katherine,” Barkly called as he strolled from the carriage behind the horses and stood next to the footman who held the reins of the lead horse, with the rest of the herd in a double row reined together.

She shuffled forward and embraced him. “I have missed you.”

“What the devil?” Malcolm asked.

Katherine turned to find the children and Malcolm at the corner of the house.

Celia stood beside Malcolm, hands on her hips. “Yes, what the devil?”

“Do not use your father’s exclamations, Celia dear,” Katherine said.

Malcolm neared the horses and shook Barkly’s hand while embracing him. “So glad you are back, my friend.”

“As am I.” Barkly smiled, his white teeth a sharp contrast to his dark skin. “I was asked to give this to you.” He reached inside his coat and held out a letter to Malcolm.

Malcolm took the parchment and ripped the seal. As he read the missive, the children gathered around him, welcoming Barkly back, and lightly touching the horse next to Malcolm.

Looking at Katherine, Malcolm winked—his expression had the ability to make her forget everything she was thinking. “The horses are from a friend. He asks that we use them in good health.” He folded the missive and slipped it into his

pocket. “We should have enough room for them in the stable.” He picked up Amelia and walked to the smallest of the herd. “This fine specimen will be yours. You will name him, feed him, ride him, and treat him as best you can. What shall his name be, sweetheart?”

“My Captain.” Amelia smiled.

Everyone froze.

Tears burned in Katherine’s eyes.

“I knew you could do it.” Malcolm patted Amelia’s back. “What shall we call you?”

The child hugged him around the neck. “Amelia, of course.”

Katherine put a hand to her mouth, hot tears rolling down her face.

Amelia dropped her head to Malcolm’s shoulder. “But, Papa, my favorite name for *you* to call me is sweetheart.”

“Sweetheart it is.” He kissed Amelia’s forehead before setting her down. The children each picked a horse, and Barkly led them and their animals toward the stable. Amelia made her way with the others.

Katherine turned to Malcolm as he stepped closer. “I cannot believe she finally spoke.”

“She needed time to trust us, darling.”

“Or to get excited about having her own pony.” She laughed.

He grasped her hips and pulled her close. “Good point.” He brushed his lips against hers.

“Who sent the horses?”

“Silas Green. I helped him with...” He concentrated like he was not exactly sure what to say. “A delicate situation.”

“Hmm.” She eyed him, but asked no more questions.

“While Barkly is settling the horses with the children, I need to go over the orders that have come in this week.”

Katherine smiled. “I will help if you like.”

“I would like that very much.” Desire flared in his eyes, a look that always had the ability to mesmerize her. His expression spoke of secrets shared in the most intimate moments, of promises vowed in husky, breathless whispers, and of fulfillment that sated her body, heart, and soul.

A weak protest left her lips. “That was not an invitation to —”

“I am taking it as such. We will need to go over the orders in our room, so we may have the privacy needed to attend to such intimate matters.”

“Orders are not intimate matters.”

“Yes, they are, my dear.” He picked her up and carried her into the house.

When Malcolm started up the stairs, Katherine huffed. “You forgot the orders.”

He chuckled.

“Oh, Malcolm, we mustn’t. Barkly will come searching for us. He will know where we are, and what we are doing.”

“We are newly wed, it is expected.”

She buried her face in his neck, laughing. “You are shameless.”



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Excerpt from LAST CHANCE

LAST CHANCE

Ipswich, England ~ Summer 1826

Chapter One

Hell was not for the dead, but for the living.

Silas Green had witnessed the degradation of society, the torture of slavery, and mankind at its worst. To him, Hell did not exist in some other realm; rather it surrounded him each and every day.

And right now, in this carriage jostling down a grassy trail, he sat in a different kind of Hell.

Hell was mayhap a bit extreme, but at present he definitely resided in Purgatory. Atoning for his sins, for all the times he'd spent bedding women, for acts he'd knowingly committed and admittedly reveled in.

