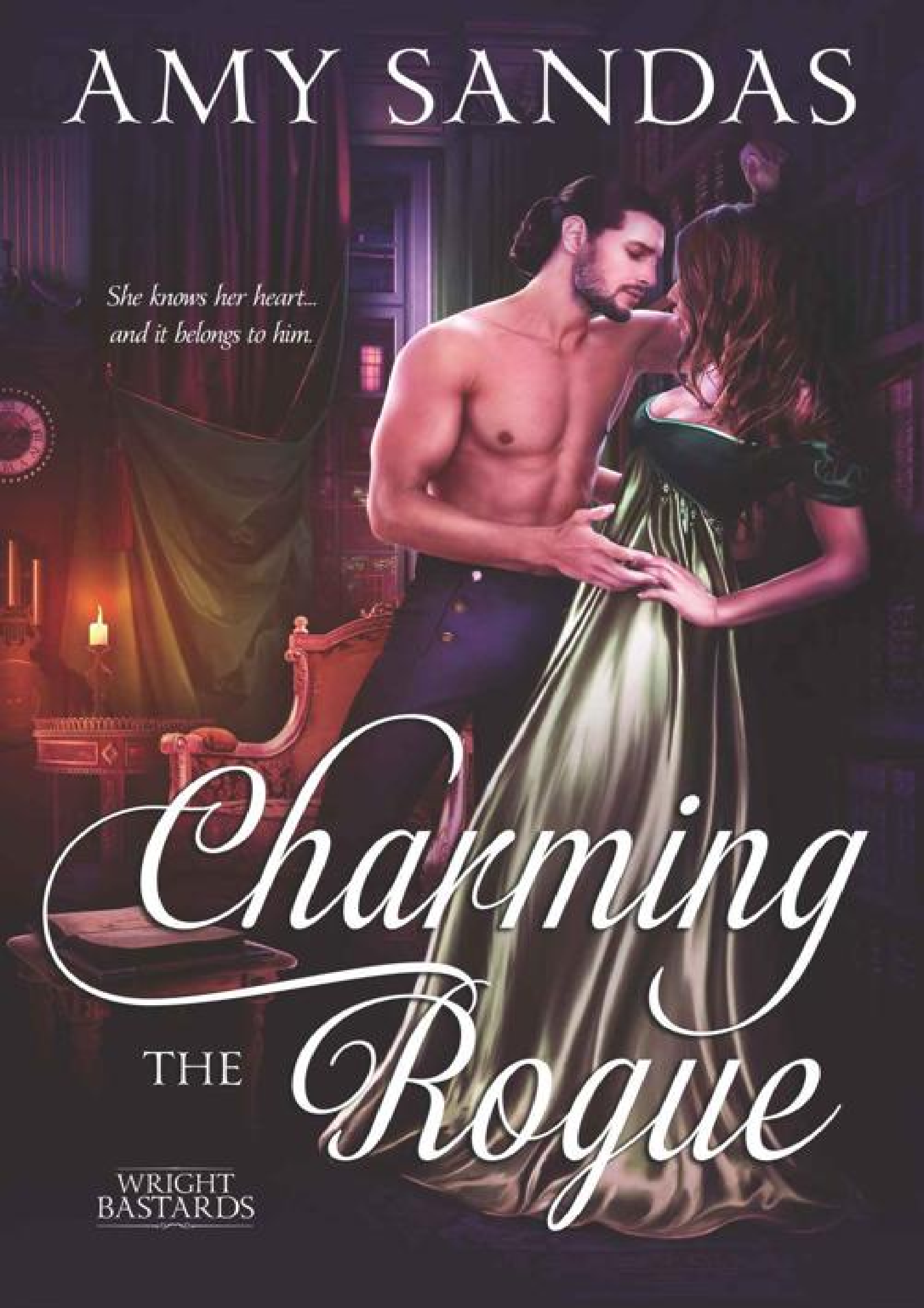


AMY SANDAS

*She knows her heart...
and it belongs to him.*



Charming
Rogue

THE

WRIGHT
BASTARDS

Charming the Rogue

Wright Bastards, Volume 4

Amy Sandas

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CHARMING THE ROGUE

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Chapter Thirty-two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-six](#)

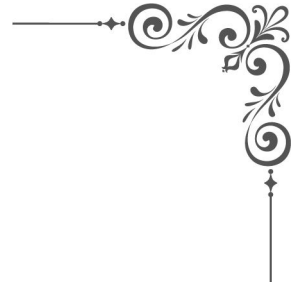
[Epilogue](#)

[Sign up for Amy Sandas's Mailing List](#)

[Also By Amy Sandas](#)

[About the Author](#)

I'd like to dedicate this one to Patrice. Thank you for always being someone I can rely on for a great talk, a fun meal, laughter, and confidence.



Chapter One

M^{ay 1830}
Bentley's (an elite gambling hell)
London, England

Bishop Black was not a man to obsess over certain comforts. He could appreciate a good brandy or an exceptional Scotch, but he was just as partial to gin or vodka or whisky. As long as his meals filled an empty stomach, he didn't care if he ate the finest French cuisine or a dry loaf of crusty bread. He didn't worry much about the quality of horseflesh or the spring of a stylish phaeton if it got him where he needed to go. And when it came to women, his attraction had never been limited to a certain type. He'd enjoyed them all—in every way imaginable.

But after five years of traveling under varying and often challenging conditions across multiple countries and a few continents, now that he'd returned to the only place he'd ever considered calling home, all he could think of was the familiar comfort of his old bedroom.

Before he'd left London to discover the world (and himself), his greatest concern was that he might be burning a bridge behind him. But Roderick Bentley—Bishop's longtime employer—had quickly corrected him on that issue.

"You'll always have a place here, Bishop. No matter how far you go or how long you're away. This is your home."

The older man couldn't have possibly known how much that assurance had meant to him. Mainly because Bishop had been sure to disguise his gratitude with some flippant response.

Then again, perhaps Roderick *had* known.

Bentley's, the elite gambling club Roderick had built out of nothing, was home to an array of misfits and castaways. The club might be a pleasure ground of gambling and vice for

its aristocratic members, but it was a family to those who worked and lived within its walls.

And the bedroom Bishop kept there had been his from the day he'd arrived on the club's doorstep as a lad looking for work. Though it had been five years since he'd last stepped inside the club, he had no doubt Roderick's word would stand and the room would be as he'd left it—covered in sheets and a bit of dust perhaps. But dust had become a relative term to Bishop after the months he'd spent in the Sahara Desert a couple years back.

The club was still alight with activity despite it being nearly dawn, so Bishop took extra care to avoid any common areas and the hallways where servants were most likely to traverse. With the many divergences possible during travel, it would've been difficult to predict exactly when he'd reach London. There had always been the chance he'd detour for some reason or another, significantly delaying his plans. It had certainly happened before. So, he hadn't bothered sending word to Roderick or anyone else at Bentley's of his impending return.

He preferred to arrive unnoticed anyway. He hadn't gotten much rest in the last few days and wasn't at all in the mood for any type of welcome. Better not to see everyone again until after he'd claimed several hours of desperately needed, uninterrupted sleep.

He was so tired that he managed to slip into his old bedroom, set his bag of personal effects beside the door (the rest of this belongs would be delivered the next day), toe off his boots and shrug free of his coat, then shuffle his way to the bed all in complete darkness. He only vaguely noted that the room hadn't been draped in dust cloths after all, but felt rather freshly aired. When he caught the faint scent of roses hovering about the room, he immediately dismissed it as a nostalgic longing triggered by his return. So, it wasn't until he tossed himself onto the bed and felt the undeniable movement of another body rolling toward him that he realized he wasn't alone.

With a muttered curse, he sat up and turned to the still heavily slumbering person beside him.

Perhaps his confidence in Roderick's promise had been misplaced. The possibility caused an uncomfortable twinge in his chest until he recalled that Roderick's last letter, though some months old, had been closed in the same way his previous ones had been—with an assurance that Bishop would always have a place at Bentley's.

So, who in hell had commandeered his bedroom?

With his eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness, he was able to just barely make out the faint outline of a form.

It was not a very large form. In fact, Bishop was nearly certain the intruder was a woman. The suspicion went a very long way toward diffusing his irritation. It wouldn't've been the first time a lovely wench crept through the club to crawl into his bed. The main difference being, of course, the fact that this one had no idea he'd be here.

Though it was slightly possible one of the club's maids had decided to use his room for some reason, it seemed more likely that the woman had come from the brothel that occupied the west wing of the gambling club, the entrance to which was only a short walk down the hall.

Though the main part of the building was reserved for Bentley's gambling hell, the west wing was let out to a high-class brothel run by the formidable Mrs. Beaumont. The brothel was an entirely independent business, but its location within the same building as Bentley's allowed for it to benefit from the club's security as well as share in the club's wealthy and curated clientele.

With his bedroom so conveniently close, Bishop had spent a good number of his off hours over in the west wing and had gotten to know all the women over there quite intimately. The one currently in his bed, though he couldn't make out a great many defining features, did not seem familiar to him.

If he listened hard enough, he could hear the faint strains of music and the trill of distant laughter, suggesting Mrs.

Beaumont was having one of her parties and it was still in full swing despite the very late hour. Perhaps this woman had indulged in a bit too much champagne and had gotten turned around on her way back to her own room.

It didn't escape his notice that five years ago, he'd have reacted to the presence of a young woman in his bed very differently. Tonight, however, all he wanted was to sleep. Alone.

Reaching out, Bishop rested his large hand on a slim but sturdy shoulder and gave a rousing shake. The slumbering woman issued a low moan followed by a soft, husky murmur. Then nothing.

Bishop jostled her again. A bit more insistently this time. "Wake up, luv," he muttered quietly but firmly. "I don't know where you came from or why you're here but you can't stay."

There was another moan of protest—this one deeper and heavier—as his bedmate tried to roll away from Bishop's heavy hand. When he wouldn't let her, she gave a soft whimper and muttered in a thick slur, "I dinna wanna go to the theater...so *blooody* dull."

Bishop curled his lips in amusement. The chit was obviously dreaming.

"Don't worry, sweet," he assured as he began to massage the muscles of her shoulder, hoping to ease her more fully to wakefulness. "I won't make you go to the stuffy theater. But there's a grand party going on downstairs and I'd hate for you to miss it."

"A party?" The woman sat up in an almost unnatural rush.

With his sight more accustomed now to the darkness, Bishop could see that she was dressed in white and had thick, dark hair tumbling past her shoulders. Though he still couldn't see much of her features, he was able to make out her movements as she lifted both hands to rub her eyes. Then she shoved her fingers back through her hair, drawing it away from her face before dropping it down her back.

Bishop got the vague impression of a strong feminine profile before the woman started to glance swiftly about the room.

“I dinnae see Bramble,” she mumbled in words that were thick and drawn out. “Where’s ’at naughty boy gone off ta?”

The woman was talking utter nonsense. She must’ve gotten good and foxed at Beaumont’s party, which also explained how she’d ended up in his room.

“Come on, luv,” he murmured gently as he shifted closer to her, intending to help her rise, “we’d best get you back to your own bed.”

When she turned to look at him, he noted the shadowed impression of heavy-lidded eyes and a wide, generous mouth. Her soft gasp of awareness or surprise or something else drifted in the space between them. Then she lifted her hand to his face, cradling the thick growth of beard along his jaw.

Her unexpected touch sent a swift and sudden jolt through his body, freezing him in place. It felt like he’d been the one just awakened from a deep sleep as his nerves started to hum, his muscles tightened, and his blood pulsed wildly through his veins.

“You’re back,” she murmured, her tone dreamy and sweet, as her thumb brushed gently across his lips.

Bishop stopped breathing. Desire swept through him—sharp and bright and intense. It had been years since he’d experienced such a deep and devastating rush of lust through his body.

But despite her words, the woman couldn’t possibly know who he was. Before he’d left, Bishop had known every one of the women who resided in west wing. The woman beside him wasn’t one of them. He’d have remembered her. She was obviously speaking out of a drunken stupor and had no idea what she was saying.

Wrapping his fingers around her slim wrist, he gently eased her hand from his face. “You’re confusing me with someone else, luv.”

He was surprised by how rough and unsteady his voice had become.

She shook her head, and though she didn't try to free herself from his grip, she did lean toward him. "Nay," she whispered, "I remember you well enough... a man who haunts my dreams..." she murmured softly.

And before Bishop could stop her, she tipped forward and pressed her lips to his.

The kiss was without finesse of any kind. Which made the fact that it triggered a bright bolt of lightning through Bishop's core—searing his insides with desire and hunger and need—so fucking startling. Startling enough that he didn't even try to resist her. And when she gave a soft, moaning sigh and looped one slim arm around his neck to press herself closer, he was incapable of doing anything but folding her in his arms. After that, it was just a natural thing to take command of the kiss.

Tilting his head, he flicked his tongue along the seam of her lips and the fire in his blood roared with life.

Her responding moan was warm and breathy before she slipped her tongue against his.

Holy hell! How had he gone so long without this?

It felt so fucking good to hold her pliant, rose-scented body against his. The soft sounds she made were a gorgeous symphony in his mind. And the taste of her...

She twisted her tongue with languid sensuality, exploring the shape of his mouth as though she'd never known anything so enticing.

He tightened his arms and dove deeper into the kiss. Claiming every stroke of her tongue as his due. Drawing her full bottom lip between his teeth. Indulging in the rush of sexual hunger he'd so willfully denied himself these last five years.

And she responded perfectly. With heated sighs, a bold tongue, and the softest lips. He couldn't recall any prior kiss ever tasting so sweet and rich and heady beyond belief.

Except one, perhaps.

As soon as the thought entered his mind, he couldn't release it.

That kiss had also surrounded him in the faint scent of roses and it had also triggered something swift and furious in his being. Something that had utterly stupefied him at that time. For its unexpected potency and because of who it was who had ignited such a maelstrom of desire.

A shocking suspicion crept through the rush of passion thundering in his blood. And even though he wanted nothing more than to dissolve into the sensuality of the woman melting in his arms, the very slight possibility that he might be right forced him to draw back.

Just enough to mutter thickly against her parted lips, "Who are you?"

"What?" Her voice was dreamy and soft and confused.

But then she abruptly stiffened. With her body still half draped against him, Bishop felt her sudden alarm like a shock rippling through her. As though she'd just been dunked in icy water.

Or as if she'd only just fully awakened.

"Wait. What's going on?" she asked, her voice much stronger, clearer, and more than a bit distressed.

What he'd thought was an inebriated slur suddenly sounded a lot more like a drawling accent. A Scottish accent.

Bloody hell, don't let him be right.

Rolling from the bed in one swift movement, he stood to light the lamp on the bedside table. As a soft illuminating glow flooded the room, the woman behind him gasped in surprise.

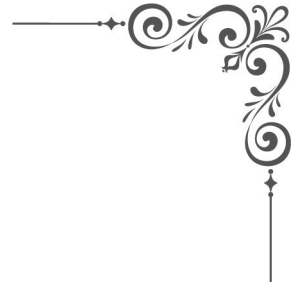
Though he already knew who he'd see, it didn't make the moment any less staggering when he turned back to the woman in his bed.

Cailleach Claybourne.

Roderick Bentley's younger sister sat in the center of his mussed bedsheets, wearing a ridiculously modest nightgown, with her rich brown hair falling in a tangled mass down to her hips. Her strong little chin was lifted to an impertinent angle, her fascinating hazel eyes were fixed intently upon him, and her gorgeous lips were parted in surprise.

As if she'd just now realized who he was. As if she hadn't just kissed him as though he poured life into her very soul.

"Bishop," she breathed in a husky whisper.



Chapter Two

The low, reverent tone of her voice spiraled through his core to the very pit of him, bringing to life those poignant desires he'd nearly forgotten.

No. Never forgotten.

Buried. Ignored. Forced aside in pursuit of other, less carnal pleasures and rewards.

He met her unsettling gaze with an irreverent arch of his brow. "What in hell are you doing in my bedroom?"

Defiance swept across her expression as she tilted her head and narrowed her gaze. "*Your* bedroom?" she asked. "I dinnae think so."

"No games, pet. You know damn well this is my room and always has been."

"So, you do ken who I am?"

Bishop snorted. Of course he knew who she was. The chit was not one to be easily forgotten. No matter how many years had passed.

"What are you doing here?"

Her gaze flickered briefly to the side before she lifted her chin to state firmly, "That isnae your concern."

He suddenly recalled how she'd turned to him in the darkness to caress his face with tenderness before pressing her lips to his. "Meeting a lover?"

"What?" Her eyes widened before a laugh, rich and hearty, rolled from her chest. "Not bluidy likely."

Casually crossing his arms over his chest, Bishop lifted a brow. "Ah, so, you've a habit then of kissing strangers in the night?"

"I thought I was dreaming," she replied, her tone slightly defensive. "And you're not exactly a stranger, are you?"

Bishop's stomach clenched. Instead of answering her question, he asked one of his own, "Does Roderick know you're here?"

He knew the answer by the sudden tensing of her features and the stubborn set of her jaw.

With a thoughtful tilt of his head, he mused, "I wonder what he'd think of this."

"It doesnae matter," she retorted. "I'm not a child. How I choose to spend my time is my own concern and no one else's."

Bishop laughed. "Nice try, pet."

She was a bold one, no doubt. But then, she always had been. Bold and confident and full of fire. But she was also an earl's daughter, and though illegitimate, she'd been raised in gentility. There wasn't a single conceivable situation that would justify her presence in a gambling hell in the middle of the night. Even if the hell did belong to her brother.

"But you're partially right," he added. "It doesn't matter why you're here as long as you get yourself gone."

"I'm not leaving," she asserted, rising to her knees in the center of the bed. "This room's far more mine than yours."

Bishop wanted very badly to give a dismissive reply, but the words got struck. They couldn't seem to make it past the sudden rush of awareness that swept through him at the sight of her kneeling so proud and defiant amid the mussed blankets, her thin cotton nightgown draping with graceful temptation over her slim form.

Bloody hell.

Bishop clenched his back teeth, forcing his gaze to settle on her face. Once he was certain his reaction was properly contained, he flashed a cocky grin. "If you're suggesting we share the bed," he drawled suggestively, "I suppose I could accommodate that, but I doubt we'd get much sleep."

He didn't mean it. *Obviously*, he didn't. And he trusted her to know that. He'd only made the comment to motivate her

into clearing the room so he could finally claim the rest he still urgently needed.

But the woman didn't appear at all shocked by his words. In fact, for a brief moment, her hazel eyes flickered over his person as she almost seemed to consider his offer in truth. Then she gave a little shrug. "Fine, but you cannae expect me to leave right this moment. If you can manage to find somewhere else to sleep tonight, I'll have my things cleared away tomorrow so you can have the room back." She lifted her chin. "*But* you mun promise me something first."

"I'll give you tonight, but if you're going to ask me not to tell Roderick about this situation," he noted with a sweeping glance that took in the now obvious signs of her frequent use of the room—the hairbrush and ribbons on his shaving stand, the stack of books on the bedside table, and the woolen shawl draped over the chair, "you can save your breath."

He'd started to turn toward the door when she called out, "Wait!"

Though he glanced back, the sharp note of command and desperation in her voice was not enough to stop him. Even so, he was brought to an abrupt halt when the woman grasped a handful of her long nightgown and hiked it up so she could clamber more easily across the mattress. The flashing vision of an elegant foot, lovely curved calf, and just a glimpse of her smooth thigh had his soul practically leaving his body.

He could barely instruct his lungs to draw breath, let alone make his feet move.

He'd long ago learned how to suppress the somewhat overactive urges of his libido. His celibacy during his travels had been a conscious decision, and once he'd made that choice, committing to it hadn't been nearly as difficult as he'd expected.

But this woman managed to threaten his control beyond anything he'd experienced in the last five years.

He had to get out of that room—away from *her*. But while he fought a fierce battle against the intense rise of desire in his

blood, the incorrigible female flew past him to press her back to the door and grasp hold of the doorknob. As if she could physically stop him from leaving.

Determination tensed his shoulders as he confronted her, but he should have stepped away first. He was suddenly far too close to her. For a second, all he could comprehend were her heady, flowery scent, her quick-patterned breath, and the rebellious light in her hazel eyes as she gazed boldly up at him.

“Promise you willnae tell Roderick you saw me here tonight,” she demanded.

Concealing the reactions in his body, he arched an insolent brow and tilted his lips into a jaded smirk. “Why in hell would I promise that?”

She squared her shoulders more firmly against the door. “Because...” She paused and he wasn’t sure if she was still trying to come up with a valid reason or if she was gathering courage to say what came out of her mouth next. “If you tell him I was here, I’ll tell him you nearly made love to me.”

Bishop’s heart slammed against his ribs. Reacting to her threat on instinct alone, he lowered his chin and took a step toward her before he could stop himself. He should be putting more distance between them, not closing the fucking gap.

But he didn’t correct the error. In fact, as her eyes widened and her breasts lifted with her swiftly drawn breath, Bishop took another step until he was a hairsbreadth away from pressing his entire body along hers. Looking down into her upturned face, he noted the bright and stubborn wariness in her eyes, the brazen set of her chin, and the edge of her teeth where they showed between her parted lips.

Goddamn, she was lovely.

And so wonderfully rebellious. It wasn’t just desire that rushed through him. It was admiration and respect and the instinctive recognition of a worthy adversary.

“First of all,” he said slowly, dropping his voice to a tone that bordered recklessly on the seductive, “I don’t take kindly

to threats and blackmail. Second..." He paused to slide a heavy gaze over her tense and beautiful features. "I was a long way away from making love to you, pet. It was a kiss. A kiss *you* initiated, I might add."

"I was half-asleep," she argued, her voice low and breathless. "I hardly knew what was happening. And it's not as though you tried to stop it."

"Trust me," he taunted with a curl of his lips, "if I'd known it was *you*, I would have."

Something flickered across her gaze and Bishop almost regretted his words. But they were one-hundred-percent true. Kissing this woman was at the top of his list of things he could not do.

And now he'd done it *twice*.

"Do you reckon that will matter to Roderick?" she asked.

His body tightened because he knew it wouldn't.

Roderick Bentley's usual easygoing manner had a hard limit when it came to anything that might harm his family. From the moment Roderick had learned of his young half sister growing up in Scotland, he'd guarded the girl's well-being as ferociously as he did his wife and sons.

If his former employer found out Bishop had dared to touch even a hair on his beloved sister's head, he'd never forgive him.

Ignoring the heat that rolled through him, Bishop arched a brow. "Well played, pet."

Her response was a firm jut of her chin as she stood in billowing white cotton with her back pressed to the door, her hand covering the doorknob. Her expression was calm yet fierce. Utterly self-contained. A direct contrast to the tangled mess of her long, brown hair which looked as though she'd slept restlessly.

Or had just been thoroughly fucked.

Damn. Ignore that thought.

He could disarm a drunken idiot with a joke and a grin. With a flick of his wrist, he could bring a violent man to his knees in surrender. In his wilder youth, all it had required was a sideways glance and women tripped over each other to fall into his bed.

Surely, he could handle one brazen young woman.

“This is what’s going to happen,” he said finally, his voice light but firm. “Neither of us will breathe a word about what *didn’t* happen here, and once you leave here tomorrow, you never return.”

She folded her arms over her breasts and tipped her head back to more boldly meet his gaze. Her subtle, evocative fragrance drifted between them, infiltrating his blood. She gave a quick little smile. “Neither of us breathes a word of what *almost* happened here and I continue doing exactly as I please.”

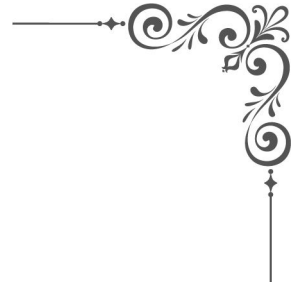
“You can’t.”

“I can and will.”

“You don’t *belong* here. And sooner or later Roderick will find out.”

Her eyes narrowed but her lips curved into a smile. “The only way he’d find out is if *you* tell him. But dinnae fash yersel’. You willnae have to suffer my presence often. In fact, I’ll make extra effort to ensure we rarely cross paths.” There was a subtle drop in her voice as she added, “*If* you’re planning on staying, that is.”

His grin was brash as he slowly leaned toward her. He couldn’t help but revel in the subtle flicker of alarm in her gaze or the way her breath caught on a sweet, intimate gasp. Lowering his head until his mouth hovered near the delicate curve of her ear, he whispered. “Just don’t be a nuisance and we won’t have a problem.”



Chapter Three

Caillie's entire body hummed as Bishop leaned close. Her skin tingled where his breath drifted over her neck. Her heart thundered wildly and her belly twisted.

Then he suddenly pulled the door open behind her. As it bumped against her backside, she gave a soft grunt of surprise and stumbled forward, allowing him to open the door wide enough to step through. The door closed again with a quiet but decisive click and just like that he was gone.

But only from the room.

Caillie set her hands on her hips, cocked her head to the side, and stared at the closed door.

Bishop Black had returned to London.

The thought triggered an undeniable thrill through her blood. She lifted her fingertips to her lips.

And he'd kissed her. Again.

Dammit. If only she hadn't been half-asleep when it happened.

She'd never been able to wake quickly from a deep slumber and often lingered in a dreamlike state even though she appeared alert and aware. Worthy, the woman who'd raised her from infancy, had loved to tease her about the ridiculous things she'd say and do as she struggled to gain full consciousness.

Even though her memory of the kiss felt like one of her more wicked dreams, she could still feel the pressure of his lips. She could taste his velvet heat on her tongue.