Miss Celeste Young, the reason for his discomfort, sat across from him. After being cooped up in this carriage with her for six hours, he'd sell his soul to Lucifer just to touch her, to confirm her skin felt as soft as it appeared, to feel the silkiness of her brunette hair, to learn if her lips against his would take his dead soul to Heaven.

Silas shook his head, trying to clear it. He was not this deprived. He'd only been at sea for two months.

During the carriage ride today, he'd mostly listened to Miss Young and his sister, Brianna, joining the conversation only when directly spoken to.

“Do you believe so, Silas?” Brianna asked.

He nodded. “I think you are right. It is safe for you to return to Coleman’s.”

She'd resided at Coleman's School for the Blind the last fourteen years, until a few months ago when one of the students was kidnapped. Silas rode hide for leather to get to Brianna and remove her from the school so she, too, would not be abducted.

“Oh, how wonderful.” His sister seemed most eager. At times it was almost eerie how her sightless green eyes showed expressiveness. “After we visit Father, will you see me back?”

Damn. Their father had other plans for her, yet Silas refused to be the bearer of that news. “Whatever you wish.”

Brianna turned toward Miss Young. “What will you do when I go back to school, dear? Where will you find work?”

Work? Would she prefer to work rather than find another protector?

Hiring Miss Young as Brianna’s companion might seem unorthodox to most people considering she’d once been Sir Roderick’s mistress. But after Miss Young’s rescue from nearly being sold into slavery, Malcolm Westbourne, Silas’s former captain, implored him to hire her. And since Silas’s return yesterday, Brianna had not stopped singing the companion’s praises.

“Do not worry over me,” Miss Young insisted.

“Perhaps you can find employ at Coleman’s,” Brianna said brightly.

Silas scowled. “Don’t they have mostly blind employees?”

“That is true. I plan to work there next year.” Brianna gingerly reached out, and when she found Miss Young’s shoulder she patted it. “We will find you something.”

How could his sister sound so certain? If Miss Young truly understood how the world worked, she would use her unparalleled beauty to secure her safety. Many men would offer their estates to have her as a mistress.

Silas never kept a paramour, not when there were willing females in every port and town. Yet after spending time with Miss Young, he might actually have considered asking her to sign a contract if she and Brianna had not formed such a close friendship. Plus, and he hated to admit it, he was unsure if he possessed the funds to support a mistress. For years he’d been in the Royal Navy. He often returned to London and Ipswich to check on his family, but had no idea the condition of the estate’s finances. He’d paid Miss Young out of his personal accounts since hiring her, and he could live comfortably on his saved earnings until he joined a business venture with his friends Malcolm Westbourne and Zachary Derby.

Miss Young peered out the window and sighed. Her bodice tightened the slightest bit around her...

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Yes, this carriage grew hotter each moment, resembling Hell more and more.

He should have visited Mrs. Vick's elite establishment prior to climbing into this godforsaken carriage. Then at least his body would be relaxed and sated.

Silas glanced at Miss Young's profile. Who did he think he was hoodwinking? He would still want her. As if sensing his gaze, Miss Young turned his way. Her sherry-colored eyes met his and a smile touched her lips.

He felt a jolt low in his abdomen.

"I cannot thank you enough for allowing me the opportunity to become Miss Brianna's companion these last months. I do hope to find another position as a companion, or possibly a governess." So she did intend to find employ instead of searching for a protector.

"It is I who must thank you. I never once worried about her welfare while gone."

"Silas, you must write a letter recommending her for employment to anyone interested in hiring her," Brianna urged.

"Certainly. I will have it ready before we leave Ipswich."

The sun stabbed between the clouds and rained in through the window, catching streaks of blonde in Miss Young's brunette hair. How he wanted to reach out and capture the loose tendril hanging next to her cheek.

Returning focus to his sister, Silas switched the conversation back to her. "Brie, did you have many visitors while staying at the London townhouse?"

Brianna laughed. "I daresay we both did. Most were interested in learning more about Celeste and her reasons for becoming my companion. Tell him about the men, dear. About the flowers."

A hint of a blush colored the companion's cheeks. "It was nothing, really."