The first time she'd ever seen Bishop Black, she'd been a child of eleven. It had been her very first foray into her brother Roderick's gambling hell, and even though it had taken place during the day and had been strictly chaperoned, she'd been excited beyond measure. Her introduction to her brother's trusted right hand had been extremely brief, and in truth,

Caillie hadn't thought much at all about the somewhat impudent young man; she'd been far too interested in other things. And though he'd given a casual tip of his head, he'd shown even less interest in her.

During her next several years and the nearly dozen—planned and supervised—visits she made to the club, she probably only saw Bishop a rare few times and always at a distance as he sauntered from one place to another. He had a way of always appearing to be busy while never, ever seeming to be in a hurry. She'd thought him an intriguing fellow, but that was about it.

And then came her abduction six years ago when she'd been seventeen.

Being a prominent and powerful figure in London's underworld, her youngest brother, Max, hadn't gotten to where he was without making a few enemies along the way, one of whom had become intent on revenge and seen Caillie as a means to obtain it. Luckily, Max had been onto his enemy's plans all along and no harm was done to Caillie or his lover, Elle, who'd also been kidnapped. But Max had decided to engage Roderick in the rescue and Roderick had brought along Bishop.

That had turned out to be an encounter Caillie would never forget.

Even in her distress over Elle's safety and the frustration of being forcefully prevented from running to the other woman's aid by Bishop's very strong arm around her middle, she'd noticed the intense spark she felt at the intimate contact with his larger, harder body. Despite her struggling attempts to free herself, his hold on her hadn't wavered.

And then he'd brought his mouth down beside her ear to murmur in a firm but almost gentle tone, "I'm not letting you go, pet, so you'd best save your fight for someone else."

The blunt words spoken with a hint of cockney in a voice that was smooth and heavy made her insides quiver delicately. Something had shifted inside her in that moment. Something irrevocable.

An awakening.

By then, Caillie had already started sneaking into the club—and the mysterious west wing, which had always been very strictly off-limits—without her brothers' knowledge. Her covert and more frequent visits made for more recurrent glimpses of Bishop, as well. Or perhaps she'd just become more aware of him after the rescue. Either way, her attention seemed drawn to him whenever he was near. Or far. Whenever he was even somewhat in the vicinity, to be honest.

And she'd started craving those quick glimpses of his long, casual gait, his irreverent gaze, and that ready grin. But especially, she loved catching the sound of his voice. It never failed to spark a quiver of awareness through her body.

But there had never been reason for her to get near enough to experience his touch again. Not even in the most casual or fleeting way.

Until the summer after she'd turned eighteen, nearly a year after her rescue.

Caillie had just slipped into Mrs. Beaumont's west wing with the intention of meeting with her friends, when she'd literally run into Bishop. Only his quick reflexes had saved her from a fall down the stairs. It had been instantly clear that he was still a bit drunk from the night before and his disheveled state made it equally obvious what he'd been doing on the upper level of the brothel.

Caillie was already well aware of how Bishop was a frequent guest to their wing. Not only did he assist in managing unruly clients, he was also an *intimate friend* of the girls. And though Mrs. Beaumont had strict rules against such fraternization, the risk was apparently worth it considering the way the ladies went on about his prowess, creativity, and generous *endowments* in the bedroom.

Caillie was just curious enough to want to hear every detail while also feeling slightly jealous that she'd never know first-hand what they all so enjoyed going on about.

On that day, however, she'd finally gotten a brief taste of what she'd been missing when Bishop kissed her on a drunken impulse. The press of his lips had been brief...

But so very enlightening.

And then he'd left.

He'd left her standing there on the landing, her heart twisting madly.

He'd left Bentley's club.

He'd left London. For five long years.

As a first crush, it had been a dramatic and intense one. And though she'd initially been just a wee bit devastated by his sudden departure, over time, the memories of her brother's dashing, irreverent, and indolently charming former employee faded away—during waking hours anyway. Even after so many years, the man still had a habit of making frequent and scandalous appearances in Caillie's dreams. She'd accounted for the oddity by acknowledging that he had been the first man to inspire within her the sensual longings of a full-grown woman. But she also had to admit that she simply hadn't met a single man since who'd been worthy of replacing Bishop in those nighttime fantasies.

And now he was back.

No longer a romanticized character of memory and imagination, but a real, live man of flesh and blood. And from her brief encounter, he was just as insolent and subtly domineering as he'd always been.

But there were differences in him, as well. And not just the fact that he wore his hair much longer than he used to, tied in a queue at his nape, or the full growth of beard he sported, though she had to admit she loved the look of both. He'd always had a sort of rakish air—a devil-may-care ease to his appearance and manner. But what she'd once seen as dashing had now taken on a certain edge. There had always been an aura of danger about him, considering his background on the rough streets of London and the nature of his role at the club.

But now...Caillie sensed that the hardness beneath his casual façade had been more sharply honed.

She tried to recall what she knew about where he'd gone and what he'd been doing in the last five years, but it wasn't much. Of course, Roderick had kept in touch with him by letter, but the correspondence had been few and far between since Bishop had apparently moved around quite a bit. And she remembered overhearing Roderick complain to his wife, Emma, once about how cryptic and vague Bishop's letters tended to be, almost as if he didn't *want* anyone to know what he was doing.

Emma had counseled Roderick to give the young man the space and confidence to do whatever he felt he must, that all he could do was ensure Bishop knew that he'd always have a place to return to.

Perhaps now that Bishop was back, the mysteries of his assumedly extensive travels would be solved. Caillie had to admit, she was certainly curious. Just as she was curious to know what might have brought the man back and if he intended to stay.

Since he'd made it quite clear that he intended to reclaim his bedroom, it seemed he'd be at the club at least for a little while.

She sighed and turned around to peruse her belongings spread about the place. It had been a lovely little escape while it had lasted. Though she wanted to believe Bishop wouldn't go straight to Roderick despite their *agreement*, he was a man whose loyalty belonged first and foremost to her brother. Perhaps if she managed to get all her things properly removed before the club even opened for the day, she'd have a solid opportunity to deny whatever Bishop might say about discovering her presence here tonight.

Though it galled her to have to do anything the man demanded, she simply couldn't risk her activities becoming exposed.

For the most part, she visited the club during the daylight hours when the business was closed and the ladies of the west

wing were far less occupied. It was also when Roderick was most likely not yet to be in since he spent his mornings and early afternoons at home with his family, only coming to the club in the evening. But there had been an occasion here and there when she'd been caught at the club rather late and it just made more sense to stay the night rather than try to slip through the increasing activity undetected. Her personal maid, Neda, was infinitely valuable in her ability to come up with proper excuses and deflections that ensured no one at home ever knew of her occasional absences.

There were certain undeniable risks and dangers inherent in moving freely about the club—and especially Mrs. Beaumont's wing—unchaperoned while business was in full swing. And she wasn't so reckless that she'd put herself in danger.

Hiding out in Bishop's abandoned bedroom had become the best option in such circumstances. It was close to the west wing and far from the main common areas of the hell. It was never used for guests, and since it was known to be in reserve for Bishop, general staff had no cause to enter the room. There was only one maid responsible for keeping the place properly aired and dusted, and Lynette just happened to be one of Caillie's many friends within the club.

Roderick wasn't the only person capable of earning loyalty.

By the time dawn just started to break over the horizon, Caillie was fully dressed and had all her belongings properly gathered. Unfortunately, she had no luggage to pack them in, so she'd wrapped them up in her woolen shawl then tied up the corners. With her cloak about her shoulders and her bundle in her arms, she felt a bit like a vagabond as she slipped through the quiet halls of the club to the back door which opened to the alley. Standing in the muted light of a lavender dawn, she gave a trill bird cry. Moments later, a carriage rolled up and the driver, wearing a jaunty red cap, leapt down to assist her into the vehicle.

“Thank you, Thomas,” Caillie said with a smile.

“Cuttin’ it close, ain’t ye, miss?”

She grinned as she settled into the shadows inside the carriage. “Mayhap just a wee bit.”

Thomas shook his head, but she saw the flash of humor in his eyes before he secured the door and started them off for home.

Thomas had initially been hired as a bodyguard of sorts under the guise of a groom six years ago after Caillie’s abduction and rescue. Though she’d never actually been in danger, her other brothers and Worthy had gotten spooked by the whole thing.

Caillie had known the second she’d seen Thomas that he was more than the groom he’d presented as. Eventually she’d gotten the truth out of him—that he’d been hired to keep a close eye on her whenever she was away from her home or her family. After that, it hadn’t taken long to convince him to work for her instead. With a generous allowance from her oldest brother and very little she needed to spend it on, she was able to increase Thomas’s salary sufficiently enough to claim his loyalty.

Though he was to continue under the appearance of being her guard, he was also to assist her in conducting her activities away from the house undetected. And in the last years, he’d proven himself to be invaluable in that regard. From the acquisition of a nondescript vehicle, familiarity with various disguises, his general knowledge of London and surrounding areas, and several mysterious contacts, Caillie knew she’d never be able to do what she did without him.

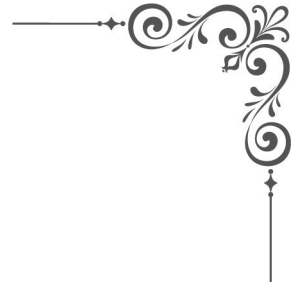
She trusted him implicitly.

Thomas brought the carriage quietly into the mews behind Wright House and Caillie slipped from the vehicle, giving him her customary silent gesture of thanks, which he responded to—as always—with a tip of his red hat. Then she quickly disappeared into the shadows and made her way into the house through the servants’ entrance while Thomas drove the vehicle off to wherever he hid it when she wasn’t in need of it.

She made it through the grand mansion to her bedroom without encountering any of the household servants. No big surprise, really. After sneaking about for the last six years, she'd gotten quite adept at it.

She might be twenty-three years old, but to her brothers, she'd always be the little sister they needed to guide and protect. If they had any idea what she did and where she went when she left the house, they'd feel compelled to put a stop to it—*all* of it. For her own good, of course.

So, in order to protect her endeavors, she was forced to conduct a great deal of her life in secrecy. Caillie hated lying to her family and hoped that *someday* all the subterfuge wouldn't be necessary. Unfortunately, it wasn't *this* day.



Chapter Four

After a solid round of deep sleep, Bishop waited as long as he could to go back to his bedroom where he'd left his traveling bag, which contained a change of clothes and other essentials. Gratefully, the chit had done as she'd promised and no sign of her remained in his personal space. Except, perhaps, a faint suggestion of her rose-water scent.

Forcing thoughts of the woman to the back of his mind, Bishop focused on the far more important tasks of the day.

Most importantly...he needed to advise Roderick Bentley of his return.

But, because he didn't expect Roderick to be in his office until late in the afternoon, Bishop took the extra time to enjoy a steamy bath and a quick bite to eat before making his way down to the second floor, where the club owner's office was located.

Unless occupied in a private meeting, it was Roderick's policy to leave his door open in welcome to any of his staff who might wish to stop in for a word. As Bishop approached the double doors thrown wide, he had a sudden feeling of being sixteen again and newly arrived at the club looking for work.

He'd been shown to Roderick's office, where he'd stood with an insolent posture and a cocksure attitude, trying very hard not to reveal in his expression just how badly he wanted the footman position.

And Roderick had sat behind his desk, staring at Bishop without saying a single word for what felt like an eternity—his sharp blue eyes narrowed into a discerning stare. In the years since then, Bishop had witnessed Roderick's infamous intuition at work a thousand times. But on that day, he wasn't yet aware of the man's uncanny ability to see things—sense things—about people that they'd rather not have known. So, he'd stared back at the man with an arched brow and a careless

smirk until Roderick finally flashed a grin and asked the first of only two interview questions.

Why do you want to work here?

A hundred answers had tumbled through Bishop's mind, but only one made it past his lips. He'd glanced about the room, taking in the fine furniture and artwork on the walls, before giving a dismissive shrug. *Seems like a nice enough place.*

The response had inspired a chuckle from Roderick and the other man had stood from his chair to approach Bishop as he'd asked his second question.

What skills can you offer the club?

Bishop had curled his lips and replied, *I'll show you.*

The truth was, his life running about the brothel dens and flash houses of the East End had given him a view into the world of scammers, thieves, and cons, and he'd made the most of studying the tricks and ploys people used to cover up their true intentions. He knew them all. And all it had taken was a single walk through the club's crowded gaming room with Bishop pointing out every nervous hand, darting gaze, and damp brow that suggested who might need to be watched more carefully. Roderick had hired him on the spot and promoted him from footman to his personal aide within a few weeks.

The club had been his home for nearly ten years. The rest of the staff had been family. And Roderick had been more than an employer. He'd been a mentor and the closest thing Bishop could imagine to an older brother and friend.

In some ways, it felt as if he'd never left.

But in others... a lifetime seemed to have passed since he'd last crossed the double-doored threshold into the office where Roderick was seated at his desk.

"You work too hard, mate," Bishop said, bringing Roderick's head up from whatever ledger he was reviewing.

“Bloody hell,” the older man exclaimed with a wide smile. He shoved immediately to his feet and started around the desk toward Bishop. “Who in hell let you in the doors?”

Bishop chuckled and took the hand Roderick extended with a firm grip. “Didn’t you know Snipes took bribes? All you need is a bag of sweets and that doorman’ll usher you in like royalty.”

“Royalty, indeed,” Roderick replied, giving Bishop a once-over. “You’re looking none the worse for your travels. Better, in fact.” Then he clapped Bishop on the back. “Come, let’s sit and have a drink to welcome you back. Why didn’t you send word of your intended return? I would’ve had someone meet you.”

Bishop shrugged. “I didn’t know for sure when I’d make it in.”

After Roderick poured them both a snifter of brandy, they took up seats in the leather armchairs set before the low-burning fire.

It was a little odd.

In all the years he’d worked at Bentley’s, he’d never sat in one of these chairs—with Roderick present, anyway. He’d sure as hell tried them out when the boss hadn’t been around. He’d tried the fine brandy, too.

He couldn’t help but grin at the memory, drawing an inquiring glance from Roderick.

“You’re looking pleased with yourself,” the other man noted as he swirled his brandy.

“It’s good to be back, I suppose.”

And it was. In some ways, just because it proved to him how he’d changed during his time away—as he’d hoped. No longer a footman with a cocky swagger and impertinent grin, he was a man of his own means. And he intended to make use of it.

Meeting Roderick’s sharp blue stare, Bishop curled his lips. He had nothing to hide from the man’s intuitive

assessment.

Except maybe the fact that he'd kissed Roderick's beloved sister. *Twice*.

Bishop tensed then lifted his glass to hide the subtle flinch.

Roderick smiled. "I hope you're not going to tell me you're only in town for a short visit." Though his tone was teasing, there was an earnestness to his expression. "I'm prepared to go to significant lengths to keep you around."

"I'm back to stay," Bishop noted, "but I do want to talk to you about that in more detail."

"You know you always have a position here. Metcalf is talking of retiring soon, and I'll be in need of a general manager."

"I appreciate that, but I won't be rejoining Bentley's staff."

Roderick's response was a silent lift of his black eyebrows.

"I intend to open my own club."

The other man's eyebrows arched higher. Then he leaned back in his chair and gave Bishop a studied look. "That's a weighty endeavor. And it won't be easy."

Bishop quirked a lip. "I'm aware."

"We'll be competitors."

"We won't, actually," Bishop replied. "I intend to draw a wholly different clientele. And gambling will only be a small part of what I'll offer."

Leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, Bishop started talking—about his ideas, his plans, his *vision*. Though Bentley's had been everything to him for so long, he'd known for a while now that if he ever got back to London, he wouldn't be able to simply step back into his old role. He wanted more. He needed more room to stretch out, to create something of his own. To realize a future of his own.

Roderick had given him a solid foundation when he'd needed it most, but Bentley's had just been a starting point—a place to learn and strengthen as he'd figured out what

direction he wanted to go next. His travels had given him a greater sense of who he was outside of his role at the club. A true sense of himself as a man.

And now, his future was as clear to him as if it were already in place.

When Bishop finally finished talking, Roderick nodded thoughtfully. Then a wide grin split his mouth. “How much do you need in investments?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” The other man’s surprise was only slightly insulting.

Bishop laughed. “What did you think I’d been doing these years I’ve been gone?”

“Since your letters never shared any details of your travels, I assumed you’d been doing what every young man does on a tour of the Continent,” Roderick noted with an arched brow. “Indulging in vices.”

Bishop flashed a grin. “Oh, I did that well enough. But as it turns out...if you happen to stop a band of thieves from robbing a Persian prince, the prince might ask you to become a guard in his entourage and travel the world with him.” The grin widened. “And if, in the years that follow, you foil a few more robbery attempts and a somewhat clumsy assassination attempt, there’s a damned good chance you’ll be rewarded with a small chest of priceless jewels when you finally decide to part ways.”

“A chest? Of priceless jewels?” Roderick asked, eyes sharp with curiosity.

Bishop nodded. “Worth more than I can spend in my lifetime.”

“Bloody hell,” Roderick muttered before he gave a hearty laugh and lifted his glass. “To your future,” Roderick said proudly.

Hearing those words in his former employer and mentor’s voice obliterated any possible remaining doubts Bishop might

have had about returning to London to open his own club.

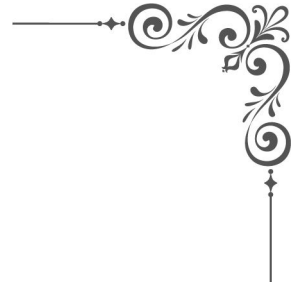
“You must come to dinner with me tonight,” Roderick added in a tone that allowed no option for refusal. “To continue this celebration and properly welcome you home.”

“If you insist.”

“I do. And don’t worry, it’ll only be a small family affair.”

A couple hours later, Bishop was strolling along the hallways and corridors of the place that had been home to him for so many years. He’d come to Bentley’s as a lad full of cocksure arrogance and far more street-smarts than true intelligence. But Roderick had sensed something in him. When most would have seen a brash young man prone to lazy self-indulgence, he’d peered past Bishop’s irreverent attitude and had somehow detected the loyalty and unique brand of ambition Bishop possessed. And he’d fostered it without forcing Bishop to form himself into a vision that didn’t suit him.

In fact, Roderick had done that for everyone who’d made up Bentley’s staff over the years. And now, Bishop would have the opportunity to do the same.



Chapter Five

Caillie stood in front of her bedroom mirror, sipping from a small glass of wine. Her aging border collie, Bramble, lay in his bed near her feet, watching her with curious interest.

Though she'd managed to catch a couple more hours of sleep after tiptoeing back into her bedroom that morning, she'd awoken with a troubling sense of disquiet. And she had no doubt as to the cause of it.

She tried to tell herself that Bishop's sudden arrival back in town was of no consequence to her. But in the light of day, she realized the man had never actually promised not to tell Roderick that he'd found her spending the night in the club. For a young lady to be inside the walls of such a place during its hours of operation was scandalous enough without the added fact that she'd obviously made a bit of a habit of it.

Despite Bishop's lack of a promise, however, she didn't exactly fear that he'd go to Roderick. She didn't trust him completely, but she'd decided to believe he wouldn't go tattling right off.

Even so, she couldn't shake a sense that everything was about to change in some way.

Unfortunately, at the moment, there was nothing she could do about it.

She drained the last of her wine and set the glass aside.

Lifting her chin, she twisted her body a quarter turn this way, then that, casually assessing the elegant image of a perfectly poised and simply sophisticated young lady armored in dark green silk with her hair a lovely confection of curls and twists pinned atop her head and her expression one of calm confidence.

Then she wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue, making a wretched face at her own reflection, destroying the thin façade.

Better.

Only her eyes gave away her lingering unease. And only if one looked very hard to find it buried within the burnished gold edged with dark green.

Her eyebrows twitched into a frown, but before she could dwell any longer on her internal disquiet, Bramble's cold nose nudged her hand. With a laugh, she reached down to give the loyal border collie a good scratch behind the ears. Bramble was right, she'd dallied long enough.

Dinner tonight was one of those rare occurrences when all her family would be present. Her brother Beynon and his family were in town for only a few weeks and Caillie didn't want to miss the opportunity to visit with the young nieces and nephews she so rarely got to see before the children were shuffled up to the schoolroom, where they'd enjoy their dinner away from the adults in delightful, playful chaos.

It had taken her oldest brother, Colin, years to bring all his half siblings together into the makeshift family they now were. But he'd been quietly, steadfastly determined.

He'd also been quite fortunate that he'd chosen to campaign for Caillie first, since she'd taken on the mantle of his purpose with all the dedication her eleven-year-old heart had been capable of—which had been quite a lot, indeed. Honestly, without her, evenings such as tonight likely never would have happened.

Colin had always been far too mindful of ensuring his siblings did not feel unduly pressured. He'd always made it clear that although the Wright House doors were always open, he understood why his illegitimate half siblings might not find it so easy to overcome their rightful anger over the circumstances of their birth.

Caillie, on the other hand, was not so inclined. Their common father had been a selfish, vengeful arsehole—undeniably. But just because Colin was the man's only legitimate child and had inherited the earldom did not mean he was anything like the prior Earl of Wright. Regardless of the type of man their father had been, and regardless of how

differently each of them had grown up, Caillie had wanted to know her brothers, damnit. And they deserved to know her.

So, she'd waged her own campaigns to win over her more reluctant brothers, not to mention Worthy, who'd been quite stubbornly resistant to the whole thing until she'd fallen hopelessly in love with Colin, of course.

All of that to say that when Caillie stepped into the doorway of drawing room and caught her first glimpse of the gathering, her heart swelled with the kind of joy only family could inspire.

But before she could take a breath to greet anyone, the front door of the house opened behind her. She turned to see Roderick and Emma's sons, Damian and Trevor, dressed in their finest and looking like the little gentlemen they were quickly becoming.

As soon as the boys saw her across the entry hall, they flashed wide grins and rushed over. Though Damian was the elder by more than a year and a half, the brothers did nearly everything together. And with their looks so similar and only a slight difference in height, they were often mistaken for twins.

"Och," Caillie exclaimed as she gave each boy a hearty hug. "You lads get bigger and brawnier each time I see you."

"Don't they, though?" their mother said, approaching with a hint of exasperation in her expression that was softened by a proud smile. "I've had to get them both fitted for new clothes three times in the last year alone."

"Well, they look verra handsome tonight," Caillie noted.

The boys rolled their eyes at the compliment and quickly excused themselves to greet their younger cousins already dashing about in the drawing room.

"You're looking very lovely this evening," Emma noted.

Caillie shrugged and swept a dismissive glance down at herself. "Am I?"

The tone was light. She didn't exactly want to admit that she'd put a bit extra care into her appearance after she'd gotten

word that an additional guest would be attending dinner tonight. She flicked a glance to the two men still divesting of their coats and hats.

Roderick was dressed in formal black with his usual exception of a brightly colored waistcoat—tonight in a vivid chartreuse. Bishop, however, wore fawn-colored breeches and a coat of midnight blue over a dove-gray waistcoat. His cravat was fashionably styled while his *unfashionably* long hair was properly pulled back and secured at his nape. The shadow of a beard still darkened his strong jaw, though it had been trimmed to a more acceptable length.

Even so, he looked a wee bit uncivilized. A pirate forced ashore. A brigand brought to heel. A man just barely contained within the confines of propriety. As though the slightest provocation might ignite a devilish light in his eyes.

In a word, he was *devastating*.

Before he could catch sight of her staring at him, she forced her attention back to her sister-in-law. Gratefully, Emma was already gazing into the drawing room, where a very high-pitched shriek of delight had just cut through the other voices in the room. Beynon and Anne's youngest daughter, though only eighteen months, was quite good at getting people's attention.

With a laugh, Caillie looped her arm through Emma's. "Come, let's join the merry mob."



BISHOP NEVER SHOULD have allowed Roderick to convince him it would be a good idea to accompany him to this family dinner tonight. But the other man had been insistent, assuring it would be a casual thing—just family. And since Bishop had just gotten to town, he couldn't exactly claim to have other plans. Unfortunately, the enormity of his error didn't become clear until he'd stepped into the house and saw Cailleach Claybourne standing across the hall.

She'd given a husky laugh when Roderick's lads had launched themselves at her, immediately drawing Bishop's

attention. She was the image of elegance in a shimmering gown of mossy green with her hair twisted atop her head, exposing the lovely line of her throat and the span of her collarbone left bare and unadorned by jewelry. It was a decided departure from how she'd looked in the very early hours of that morning dressed in her billowy nightgown with her hair a fall of tangles. And it had taken significant effort to look away before Roderick noticed his inordinate interest.

But even after averting his gaze, his body remained intensely aware of her presence until she turned to enter the drawing room. He and Roderick followed shortly after.

A small gathering, my arse.

Stepping into the grand and elegant drawing room, Bishop's first impression was of mild chaos. Men and women dressed in elegant finery socialized in easy camaraderie while children of various ages and sizes ran about untethered.

Bishop could handle a drunken mob with ease. He'd stepped in the middle of more violent disputes than he bothered to count.

But this...this...domestic, familial pandemonium was utterly incomprehensible to him.

Roderick gave a rich chuckle, obviously noting Bishop's discomfort.

"Don't worry, mate," the older man said with a knowing grin. "They're not nearly as dangerous as they appear."

"Remains to be seen," Bishop drawled.

Roderick chuckled again and gave him a hearty clap on the back. "Since it's just family and you know just about everyone, we can bypass the formal introductions. Come, let's get a drink."

A few minutes later, Bishop stood with a glass of fine brandy in hand. Roderick was momentarily engaged by his younger son, Trevor, allowing Bishop an opportunity to take in the scene before him with a casual, assessing eye.