Her expression appeared shy and introverted, not the confident look of a courtesan. Being Sir Roderick's mistress should have infused her backbone with stiff solitude. She must have had propositions from half the men in London, yet she shied just now. Her actions did not make sense.

"Nothing? You are calling love sick men stumbling over themselves nothing?" Brianna folded her hands together in her lap. "After we attended Lady Drake's ball, we were inundated with callers. So much so, we moved to Celeste's townhouse to escape them. There we were still visited by many, but not hounded so badly."

"Unless you consider Mr. James," Miss Young added.

Ah, Mr. James. Silas wondered when the man's name would come up. Mr. James made no secret of his interest in pursuing a relationship with Brianna. Five years older than Brie, he taught at Coleman's. James's sister was blind, and he claimed to always want to work with others with the same affliction. However, the man clearly wanted to do more than work with Brie.

"And what did Mr. James want?" he asked.

"He seemed extremely curious as to when Miss Brianna would return to Coleman's," Miss Young playfully said. "I believe his comment was that the days proved endless without her about."

Brie's neck and face blazed red.

Silas grinned, enjoying the fact Brie had someone to tease and talk with.

Miss Young made a dramatic gasp. "He seemed forlorn to leave the premises each day."

"Each day?" Silas reiterated.

"Oh, yes." Humor ran in Miss Young's voice.

Brie inhaled. "Each blasted day." That caused her and her companion to laugh.

He smiled at their easy interaction. Miss Young's lightheartedness reached inside of him, making his chest feel

lighter. Giving his soul a reprieve from the darkness he'd experienced.

"Please do not misunderstand. I am fond of Mr. James." Brie bit her thumb. "But his visits seemed rather excessive."

The carriage stopped, and Silas peeked out the window to see his father's grey-bricked home. He flung the carriage door open and jumped down. After helping Brie descend the steps, he reached out to Miss Young. Her gloved hand smoothly slid into his, and she raised her foot over the carriage doorway.

Suddenly, her body plummeted toward the ground. She squealed.

Silas quickly stepped forward, wrapped his arms around her waist, and pulled her body against his. Her frantic breaths struck his neck.

He was back in Hell. And if this be what it entailed, he wished the devil would take him now. With her body pressed to his and her face buried in his neck, he never wanted to be anywhere else. He breathed deeply, catching the same scent that plagued him in the carriage. It wasn't overpowering, but subtle, exotic, and alluring—different than any perfume he'd ever smelled.

"What happened?" Brie frowned.

Miss Young held on to him for another three heartbeats and finally looked up. Their gazes locked. For seconds they stared at each other. Finally, her light brown eyes blinked and she released him. Obligated to do the same, he stepped back.

"My shoe caught on the carriage doorway and I toppled out headed straight for the drive. Your brother caught me and saved me from making an arse of myself." She straightened her dress, the shoulders having slipped down her arms. Some of her hair had fallen and curls now framed her face.

"Where are you when I need you, Silas?" Brie giggled.

"Dear, you make an arse out of yourself too often for me to save you every time."

Brianna slapped his arm. She had good aim for a blind person.

Miss Young smiled. “Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Green.”

He opened his mouth to answer when Eric approached from the side of the house. The long-time stable master was almost completely grey-haired now. “Lieutenant Green. Miss Brianna. Ye are finally here.”

“Eric, it is good to see you.” He shook the man’s hand. Silas tilted his head to one side, then the other, trying to stretch out the tension held there. “I am no longer a lieut—”

The front door flew open and his father’s most trusted servant rushed out. Well, Hamilton was more than a servant, he—

“Come, Silas. Brianna.” Dressed in black from head to foot, urgency had replaced Hamilton’s normally staid countenance. “You must come quickly. It is your father.”

Silas reached for Brianna’s arm.

“Go ahead. I will bring her,” Miss Young said.

He nodded and followed Hamilton, having to run to keep up. Hamilton uttered, “I only hope it’s not too late.” They scaled the stairs as if rabid hounds chased them.

Hamilton stopped at the top of the stairwell and pointed down the hallway. Father’s bedchamber door stood open. Silas entered to find his sisters, Jean and Lorna, each on a side of the bed, both crying into handkerchiefs. Father lay on the mattress motionless. Lifeless.

The girls looked up and ran to Silas. He held them, each crying on a shoulder. Dr. Montgomery picked up his leather bag, bowed his head as he passed them, and left the room.

Silas’s focus returned to his father. He’d been expecting this day, yet...he swallowed hard. He loved and respected his father, even though they had not agreed on many things.

He kissed his sisters’ heads before leaving them to approach the bed.

His heart pounded in his chest and ears. It wasn't as if he'd never seen a dead person. Suddenly, images of lifeless faces and bodies bombarded him.

To distract himself, he took inventory of the room. This bedchamber had not changed since he could remember. Decorated in rich colors of green, it housed a mahogany four poster bed, a huge mirrored dresser, and a single nightstand. Two wingback chairs flanked the fireplace in the corner.

Once at the bedside, he closed his eyes and took a fortifying breath, then peered down. His father's almost bald head looked dull, his skin white, and his cracked lips were blue.

Words eluded him. What did one say to a dead man?

Whispering at the door caught his attention. Lorna and Jean were in front of Brianna and Miss Young, stroking Brianna's hair and murmuring. Brianna's coloring had paled, and she still clutched Miss Young's arm. He cleared his throat as he advanced toward the women. "Brie, would you like to say goodbye?"

"I would." She held out her hand. He gently placed it on his arm and escorted her toward the bed. "I may be spoiled from living with Celeste and her love of fresh air, but this room is sweltering. And it smells of laudanum, Silas. Heavily."

"I am sure they administered it for pain. We would not have wanted him to suffer."

"You are right." When he stopped, she let go of him. "Can you direct me toward his hand?"

Silas grasped his father's still warm hand and placed it in Brianna's. She leaned over and raised it to her face, kissing the back. "May you rest well, Father." Such a sweet gesture, yet somehow cold. Not cold exactly—more detached. Brianna had lived at Coleman's for so long Father was more of a figurehead to her. Lorna and Jean, on the other hand, considered him a papa in every way.

"I wish I'd spent more time with him." Brie straightened, tears hovering on her lids.

He studied his father one last time. When he turned, his other two sisters were at the foot of the bed, both staring at Father.

“Shall we?” He motioned to the doorway and his sisters led him and Brianna out of the room and down the stairs. Miss Young was nowhere to be found.

And why in Hades was he looking for her anyway?

Silas helped Brie into the study and settled her on the settee. While his other sisters found places to sit, he walked to the door and shut it. This study remained his domain whenever he visited Ipswich. Since becoming an adult, he’d felt more contented here than anywhere else in the house. Maybe the feeling came from the familiar paintings on the walls or the various nautical items his father had accumulated while he served in the Royal Navy. Or perhaps the masculinity of the room, the dark red walls and dim lighting, made Silas relax.

“How was he before he passed?” he asked.

Jean’s tears began anew. “Extremely anxious to speak to you.”

It felt as if he’d received a fist to the gut. His father was supposed to tell the girls of their commitment in Scotland. Had he? Or had he left that task to Silas?

“He wrote you two letters. They are on the desk.” Jean turned toward Brie and spoke as if addressing a child. “He also left one for you, Brianna.”

Brie stiffened. “Thank you. I will have Miss Young read it to me later. Speaking of Miss Young, where is she?”

“When you entered Papa’s room, she mentioned something about wanting to see to your things and hurried off.” Lorna wiped her nose with a handkerchief. “I am sure she is giving us time as a family.”

“What of services, Silas?” Jean rubbed her arms like she was cold.

“After I read Father’s letters, I will know if he had any special wishes. However, I assume he would like to be buried

quietly with a funeral feast like we did for Mum.”

“When?” Lorna questioned.

“Soon as possible.” Silas glanced at the side table. The brandy called to him, but he ignored the beckoning. He needed to be able to think clearly while reading his father’s letters.