The host of the evening, the Earl of Wright, stood before the unlit fireplace, watching the others in the room with an earnest gaze that revealed little of his thoughts. The moment his countess wife passed through his line of sight, however, the lord's expression flashed with a glint of possessiveness.

Lady Wright, utterly unaware of her husband's intense regard, moved about the room with a broad smile as she wove effortlessly through the children who dashed or toddled about. The Scotswoman possessed a subtle air of command that blended seamlessly with her undeniably warm and casual manner.

Seated on a nearby armchair, a pale-haired lady quietly observed the activities of the younger children with a gentle smile and a slim hand resting on her subtly expanding waistline. Behind her stood a brawny, dark-eyed fellow Bishop recognized as Roderick's brother, the Welshman Beynon Thomas.

Shifting his gaze, Bishop spotted Roderick's youngest brother, Max Owen, lounging in the corner of a sofa, absent-mindedly twirling his fingers in the fair curls of his gorgeous lady-wife.

Owen's connections to London's underworld had gotten Cailleach kidnapped some years ago. Bishop could still recall the swirl of fear in her hazel eyes when they'd busted into the room where she'd been tied and gagged. That Owen had known his young sister had been in danger and had let the whole thing happen anyway had infuriated Roderick, but Cailleach herself had been far more concerned with the fact that another was still in danger. If Bishop hadn't held her secure, the chit would've run off on a rescue mission of her own.

He'd known then that Cailleach Claybourne was going to be trouble.

Owen's wife turned to whisper something to him, inspiring a loud, brash laugh from the East End scoundrel, which happened to draw the attention of someone nearby.

Though Bishop had been acutely aware of Cailleach's position from the moment he'd entered the room, he'd been intent on avoiding another direct glance at the woman. But as she lowered herself to the arm of the sofa beside Owen, draping herself against the curved backrest, he couldn't force his gaze away. The position displayed her elegant form in the way a more sedate posture couldn't have achieved. With a look of mischief in her eyes, she leaned forward to say something that had Owen flashing her a vicious glare.

But her brother's menacing expression didn't seem to intimidate Cailleach in the slightest. In fact, she responded with a husky little laugh. The warm, sultry sound triggered a sudden flood of heat through Bishop's bloodstream, forcing him to look away just in time notice another guest's unwanted approach. Gratefully, he managed to sidestep the toddling lad who nearly collided with his knees. A moment later the small boy was swept up by his mother.

"Och, Fergus, ye wee rascal," the Scotswoman muttered, flashing Bishop a quick smile as she hefted the Earl of Wright's heir into her arms. "My apologies...Mr. Black, isnae?"

"It is, my lady," Bishop replied with a moderate grin and a tug on his forelock. "You've a good memory."

"As if I could forget the man who helped rescue my lass from that dastardly fellow," Lady Wright replied with a hint of affront. "You're always welcome here, Mr. Black, though I was a wee bit surprised to learn that you'd returned to town. Are you back to stay or...?"

The question fell off as the boy in her arms started to squirm in his desire to be set down again, his gaze fixed on the other, older children running about.

The earl stepped forward just in time to take the determined boy off his wife's hands. "Shall we send the children upstairs, my dear?"

"Aye," Lady Wright replied without hesitation.

Her husband chuckled and bent to press a kiss to her temple before he turned to Bishop and gave a short nod. “Welcome, Mr. Black.”

Bishop nodded his acknowledgement and muttered a quick thank you.

For the next several minutes, the room devolved into further chaos as the children were rounded up and sent off with a bevy of servants to continue their play and have their supper upstairs.

After seeing his own boys off, Roderick returned to Bishop with a distinct glint of amusement in his blue eyes. “I’m impressed.”

Bishop slid the older man a sideways glance and arched a brow. “With what?”

“I wasn’t sure what you’d make of all this,” Roderick noted with a wave of his hand toward the rest of the room. “It can be a lot to take in. I half feared you’d slip out at the first opportunity.”

“D’ya think I’d be intimidated by a room full of undergrown rascals?” Bishop gave a rough snort. “I thought you knew me better than that.”

His former employer laughed. “You’re right. There never was a situation you couldn’t manage at the club. I reckon you encountered a wealth of harrowing situations during your travels, as well.”

“Certainly more harrowing than a dinner party.”

Roderick turned his focus back out toward the rest of the room. His voice lowered to an earnest tone. “I suppose there are probably a thousand other ways you’d rather be spending your first night back in town, but if I haven’t said it yet, I’m glad you’re here.”

Utterly uncomfortable with the hint of sentiment, Bishop offered a rascally grin. “Damn, now I’m going to feel like shite when I sneak off after supper.”

Roderick chuckled. “Since I insisted you come along, I suppose I’ll be responsible for coming up with a proper excuse for your sudden absence.”

Bishop gave a rough snort. “I doubt anyone would notice.”

“Notice what?”

Bishop tensed as Roderick’s younger sister stepped up beside him, a soft whiff of roses accompanying her arrival. There was an undeniable hint of naughtiness in her smile as she glanced with curiosity between Bishop and her brother.

Desire—swift and unwanted—swept through him.

“Nothing that concerns you, poppet,” Roderick replied easily.

The lady’s rich hazel gaze settled on Bishop. “I reckon you’re going to tell me your conversation is too scandalous for my innocent ears.”

“Something like that,” Bishop replied tensely.

“Well, that’s a shame,” she said. “I was hoping to hear some dashing tales of your travels, Mr. Black. Surely, you’ve a story or two that wouldnae *ravage* my delicate sensibilities.”

“None I can think of,” he countered lightly.

“Your travels were so verra salacious, then?” she pressed, her eyes wide and sparkling.

“All right, that’s enough,” Roderick interjected and Bishop was surprised to note the words were directed toward the young lady rather than himself. “Bishop isn’t accustomed to your teasing.”

Cailleach’s secret smirk widened into a grin as she slid Bishop a sideways glance that quickened his pulse and tightened the muscles of his stomach.

“You cannae be suggesting I take it easy on him?” she asked with an arched brow.

“Never,” Roderick replied. “Bishop can hold his own, I assure you. But it’d only be polite, I suppose, to give him a

little time to acclimate to”—he swept a hand over the room —“all this.”

“What are you saying, brother?” Cailleach asked in mock affront. “We’re a bluidy delightful bunch.”

Roderick shook his head. “I give up, poppet.” Then he glanced to Bishop with an apologetic smile. “You’re on your own, mate.”

Then he walked away to join the earl near the fireplace.

He actually left Bishop and his beloved little sister standing alone together, leagues away from anyone else.

“You’re still annoyed with me.”

Bishop’s flickering glance was meant to be dismissive. But when his gaze met hers, it held. Against his will and better sense. Against all instinct for self-preservation.

Though her voice had possessed only a hint of challenge, her eyes were filled with it. Bright and verdant with a mysterious darkness all existing harmoniously together. There was a disturbing sort of knowing in her gaze. One that seemed incongruous to one so young. He’d noticed it five years ago and it had only strengthened in his time away.

But he’d strengthened, too.

His resolve. His purpose. His intention.

“Course not,” he replied in as casual a tone as he could manage as he glanced over the room, noting how no one seemed at all concerned that the two of them were engaging in a rather private conversation.

She made a soft snort of disbelief. “Then why else have you been doing your best to avoid even looking at me?”

Though he didn’t see her do it, she must have taken a step closer, because as he met her bold stare, he could now make out the distinct ring of green around the outer edges of her eyes.

He narrowed his gaze, forcing the rush of heat through his body to remain at a low simmer. Then he quirked his mouth

and arched a brow as he allowed his attention to slide down her form. Though he aimed for a long-ago-perfected air of jaunty nonchalance, it was not an easy task as he made note of every dip and curve and line of her slender feminine figure.

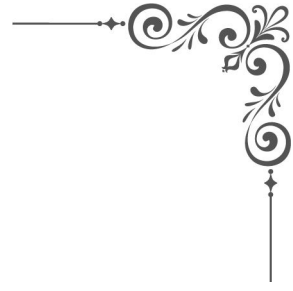
“I’m looking at you now, pet,” he said, his voice coming out lower than he intended. “Do I look annoyed?”

When she didn’t immediately reply, he lifted his gaze back to her face. The gold and green of her eyes swirled around the dark centers and her lips were slightly parted.

“Nay,” she answered in a weighted whisper.

Realizing she’d likely detected the desire in his stare, he forced a grin of cocky insolence. “Remember our agreement. Keep your distance, Miss Claybourne, and there won’t be a problem.”

Not waiting for a reply, he took a deliberate step back to perform a slightly mocking bow before turning to walk away.



Chapter Six

Dinner at Wright House when it was filled with all the Wright siblings and their wives was always guaranteed to be interesting and full of debate. Conversations that might pop up could range from the topic of sheep farming to issues under discussion in the House of Lords before swinging over to a discussion on art or herbology or the plight of children in Whitechapel workhouses. With such different perspectives and backgrounds, there was never a moment that everyone around the table agreed on anything, but there was always a great deal to be learned from each other.

Caillie loved it. The impassioned arguments. The debates. The occasional concessions. The sharing of ideas and experiences that made every one of her brothers and sisters-in-law so unique and wonderful.

She couldn't help but notice that Bishop didn't often engage in the various conversations. Instead, he'd listen with a slightly cocked head and a subtle tilt to his lips, appearing curious but slightly detached. She wondered at it and found herself observing him more often than engaging in the discussions herself, which she usually couldn't resist doing since she typically had an opinion on just about everything. More than once, she noted moments when it seemed Bishop might interject something, but then the corner of his mouth would twitch and his gaze would flicker down to his plate or his wineglass and he'd say nothing.

Even when Emma politely inquired into Bishop's travels, he managed to keep his responses lightly entertaining but vague, revealing nothing but some foggy idea that he'd traveled to various countries both near and far and he'd met loads of interesting people.

Nonanswers as far as Caillie was concerned and certainly not nearly enough to satisfy her increasing curiosity.

As soon as the conversation and attention shifted to something else, his dark stare slid quietly along to table to where she sat still watching him intently. Noting her interest,

he gave a quick, barely perceptible wink. It was cheeky and insolent.

He knew exactly how interested she'd been in his answers.

After the meal, the entire party moved into the drawing room. Emma and Roderick settled at a table with Max and Elle for a game of whist while Colin, Worthy, Anne, and Beynon took up seats on the facing sofas to catch up on all that was new with Beynon's other siblings back in Wales. Caillie sat at the pianoforte to play quietly as she watched the door for Bishop. He'd slipped away as everyone had filed out of the dining room, and though she'd have denied it if asked, she was anxious for his return.

If asked, she also would have vehemently denied a rekindling of her youthful infatuation with the man. What she was experiencing now was nothing more than a healthy curiosity. A man like Bishop, with his brazen swagger and confident, irreverent gaze, couldn't possibly travel the world without having a few adventures worth knowing about. Adventures Caillie would never have a similar opportunity to experience.

Bluidy hell. Imagine if she just up and decided one day to travel about all by herself. She almost laughed out loud. She wasn't even free to drive around the park without a chaperone, let alone explore the world.

Her train of thought threatened to push her into a wee bout of melancholia. To distract herself, she glanced around again for Bishop. But he still hadn't reappeared.

She should go look for him,

Nay, you shouldnae, you nosey lass.

But the seed had been planted. After only a few moments of indecision—well, one moment, perhaps, since Caillie wasn't exactly an indecisive type—she rose from the pianoforte and strolled casually from the room.

It was entirely possible that he'd left the house completely. But she didn't think so.

Following nothing more than her intuition, she chose to venture toward Colin's favorite area of the house. While Worthy preferred the kitchen and Caillie adored the music room, Colin loved his study and the library best. The rooms were located along a short passage at the back of the entry hall. Caillie reached the open door to Colin's study and breathed in the familiar subtle scents of leather and parchment.

She wasn't at all surprised to see Bishop standing with his back to the door as he filled a glass from Colin's liquor service then downed the contents in one swift swallow.

Entering the room, she stepped silently across the plush carpet. Though she didn't make a sound, something must have alerted him to her presence as he suddenly tossed a glance over his shoulder.

He didn't seem any more surprised to see her than she'd been to see him since he just cocked an eyebrow and turned away again.

"You probably shouldn't be here, pet." His tone was slightly admonishing, as though she were a child getting into mischief.

With a sniff, she lengthened her stride and crossed to the bookshelf behind her brother's wide desk. "I've come to fetch a book for Max," she replied, her tone breezy. "I'll be gone again in a moment and you can enjoy your whisky in solitude."

He gave a short, snorting chuckle and she tossed a look his way just in time to see him lifting another glass in a mocking toast before tossing its contents down his throat, looking practically piratical.

Caillie's fingers curled into her palms.

The man was too bluidy attractive.

Forcing herself to make her wee lie a truth, she made a good show of scanning the titles on the bookshelf. Unfortunately, she couldn't manage to read a single thing as every one of her senses was utterly distracted by the man behind her. And a good thing too, or she might not have

detected his approach. As it was, Caillie knew he neared first by the quickening of her pulse when she caught the subtle drift of his scent, then the tensing of her muscles as the air around her warmed by an infinitesimal degree. And lastly, by the dip and swirl of her low belly as every nerve came more alive.

“Why’d you follow me?”

She slowly turned to see him leaning back against Colin’s desk, his arms crossed casually over his chest, a questioning tilt to his head.

Widening her eyes, she added an innocent lilt to her voice. “I dinnae ken what you mean.”

There was a brief pause, then he chuckled—a rich, delicious sound. He lowered his chin and shook his head before lifting his gaze again to pin her with a blunt, knowing stare. His smile was arrogant. Knowing.

“What do you want?” he asked, his tone textured and intimate.

Though Caillie’s body responded acutely to the seductive suggestion of his words, she forced herself to ignore it. Mainly because she didn’t trust it. All the stories of his charm and ease with women—many, many, *many* women—had long ago disabused her of the notion that a man like him might ever hold a single woman above any others. He enjoyed all women. And though she’d often wondered what it might be like to be made love to by a man like him, she reckoned she’d much rather be *loved* by someone constant and true to her alone.

“Well, that’s a verra broad question,” she replied thoughtfully as she leaned back against one of the bookshelves, folding her arms in a similar posture to his. “There are so many things a woman can want. Dancing slippers that dinnae shred to ribbons after one wearing. The ability to go about town without the need for an escort. Freedom from double standards and unwanted lascivious attentions from gentlemen who’ve no bluidy idea how to process the meaning of the word *no*. The opportunity to attend university. And a seat in the Lords or the Commons—either

one. Just to name a few..." she added with a quick curl of her lips. "You may need to be a wee bit more specific."

His lips twisted upward. "Clever," he muttered softly.

Caillie shrugged a shoulder in acknowledgement of the compliment. "And true," she replied, boldly holding his gaze. "Why didnae you talk more freely of your travels?"

Her blunt question seemed to surprise him. But only for a moment.

"Why is the topic of such interest to you?"

Knowing she couldn't fairly expect truth from him if she wasn't willing to give it herself, she flashed a rueful smile. "Mayhap because I ken I'm never likely to experience the same for myself."

"Do you desire travel?"

She gave another little shrug. "Mayhap I'd simply like the option."

He glanced toward the door with a tip of his head. "Somehow, I can't imagine your doting brothers denying you a little holiday on the Continent."

"But that isnae what we're talking about, is it?" she countered. When his brows dipped, she continued with amusement in her tone, "Did you encounter many women adventurers during your travels? Ladies exploring the world with no one to answer to? Alone, without any risk to their person or welfare?"

"Even a man traveling alone puts himself at some risk."

"But not in the same way as a woman," Caillie countered.

After a pause, he replied, "No. Not as a woman."

Caillie was surprised by his agreement. She gave a short little laugh then sighed. "Aye, then. So, you didnae travel alone?"

His eyes narrowed a bit at her deduction, but he nodded. "I didn't."

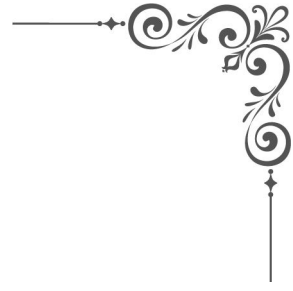
“Hmm.” An odd tightening wrapped around her chest.

Jealousy.

She hadn't experienced it since she'd been young and thought Bishop to be the epitome of all that was exciting and desirable. And all that was undeniably out of her reach. That it should return now—and so poignantly—was decidedly not appreciated. She had no wish to fall back onto that lovelorn path.

Flashing a teasing grin, she straightened and unfolded her arms. When he unfolded his arms as well, lowering his hands to curl his fingers lightly around the edge of the desk on each side of his hips, her belly twisted. “Of course you weren't alone. I reckon you were constantly surrounded by a bevy of lovely adventuresses.”

After the flippant comment, she turned and gave him her back, reclaiming her pretense of wanting to find a book. As soon as he could no longer see her face, she squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to dispel the image of Bishop surrounded by women with bold gazes and fearless smiles.



Chapter Seven

Bishop tightened his grip around the edge of the desk. He knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't stop himself from sliding his gaze down the graceful line of her neck and the long slope of her spine. The swell of her hips was gentle beneath the silken fall of her gown, but still, his body tensed with the sudden urge to reach for her. To grasp her around the waist and haul her back into his lap.

Control yourself. She's not for you.

But then she lifted her hand to run her fingertips along a row of books and his mind conjured the sensation of those fingers trailing delicately over his body.

Say something. Anything.

"Why my bedroom?"

When she gave a subtle flinch, he realized his question seemed to come out of nowhere. But the issue had been bothering him. Why *had* she decided to use his room at Bentley's?

She paused then gave a brief peek over her bare, slim shoulder. "I dinnae ken—"

"Yes, you do," he interrupted.

She smiled and turned back to face him. Her expression was secretive without being coy. Amused but also a bit challenging.

He was undeniably intrigued.

"Your *old* room happened to be best suited to my purposes."

He arched a brow. "What purposes?"

He couldn't help but think of his bedroom's proximity to the brothel which occupied the west wing of the club and how well it had suited his admittedly carnal and selfish purposes during his previous occupancy.

The smile she gave him then was slow and full of mischief. “Trust me, you dinnae really want to ken.”

As if compelled by some force beyond himself—beyond reason—Bishop rose to his full height and took a measured step toward her. There was a flicker in her eyes, but nothing else. Even her smile remained unfaltering. Holding her gaze, he took another step. Then another. Until he was close enough to extend his hand and brace himself on a shelf at a height with her head. Then he leaned forward—slowly—bringing his face to within a few bare inches of hers.

He had no idea why he was taunting her like this. Taunting himself. Pushing against some unseen boundary that was best left alone. He knew damned well it was a bad idea.

Yet here he was...

Close enough for the heady scent of roses to soak into his jacket and torture him later.

Close enough to hear the subtle catch in her throat when her attention flickered ever so fucking briefly to his mouth before rising stubbornly back to meet his gaze.

“Why not?” he asked, bringing them back to the conversation.

She took a long breath, then squared her shoulders. “If you kent what you shouldnae,” she answered slowly, her voice a husky whisper, “you’d verra likely feel compelled to tell Roderick. And then *I’d* be forced to tell him something, as well.”

Bold.

He flashed a cocky grin. “You honestly think you can manipulate me, pet? You’re wading into dangerous waters.”

She lifted and dropped one shoulder. “I can swim well enough.”

Her tone was annoyingly unconcerned, but the casual gesture drew his gaze down to the shadowed line of her collarbone, then lower...to the gentle swell of cleavage above the neckline of her gown.

His stomach tightened as he lifted his gaze back to hers and lowered his voice to a heavy warning. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking you can *manage* me, sweetheart.”

“I’ve been *managing* four exceptionally smart and stubborn older brothers since I was a child.” She narrowed her flashing gaze and her tone was almost intimate in its subtle arrogance. “Dinnae make the mistake of underestimating me.” Then she tilted her head to a curious angle and whispered, “Why are you here, Bishop Black?”

“I wanted a whisky.”

Her half smile twitched. “In London, not Colin’s study.”

He couldn’t help but smile in return. “Why so bloody curious?”

“Why so *bluidy evasive*?” she countered, a hint of frustration entering her tone.

The woman really didn’t like being thwarted, which—unfortunately for her—only made him want to thwart her more.

“I’ll find out eventually,” she noted simply. Confidently.

Bishop tipped his head toward her. “So will I,” he promised, referencing her own secrets. And she must have at least partially believed him because a flicker of defiance crossed her lovely features.

“Only if I allow it.”

Bishop had never realized just how attractive confidence could be until he saw it glimmer so brightly in this woman’s eyes. It fired his blood even as it also sparked something unprecedented. *Concern*.

“If whatever you’re doing is even the slightest bit dangerous,” he noted gruffly, “I’ll have to put a stop to it.”

Rather than being properly wary of his quiet warning, she gave a short little laugh then shook her head in mock dismay. “Have you forgotten that I’m a woman?” *As if he possibly could*. “Everything is a wee bit dangerous. But I warned you about underestimating me, Bishop Black,” she whispered in a

voice that made him think of a warm breeze disguising a hurricane. “You have absolutely no bluidy say in what I do or dinnae do.”

She was right. He had no claim on her. But that didn’t mean he’d let her go about engaging in anything that could be harmful to her or her future—such as sneaking about in a gentleman’s club.

“It seems that someone should.”

She sighed, and for a second, she looked disappointed.

“You do realize I’m fully grown and perfectly capable of managing my interests without everyone fluttering in distress over my well-being and safety and whatnot? Any young man my age would be off touring the continent. He’d be expected to test his limits and experience life unfettered. Without an escort, I might add.” She gave another shake of her head. “It’s a shame, really. I’d hoped you might be different. But...wishes and horses and all that.”

With another sigh, she lifted her hand to press it against his chest, clearly intending to push him back enough so she could step away.

But he wasn’t ready to let her go. Even as he did it, he knew he shouldn’t. He knew that stopping her now would be a mistake—*touching* her would be a mistake.

He did it anyway.

Instead of giving her more space, he leaned into the pressure of her hand, stopping just shy of pressing his body full length to hers as she leaned back against the bookshelves.

Her soft gasp of surprise was followed by a sudden exhale that warmed his throat with her sweet breath. But other than that, she gave no reaction. No indication of fear or wariness or even annoyance. No further attempt to push him away. Instead, she tipped her head back and met his gaze with a lifted brow.

“I *am* different,” he murmured thickly. Different from who he’d been when he’d left five years ago and different from who she thought him to be.

As though considering the truth of his words, she slid a carefully assessing gaze over his face, pausing at the hard line of his mouth before lifting again to meet his stare. She parted her lips on a soft breath. “Are you?”

The challenge in her tone—the sultry pride—crashed through him with more force than he was prepared to handle, leaving him defenseless against the spear of lust that shot painfully through his core. Just when he thought he’d been doing such a damned fine job of holding his desire at bay, the urge to kiss her rushed through him like a tidal wave.

At another time in his life, and if she were anyone other than who she was, he’d have dove headfirst into the warm, turbulent waters.

Instead, his entire body tensed in his effort to resist the enticing challenge in her half smile and her rose-water scent and the way she gazed back at him as if she wanted to crawl into his mind.

A raw and ragged sound slid from his throat.

What the fuck was he doing?

Muttering a crude curse, he shoved off from the bookshelf with enough force to cause the thing to teeter as several books fell to the floor. The look in her eyes then was impossible to read. There was just far too much swirling about in the gold and green shadows.

“Keep your secrets,” he drawled in a tone he intended to sound lightly dismissive. Unfortunately, there was too much sexual frustration in his voice to allow for any hint of lightness. “I’ve no need for them.”

Then he turned and left her there. With her eyes bright and her lips parted in surprise. It would have been a quick, clean exit if not for her barely audible whisper.

“Coward.”

She wasn’t wrong.

His strides were long and heavy as he left the room and continued down the short passage to the entry hall. Ignoring

the sounds of voices raised in family revelry, he collected his coat and hat then continued right out the front door.



AS SOON AS BISHOP'S footsteps faded away, Caillie did her best to steady herself.

Bluidy hell. That had been interesting.

For one breathless moment, she'd thought he was going to kiss her again. And heaven help her, she'd wanted him to. With the desperation of a young girl yearning for the lips of her first love.

But then, with the sudden force of a slamming door, his entire demeanor had changed. He'd pulled back from her so suddenly, she was still shaken from the loss.

No doubt, it was for the best that he'd left her. Despite her brave words, she'd believed him when he'd claimed to be different.

Foolish.

Bishop Black's return had already started to turn her world upside down. A world she'd carefully cultivated and shaped and grown into something she was proud of. She couldn't allow him to sabotage that. Intentionally or otherwise.

Pressing a hand to her chest in an attempt to slow her racing heart, she took a fortifying breath then bent forward to retrieve the fallen books littering the floor at her feet. When she turned to replace them on the shelf, she noted another book—slim and small—peeking out from the empty space from behind the other volumes. It must have slid behind the other books at some point to become lost and forgotten. It took her a few moments to maneuver the small book free then replace the fallen items, but when she had a chance to finally get a good look at the recovered book, she recognized it in an instant.

Well, not *it* exactly, but she recognized it as part of a familiar set.

A chill ran up her spine and an odd trembling made her hands suddenly unsteady.

The man who'd sired her and her brothers had kept a collection of journals documenting his wicked plan to beget as many children as possible outside the bonds of his marriage as a vengeful plot against his faithless wife.