“I would like to freshen up.” Brianna stood.

“Let me help you to your room.” Lorna got to her feet and grasped Brie’s hand.

“Lorna, have you ever noticed how Silas leads me around? I hold on to him, not the other way about. That is easiest for me and the person assisting me.”

“Oh. As you wish.”

“It is not a wish. It is a routine, one that helps me feel comfortable. If you and Jean would have visited Coleman’s you might have learned that technique. It is one of the first things taught to those who are close to sightless people.”

Silas could not fault Brie for finally bringing up the fact neither sister visited Coleman’s, although this did not seem like the appropriate time.

Brie exhaled in a huff. “Is my letter from Father here in the study?”

“How did you know we were in the study?” Jean stood, retrieved the note, and placed it in Brianna’s hand.

“Three clues.” Brianna’s voice rose as she spoke. “One, I did live here and visited over the years, so I do know which way the study is from the stairs. Two, it smells of Father’s tobacco. And three, you mentioned Silas’s letters were on the desk. See how I did that using the powers of deduction. Do you not think a blind person can—”

“Brianna,” Silas quietly reprimanded.

She threw her hands up. “Well, they think I am an idiot.”

“We do not!” both sisters quickly argued.

“Fine. A simpleton, then.” Brie’s voice returned to normal. “I have wants, needs, and dreams, the same as you. I have lived away so long, I do not expect to have a close relationship with either of you, but I am not to be feared or pitied.” She let go of Lorna, walked around the desk, behind the settee, and pulled the bell pull. “I do remember some things around here.”

The girls stood dumfounded. Obviously, Lorna and Jean were surprised at their sister’s words and actions. Brianna appeared both angry and astonished, the latter undoubtedly from finally confronting this issue.

Hamilton entered the room. “Yes?”

“Please ask Miss Young to come to the study.” Brianna’s words were short and clipped. “I am in need of her assistance.”

“Right away.” Hamilton left.

None of the staff was equipped to help Brianna. Indeed, their parents had been mistaken not to employ a person to assist her. Not even when she was a young girl.

Stilted silence hung heavy in the air.

Minutes later, Miss Young arrived at the door in the same lilac gown she’d worn on their trip, having tidied her hair. “May I be of assistance?” she offered.

Brie nodded. “I wish to freshen up.”

Miss Young looked at Silas as she neared Brianna. He gave her an unhelpful shrug. Her eyes widened the slightest bit, yet she kept her face impassive. She reached Brianna, turned toward the door, and placed Brie’s hand on her arm. “This way, dear.”

What a gentle spirit the woman had. He’d witnessed it on their trip.

Brianna tugged Miss Young to a stop at the door and spun around. “Lorna, Jean, how many seasons have you had?”

“Three,” Jean said.

“For three seasons you traveled to London and never once visited me?”

Silas folded his arms over his chest. He refused to get involved in his sisters' disagreements. He'd already interfered when Brianna lost her temper. It was not his place to make peace between his siblings.

Lorna frowned. "Papa didn't think it wise."

"Did he give any reasons why?"

"He only said you would be jealous and didn't want to upset you."

"Every season I expected you to at least call on me at Coleman's."

Jean stood. "I believe Papa's intentions were good."

"And what of your intentions? We are no longer children. Did either of you ever think to visit me?"

Lorna let out a heavy sigh. "We might turn that question back on you, Brianna. You stopped visiting Ipswich four years ago."

"True. I did not belong here."

"Perhaps we did not belong at Coleman's."

"Touché." Brie turned, grasped Miss Young's arm, and they left the room.

"Someone should get that bee out of her arse." Jean walked to the side table and poured herself a glass of brandy.

"Maybe Papa was wrong and we should have visited her." Lorna took Jean's glass and sipped.

These two sisters were close, like sisters should be, like twins. But they were not twins, they were triplets. He was unsure if Lorna and Jean would ever simply be friends with Brianna.

He glanced at one of them for a second, then the other. "Please, try to make her comfortable while she is with us."

"Of course we will," Jean pledged.