Some years ago, Caillie had read through the journals. A small part of her had been compelled to try to understand a father she'd never known. Unfortunately, the man's own words had revealed very little of himself beyond his obsessive focus on hurting those around him as he deliberately seduced women for the sole purpose of siring bastards. Once he received confirmation that a child had been conceived, the wretched man had nothing more to do with the mothers or his misbegotten children. His journals documented every attempt and every success as proof of his endeavors. He wanted to ensure his wife, Colin's mother, could not be left in any doubt that the bastards were his.

The prior Earl of Wright's life had been dedicated to a pointless obsession. The wife he'd wanted to hurt couldn't have cared less about her estranged husband's exploits. And the children he'd so carelessly scattered across Britain had been brought together after his death by his only legitimate son. Colin had managed to create a true family out of their shared father's vengeance. And Caillie was forever grateful.

Turning the journal over in her hands, she realized that although it certainly matched the others, the cloth covering wasn't nearly as faded or worn. It would seem this volume might have been stuck behind the other books for some time. Years or decades, even.

Opening to the first page, she noted the date at the top.

August 7, 1802

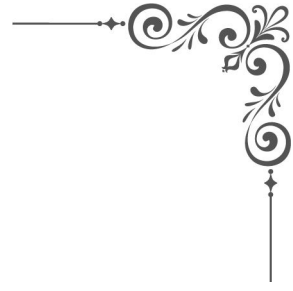
Her stomach flipped. The journal was dated several years before her own conception and birth, yet after Max's. She thought back to the other volumes, trying to recall if there had been a gap in time, but she couldn't be sure. Surely, she'd have noticed. Wouldn't she?

Her mind whirling with the possible implications another journal suggested, Caillie was tempted to plop right down in Colin's desk chair to start reading.

But she couldn't. Not right now. Not with the drawing room still full of family, any one of whom would soon notice her absence and come looking for her.

For some reason, she wanted to keep this unexpected discovery to herself. At least until she knew if the journal contained anything pertinent, such as, oh...*evidence of another possible sibling!*

Heart racing, she tucked the book behind her back as she approached the doorway and glanced out into the hall. Seeing no one about, she quickly crept to a nearby alcove which displayed an antique vase on a finely carved pedestal. Propping the book out of sight behind the vase where she could retrieve it later, she strolled back toward the party. Thoughts of Bishop were shoved to the back of her mind as she did her very best not to look as though she'd just discovered something potentially amazing.



Chapter Eight

After leaving Wright House, Bishop took a long, roundabout walk, circling around Mayfair on his way back toward St. James, where Bentley's was located. It took far longer than it should have to get the bold Miss Cailleach Claybourne out of his mind. He kept seeing her brazen stare, flashing in a way that was both light and dark. Intense and full of depth. And he'd been right about her scent permeating his clothing. The sweet, heady hint of roses wouldn't release him. And neither would the low hum of desire that seemed to have taken up a permanent home within his core.

By the time he got to the club, he was almost desperate for a distraction.

Luckily, the club's evening activities were in full swing and the gaming room was crowded with patrons. Many of the members, Bishop recognized. Some, he didn't. It was the first time he'd ever strolled amongst the various tables as a guest rather than as one of Bentley's staff. Just as everything else he'd experienced since his return, the excitement and energy of the gaming floor felt familiar yet different.

In the past, when he'd walked amongst the elite gentlemen who made up the membership—men of undeniable wealth and privilege—it had been impossible not to acknowledge the differences in class, background, wealth, history, experience, and so many other things that separated himself from those men. He'd accepted it as due course at the time. They were lords and peers of the realm, born into a way of life he couldn't imagine, while he'd been born in the slums and raised in brothels. They were practically different species.

Now...the differences between them and him were still starkly apparent. But Bishop could no longer see why that should hold them so separate. What good could come from so strictly adhering to such arbitrary boundaries? How were men to share new ideas and learn from each other if they only ever associated with people of similar circumstance who possessed the same ideologies and priorities?

If his travels had taught him anything, it was that the world was limitless when it came to fascinating people to know, things to learn, and places to go. The world was far too broad to limit oneself to a single tier of society. The culture of humanity should be about bringing people together in order to expand experiences and expose oneself to things beyond the original scope of one's own life.

If he could bring about even just a small expression of that ideal, Bishop felt as though his experiences on the streets of London, within the walls of Bentley's, and across various countries might have some true merit. And he couldn't wait to get started.

Though he got to bed rather late, slightly foxed and a bit richer from his skill at the tables, he rose early and with purpose.

Even before his return to London, he'd begun corresponding with a Mr. Linus Clarke. As Roderick's solicitor for many years, Mr. Clarke had handled a variety of legal issues on behalf of the club and there wasn't a man Bishop trusted more to address his business needs.

He'd sent the man a note yesterday, advising that he was back in town and was anxious to view the properties Clarke had sought out on Bishop's behalf. They'd arranged to view three potential locations that afternoon.

The first two properties weren't quite the right fit for Bishop's somewhat specific needs.

The last place, however...was very simply perfect.

The second he stepped from the carriage to the Strand and gazed up at the broad edifice built of cream-colored brick with white trim, he just gotten a feeling. Originally constructed as a personal residence, the mansion had gone through various changes over the last several decades. Mr. Clarke explained that it had remained empty for years after its original residents moved to a larger property farther east in the city. Then it was converted for use as government offices for a few decades, then a meeting place for political discourse. Most recently,

someone had started shaping the building as a hotel but ceased their efforts midway through the reconstruction.

And that was how it remained. Half-old, half-new. Some rooms retained elements of the sophisticated elegance from their original design while other areas had been gutted and partially reformed with modern conveniences and a contemporary style. On first glance, most prospective buyers would likely see a disaster of a building.

But Bishop saw everything he was looking for.

The main drawing room was an ideal setting for casual gatherings and easy conversation. There was no need to alter the kitchens that had been expanded and updated by the hotelier. The dining room was already sufficiently grand to present modern fare to numerous guests. Although the various parlors and salons would have to be redesigned to host private parties or other featured entertainments, the elegant conservatory was perfectly suited for the gambling tables. There was a long upstairs gallery suitable to display the work of various artists and a ballroom in which to host grand events. And it would only take a little work to reform the upper-level bedrooms into suites available for lengthy guest stays.

Even the location couldn't be more appropriate. The property was surrounded by similar transformations as the area continued to undergo a longtime shift in focus from residential to something...new. The neighborhood abounded with theaters, coffee houses, chop houses, and hotels. The area was also known for its many book publishers and print houses, not to mention the newly founded King's College.

The energy and a diversity of purpose along the Strand excited Bishop in a way nothing else could have. It was exactly what he wanted to bring within the walls of his club.

Though he was tempted to tell Clarke then and there that he'd buy the place, he wanted to confirm some important details before making a final decision on the property. As he left Mr. Clarke with a handshake and a promise to contact him soon, it was difficult for Bishop to keep a neutral expression.

His place was going to be more than a social club or gambling house. Though it would have the amenities typically associated with exclusive clubs of the aristocracy, it would be open to all who followed his simple rules of conduct. It would be a comfortable shelter where men could indulge in casual conversation with their peers, where they could relax amongst friends and meet new ones. Where they could discuss their passions and broaden their perspectives. He wanted his club to appeal to scholars and artists and tradesmen alike. A place for men who walked different paths through life to come together. To strengthen themselves and each other through social discourse.

He wanted to support the idea that people were not actually so different from each other. Whether of different nationalities or different social strata or different political leanings, human beings all shared the same worries, passions, fears, and hopes.

He wanted to create a place where differences were overcome by commonalities.

Bishop was so distracted by his thoughts and plans as he drove back toward Bentley's that he almost didn't even register the sight of a familiar young lady striding briskly along the street.

And then once he did, he discounted it immediately.

There was absolutely no reason for Cailleach Claybourne to be walking *alone* through Covent Garden. Surely, it was a different woman with a tall, slim form dressed in a lilac-colored frock with warm brown hair tucked beneath a fashionable bonnet walking along in that confident, purposeful manner.

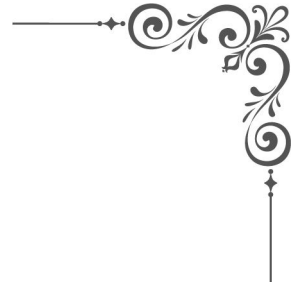
But he couldn't glance away, and in the next second, as his carriage passed, the lady in question turned enough for him to catch a full glimpse of her face. There was no mistaking that wide mouth and those rich hazel eyes.

"Bloody hell."

Even as he knocked on the carriage wall to signal the driver to stop, he watched as the woman boldly turned into a coffee house and disappeared inside.

What in hell was she doing here? There was no way the earl would allow her to visit a coffee house in Covent Garden without an escort.

Bishop didn't even wait until the carriage came to a complete stop before he leapt to the pavement and started down the street in long strides.



Chapter Nine

The coffee house was dimly lit and hazy with tobacco smoke. At first, all Bishop could make out were dark paneled walls and vague human figures milling about. Though the establishment was of modest size, the place boasted nearly a dozen tables crammed together in the open room surrounding a large stone hearth. And each table overflowed with patrons. Some sat quietly, leaning close over their steaming mugs as they muttered in lowered tones. Others nearly shouted at each other in their attempts to be heard over the constant din of conversation and occasional bursts of laughter that filled the space.

Most coffee houses still didn't allow women and this one didn't appear to be one of the exceptions. There wasn't a bonnet or petticoat to be seen anywhere in the place. But he hadn't taken his eyes off Cailleach once he spotted her along the street, and he was damned certain she'd entered this place. So, where in hell was the chit?

And why did she think this a proper place for a young lady to visit?

While coffee houses were popular venues for people with common interests to gather in casual socialization, they were also notorious for being breeding grounds for rebellious ideas, political plots, and criminal activity. The rougher the neighborhood, the rife with rebellion and discord the coffee house.

And Covent Garden was a far cry from the tranquility of Mayfair.

A second deep scan of the room still revealed no sign of a lady's fine purple gown, but Bishop's eyes had finally adjusted enough to the darkened atmosphere to notice a row of tall-backed wooden booths along the back wall. The booths were deep in shadow and disappeared around the other side of the large stone hearth.

As he cut through the crowded front room to get a closer look at the occupants of those booths, he heard the soft trill of female laughter threading gently through the steady roll of masculine voices. The first laugh was followed swiftly by one that was a bit lower and huskier but no less feminine. It was a sound that instantly made his stomach tighten and his blood run faster.

She *was* here.

There.

The private corner booth, completely hidden from view of the front door and most of the common room.

Forcing himself to a far more casual manner than his instinct urged, Bishop approached in a way that allowed him to get a good look at the table's occupants before they noticed his presence.

He spotted Cailleach right away.

She sat at one end of the half-circle booth with her forearms resting on the table and her hands wrapped around a cup of coffee. Her face angled slightly away from him, but he could tell by the curve of her cheek that she was still grinning widely in response to the conversation engaging their group of five ladies in total.

Beside her was an older woman with a slightly hawkish nose and obvious strands of gray in her dark hair. In the center of the group sat the current speaker, a much younger girl—perhaps even younger than Cailleach—with large dark eyes and a subtle but visible scar that ran along the side of her face from temple to chin. The fourth woman wore a bonnet with a concealing veil over her face, but it was obvious that she possessed the kind of grace and refinement that couldn't be faked. Another lady venturing too far from Mayfair, perhaps? The last member of their group was uncomfortably familiar with her bold red hair and even bolder, redder lips.



CAILLIE WIPED A TEAR from her eye as she gasped for breath.

Lucy had a way of turning the most mundane occurrences into tales of unexpected hilarity. The lass was bluidy gifted.

Mrs. Flynn leaned forward to pat Lucy's hand. In a level tone of gentle comfort, she noted, "At least the pigeon wasn't harmed, my dear."

The comment threw them all into another fit of laughter. But the laughter quickly died an odd and unnatural death. As Caillie looked around at her friends, she noticed them staring—wide-eyed and tense, except for Marianne, who sported a secretive little smile—at a spot some distance above Caillie's left shoulder.

With a start, she turned to look at whatever had captured their attention and nearly shrieked in startlement as she found herself staring up into Bishop's handsome face. He stood with one shoulder leaning against the backrest of the booth and an almost lazy smile curving his delicious lips, but there was something unnerving swirling about in his chocolatey-brown gaze.

Dammit. Why on earth was he here?

Forcing an easy smile of her own, Caillie tipped her chin back to look more directly up at him as he loomed over her. "Mr. Black, what a lovely surprise."

"Ain't it though," he replied casually before sweeping a glance over the others in her group. "Hello, ladies," he added with a short tilt of his head.

Though Caillie's friends all murmured proper responses, she could see they were slightly uncertain and undeniably curious about what this encounter was about.

Except for Ruby, who was looking up at Bishop with a twinkle of mischief in her eyes and sly little smile. "Hiya, Bishop. It's been a while, ain't it?"

Caillie nearly bit her lip in amusement at the subtle flicker of discomfort in Bishop's gaze as he looked at Ruby.

Oh goodness, he didnae remember her.