"Do you think we will not?" Lorna glared at him.

“Oh, no. Do not bring me into this. This is between you three. I’m loved by all of you and plan to keep it that way.”

“We do love you.” Jean smiled. “I must inform the staff Brianna brought a guest.”

“Is she really a guest?” Lorna asked.

Silas looked at her pointedly.

“We have seen Miss Young before. We know she...” Lorna appeared uncomfortable and uncertain what to say.

“Has an association with Sir Roderick,” Jean finished for her.

“Gossip does not become either of you,” Silas admonished.

“It is hardly gossip if it is the truth,” Jean defended.

“It is unfavorable toward Miss Young, and I won’t have it mentioned again. Her association with Sir Roderick is over. As I wrote to you, she has been Brianna’s companion since I last left London. In that time, Brianna and Miss Young have become good friends, and we will treat her as such. Please have the room across the hall from Brianna’s readied for her.”

“I will see to it.” Jean hurried from the room.

Father’s letters stared at him from the desk. He needed to read the bloody things.

Lorna set her empty glass on the side table. “How are you, Silas?”

“Weary. I only docked yesterday and have been traveling the whole of this day.”

“Was your voyage successful?”

He thought of the freed slaves and rescued English children. “Extremely. Tell me, Lorna, how do you fare?”

“I am tired of the country. I believe I would much prefer to live in London. Papa claimed proper young ladies must retire to the country and live quiet lives.” She scowled. “Why did he not just say boring, uneventful lives?”

Silas held back a laugh. Clearly his sisters were getting to an age where they felt free to air their complaints.

“Jean and I should have husbands by now.”

“It is not for lack of suitors.” Silas had been in Town for a few weeks during both their first and second seasons and witnessed the flock of young bucks around his sisters. “How many proposals have you received?”

“Four. Jean’s had six. Each time Papa refused the betrothal and insisted we wait.”

“Did he explain why?”

She shook her head.

Damn his father. He’d made some deal with the devil and his daughters would pay the price.

Well, not if Silas had anything to say about it.

Chapter Two

As Celeste guided her charge up the stairwell, Brianna mumbled, “My room is third to the left from the stairs. Well, that used to be my room.”

Celeste did not answer the insolent remark, refusing to encourage Brianna’s glowering mood. Considering her father just died Brianna had every right to be upset, yet she seemed more distressed about her sisters.

Although the mood had changed to somber, Celeste enjoyed the trip to Ipswich earlier today. She loved to set out on new adventures, and the ride left her with a sense of contentment.

Brianna was a wonderful traveling mate, and Mr. Green proved equally entertaining. She learned of his character months ago when he and his comrades rescued her from being sold into slavery. He was a kind, gentle, trustworthy man dedicated to helping and rescuing slaves and the less fortunate.

What she’d not been prepared for was her reaction to him when he arrived back in London yesterday. Having only met

him during her rescue, she'd not taken inventory of the man at that time. But when she opened her door yester morn, she found herself in awe of his handsomeness. Gratitude for his assistance in her rescue more than likely colored her judgment, yet no one could deny the attractiveness in Mr. Green's sun-kissed skin, blond hair, and broad shouldered frame.

When he escorted her and Brianna to visit with the orphans yesterday, she noticed how the rescued children flocked to him, how he made them laugh. She even saw him, Mr. Westbourne, and Mr. Derby give each child a small box they were allowed to keep. His caring and gentleness made him even more attractive.

Being with him in the carriage this entire day had not been a hardship. And as engaging and quietly entertaining as he was, she detected pain in his blue eyes.

At the third room to the left, Celeste opened the door. Hamilton showed her to this room earlier and she'd been here ever since, arranging Brianna's things. Decorated in beautiful, pale pinks—from the curtains, to the counterpane, to the rug—even the room's walls were tinged with a rosy glow.

Letting go of Celeste's arm, Brianna walked inside. She stepped assuredly to the bed and flung herself on it.

Celeste made her way to the huge window she'd opened earlier. It overlooked the back gardens. A myriad of colors splashed across the yard, as if a painter purposely placed each color carefully where it belonged. "The gardens are beautiful. I have never seen such lush foliage."

When Brianna didn't comment, Celeste studied her. Sprawled on her back, crossways on the bed, her arms were spread as an eagle's in flight, her stern lips flattened in a definite pout. This would not do. Returning to her childhood home obviously turned Brianna into someone else. She did not have her usual charming demeanor.

"Brianna?"

"Yes?"

"I was somewhat stunned when I saw your sisters."

Brianna sat up. "How so?"

"You three favor each other very much."

"My father used to call our likeness unnerving."

"I wouldn't say unnerving. It is surprising to see three women look so much alike. And you are all so beautiful."

Brianna's lips twitched. "Are we?"

Celeste sat next to her on the bed. "You have no idea of your beauty, do you?"

"It hardly seems important."

Unsure how to answer that comment, Celeste reached for Brianna's hand. "I do not think it is important. Although you are beautiful in appearance, your inner loveliness is also enchanting. The way you make everyone you meet feel welcome, the way you make everyone around you comfortable." She glanced at the door. "All save your sisters. I suspect your high dudgeon is not without merit."

Brianna rose from the bed and paced next to it, never once losing step or hitting any of the furniture. "You saw how they treat me."

Celeste frowned. "They seemed concerned about you."

"They treat me differently."

"I hate to be the one to point this out...you are different."

"I am not a simpleton."

"Someone called you a simpleton?"

Brianna stopped and closed her eyes. "No."

"Then why would you say such a thing?"

"You do not understand."

"Explain it to me," Celeste gently urged.

"I have always been on the outside of their little circle."

"And you blame your sisters for that?"

"Actually, I blame my blindness and my parents."

Celeste held quiet.

“As a child, Silas took care of me. He brought me with him everywhere he went. When he left for school, I became confined to my room. At the age of seven, Father delivered me to Coleman’s. I suppose I should have been scared or wary, but I soon became overjoyed to live in a place where I was treated like everyone else.”

“Treated like everyone else in a blind school.” Celeste believed it proper Brianna understand that. “The teachers and other students had encountered blind individuals before. Your family had not.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Brie, I must admit, I do not understand who or what has you miffed?”

“Everyone and everything.”

Celeste laughed. “Obviously.”

“I have swallowed my spleen for years. I am one of triplets. I simply wish to be treated as such.”

“And you think acting like you did earlier will accomplish that?”

Brianna returned to the bed. “You did not witness the worst part.”

“Thank heavens. I still have a fond opinion of you. Shall we keep it that way?”

“Most definitely.”

“Just let them see you as I do.”

“I will try.” Brianna pulled a missive from her pocket. “Will you read this to me?”

“Certainly.” Celeste broke the wax seal and unfolded the paper.

“My Sweet Brianna,

“When you and your sisters were born, we were thrice blessed. My joy was soon overshadowed by your blindness. I

am ashamed to say I let your blindness become a hardship to each of us, especially to you. We treated you differently, all of us except Silas. It was never our intention, please believe that, but we were inadequately equipped to service your needs.”

Brianna sniffed.

Heart heavy, Celeste continued reading.

“Sending you to Coleman’s, I hoped to give you the best life I could. I am proud of how you flourished there and of how you have grown into an independent woman. I pray one day you will experience the love of a husband and a family who understands you, as we so poorly failed in that regard.

“But you were always loved, Brianna. Always.

“Father.”

Celeste folded the paper and put it in Brianna’s palm.

Tears coursed down Brianna’s cheeks as she carefully held the paper between her slightly trembling hands. “Why do people apologize from the grave? It is rather difficult not to forgive them.”

“That is probably why, dear.”

Brianna let out a watery laugh. “Yes, I am sure you are right.” She flopped back on the bed. Her words were weak and choked. “I never doubted he loved me. It is like he explained, he did not know what to do with me.”

He could have sold you to a man at the age of sixteen to save your family, Celeste wanted to say, but held her tongue. This was not the time to delve into her own past.

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