Caillie was well aware of Bishop's frequent fraternizing with Mrs. Beaumont's ladies of the west wing, but if she remembered correctly, Ruby had only been at the club a short while before Bishop had left. Obviously, enough time for him to have paid her a visit, but perhaps not long enough for the occurrence to be memorable.

Worried that Ruby might be injured by Bishop's forgetfulness, she glanced to the woman across from her. But she needn't have worried. Ruby took just about everything with the pragmatism of a seasoned realist and managed to find a trace of humor in even the most painful situations. It was one of her greatest strengths and Caillie admired her immensely for it.

At present, Ruby was pressing her red lips together in a suggestive pout and her eyes glittered with amusement as she awaited Bishop's reply.

When the man stepped toward the former prostitute, now the exclusive courtesan to one of the richest men in town, and took up her hand to raise it to his lips, Caillie tensed despite herself. She didn't miss the roguish smile that touched his mouth nor the quick wink he gave Ruby as he whispered in a tone Caillie had to strain to hear.

"Too long, Ruby, my jewel."

He remembered her after all. For some reason, the fact caused a distressing twist in Caillie's stomach.

The courtesan's smile was full of quiet satisfaction as Bishop released her hand and straightened. Then he tossed a charismatic grin over the rest of the table's occupants. "I'm curious what purpose such a lovely group could have to meet in such an *unexpected* establishment."

"Needlepoint," Caillie replied readily and firmly with a smile.

His brow arced. "Needlepoint?"

"Yes," she asserted, giving a quick glance around the table, inspiring the other ladies to reach into their laps or pockets or reticules and pull out small bits of fabric and thread and

embroidery in varying states of completion and skill. “We’re a sewing circle.”

Bishop glanced around the table with a starkly dubious expression, but there wasn’t much he could say about it when the ladies stared right back at him, smiles curving their mouths.

“Well,” he said to the group as a whole, “while I’m deeply sorry to interrupt your industrious little gathering”—Caillie clenched her teeth at the dismissive tone in his voice—“I’d like to have a private word with Miss Claybourne, if you don’t mind.”

“It seems to me that it’s far more important whether Miss Claybourne minds or not.”

Caillie grinned at her sister-in-law. Leave it to Elle to voice such a thing with undeniable elegance and quiet ferocity despite being fully veiled.

Bishop arched a brow at Elle’s admonishment but then responded with an acknowledging tug of his forelock.

“Miss Claybourne?” he inquired, amusement curling his lips.

Rising to her feet with a dramatic sigh, she set her embroidery circle containing a wretched attempt at a sunflower on the table. “Verra well, Mr. Black. This way.”

She headed toward the short hallway leading to the coffee house’s private rooms. She and her friends occasionally made use of the back rooms when their talks revolved around more...sensitive topics, so she was familiar with the layout. Turning into the first small room, she stopped only a few steps past the threshold before turning to face the man behind her with an overly pleasant smile.

“I’d ask what you want to say to me, but I reckon I already ken.”

His sigh was rough and deep. With a shake of his head, he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. The posture was deceptively casual while effectively blocking her from an easy exit. When he spoke, his

tone was laced with disapproval. “What in hell are you doing here?”

“Sewing.” She tilted her head. “Havenae we been over this?”

“Why *here*?”

“My friends and I enjoy coffee. And this happens to be a coffee house.”

“A coffee house in *Covent Garden*.”

Widening her eyes, Caillie exclaimed. “Oh! Is that where we are?”

He stood oddly still, staring at her while he took a long, deep breath.

Caillie said nothing, waiting patiently to see if he intended to lecture her or if he’d finally realized such a thing would be utterly fruitless.

But then, something flickered in his eyes...like a candle coming to life in the darkness.

Almost as though against his will, his gaze left hers to send a swift glance over her person. Touching on certain details of her form with sudden acute interest before he seemed to catch himself. Giving a rough shake of his head, he brought his intense stare to hers once again.

But the damage had been done.

Her body was aflame. Her belly fluttered and her heart had set to racing.

“You’re flirting with trouble,” he said in a low voice. “You don’t belong in a place like this.”

She rolled her eyes and threw up her hands. “Just where do I belong, then? Perched on a pillow in a quiet little sitting room where I can engage in those delicate pursuits someone decided long ago were the only appropriate hobbies for young ladies?” Striding toward him, she continued, “Well, I happen to like noisy, boisterous places where people talk too loud and laugh with their whole bellies. I want to discuss things like

politics and geology and maybe place a bet on who will win Frankie and Georgie's daily arm-wrestling match."

Bishop's eyebrows arched at that, but he remained silent, and for a moment, it actually felt like he was listening to her.

"I'm not a wee lass in need of constant supervision and protection. Is it so hard to imagine that I might want to be afforded the same amount of respect and confidence men take for granted?"

His brows furrowed. "This is different."

"Is it, though?" Caillie continued to challenge. "All I'm doing to having coffee with some friends. Hardly a thing worthy of concern."

He shook his head. "If you were in Mayfair, perhaps. But Covent Garden can be a dangerous place. It's rife with thieves and worse who'd easily take advantage of a naïve young woman."

Caillie had to laugh. "I'm sorry, but I dinnae think I've ever been naïve. Not even when I *was* a wee lass."

She wasn't sure if it was her amusement that irritated him more or her refusal to heed his warning, but something shifted in him. His eyes narrowed as he pushed away from the doorframe and started toward her. There was tension in his body and frustration in the press of his mouth.

She could understand. She was frustrated, as well, and refused to step back as he approached.

"Not naïve?" His voice was low and weighted as his focus smoothed over her face before settling heavily on her lips. "Then how in hell did I manage to get my hands on you? Twice."

Caillie parted her lips on a soft inhale. "So, you *do* remember that kiss on the stairs," she whispered.

His dark gaze lifted swiftly back to meet hers. "Of course I remember." He took another step closer. "You didn't even try to stop me."

A thrill raced through her, making her nerves tingle with fire. She couldn't seem to decide where she wanted to look more. His dark, penetrating gaze. Or his perfectly arched lips.

She also had another choice to make.

Deflect the conversation to protect that vulnerable girl who'd once thought herself in love with him? Or be bold and honest?

"Now, who's being naïve?" she asked softly as she shook her head with a rueful smile. "Didnae it ever occur to you that I didnae want you to stop?"

A dark sound seemed to get caught somewhere in his chest. His eyes dropped again to her mouth and his hands lifted briefly—as if he intended to reach out for her and grasp her to him...or perhaps force her away. In that moment, her entire being felt held in suspension. Breathless. Anticipating. But he stopped himself from doing either, curling his hands into fists as he lowered them back to his sides.

Caillie clenched her teeth. A shiver of loss coursed through her.

Then he slowly shook his head and took a step back. A subtly sardonic smirk curled his lips. "And that proves my point," he murmured. "If you knew anything of the world, kisses from me would be the last thing you'd want."

She gazed back at him defiantly. "Dinnae dare to tell me what I want."

His smirk widened into an irreverent grin, but his stare was dark and forbidding. Taking a step back, he murmured, "Go back to your sewing circle, pet."

The words could easily have sounded dismissive and belittling, but Caillie heard something else in his layered tone. Something that didn't make sense at all.

And then he was gone.



THOUGH HE LEFT THE coffee house, Bishop only went so far as to find an unoccupied stoop tucked into a shadowed alley from which he could watch the entrance to ensure Cailleach left safely. She claimed not to need protection, but she was going to get it regardless. There were far too many dangers lurking about and he'd never forgive himself if something were to happen that he could've prevented.

Something like kissing her again.

His fist clenched his hands.

Bloody hell, what was it about her that pushed him so close to the blasted edge?

Everything. It was everything about her. Her strength and sass. The flame of rebellion in her steady gaze and the brazen confidence in her smile. Absolutely everything about Cailleach Claybourne fired his blood.

Dammit. He had to get a better hold on himself. If he truly believed he'd become a different man in his years away, this was how to prove it to himself. If he could resist his desire for Cailleach Claybourne, he could surely accomplish anything.

Nearly two hours passed before she stepped from the building in the company of her friends. Ruby left first, waving a quick goodbye before driving off in a fine-looking carriage with matched horses. The rest of their group strolled together down the street, as though in no hurry to part from each other's company. Cailleach and the veiled woman walked together with linked arms as the other two followed a couple steps behind, still engaged in an apparently robust conversation. None of the women seemed to notice that a man left the coffee house immediately after them, following closely on their heels. A very tall, obscenely muscled man.

Bishop didn't hesitate. Leaving the shadowed stoop, he darted from the alley. His stomach clenched as another man—not as burly but stealthier than the first—simply materialized beside the women, who continued to stroll down the street, utterly unaware of the encroaching threat. A half second later, another bloke slid out from an alley ahead of them, matching their pace.

Panic swept through him. His ground-eating stride became a full-out run as he dashed forward, intent on reaching them before these men could take further action.

Bishop was still some distance away when the entire party stopped. The now four men who were essentially surrounding the group of women also stopped. But they made no move to attack. In fact, their gazes were trained outward. One of them pinned a sharp forbidding stare in Bishop's direction.

Bishop realized his mistake in an instant and came to a jolting stop.

And then the veiled woman lifted her face covering to lean toward Cailleach as they exchanged a quick embrace.

It was Max Owen's wife and sister-in-law to Cailleach and Roderick.

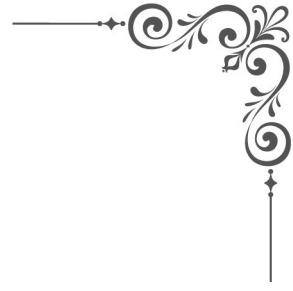
Shite.

After embracing the other women, Cailleach turned to climb into a hack that had apparently been waiting for her. The youngest of the other ladies climbed in behind her. As they drove off, the four men escorted Owen's wife and the older woman to another larger vehicle.

They'd been under the vigilant guard of Owen's men the whole time. It explained the veil. No doubt Owen had any number of enemies throughout London. People who'd love to take revenge by enacting some crime against his beloved wife.

Bishop made his way to his own vehicle. Although annoyed that she didn't just tell him that she was being well protected, he grudgingly had to admit that perhaps Cailleach wasn't as reckless or naïve as he'd assumed.

And the possibility of *that* bloody terrified him.



Chapter Ten

Caillie loved a rousing good party and tonight's little soiree was expected to be exactly that.

Hosted by Mr. Marcus Lowth, younger brother to the Viscount Tindall, the gathering would likely include guests of the more scandalous side of the beau monde as well as the demi monde. Mr. Lowth was a long-standing member of Bentley's club and though Caillie had never been introduced directly to the man, she'd overheard things here and there to determine he was a very well-liked fellow with a strong taste for the wilder side of life.

If given the opportunity, Caillie suspected the two of them would likely get along famously. Tonight, however, there was another man entirely whose acquaintance she intended to make.

She arrived at Lowth's townhouse to see the party in full swing. Light shone from nearly every window in the house and the sound of music and overlapping voices raised in revelry greeted her the second the door was opened.

An added benefit to the less-than-respectable nature of the gathering was that no one seemed the slightest bit concerned that she had arrived without an escort. Not the butler who let her in or the footman who took her cloak or any of the other guests she passed by as she followed the sounds of revelry up the open staircase to the second floor. Not a single person glanced her over with a pinched look of disapproval or silent judgement. And certainly no one tried to lecture her about the impropriety of her presence at the party of a known rake well after midnight without a chaperone of any kind.

It was...liberating.

Though Caillie had received a proper social come-out at eighteen, it had always been expected that even with the Earl of Wright's full and weighty support, there would be a number of those in polite society who would never accept Cailleach Claybourne due to her illegitimate birth. She'd readily

accepted that inescapable fact and had enjoyed a full social life despite it. There were still plenty of doors open to her and she'd made countless acquaintances amongst the ton and a few good friends as well.

But over the years, as she'd attended an endless stream of social events with Colin and Worthy or Roderick and Emma or even Emma's sisters, who occasionally stepped in as chaperones, Caillie had come to the realization that high society wasn't necessarily where she belonged. Far too often, she'd felt herself putting on a mask to act a certain part when amongst the ton. The subtle masquerade went against every natural inclination she possessed.

Within the first three minutes after walking through Lowth's front door, however, Caillie found herself relaxing her sedate social stride to a more casual gait. She also allowed a more honest smile to widen her lips as she continued along an upper-level hallway toward a set of double doors that were thrown wide open to the glitter and energy of the party within.

The large room, obviously intended to be used as a drawing room, was gently illuminated by the soft, flickering glow of candlelight from an impressive chandelier which had only been partially lit. The intentional choice gave the somewhat expansive space a more intimate feel. Sofas and chairs and small end tables, which were likely typically arranged throughout the room in conversational arrangements, had all been pushed outward to line the walls. Obviously, to make space for the raised stage which had been placed in the center of the room. Performing on the stage was a small troupe of acrobats and contortionists. Caillie had seen a similar performance at a fair once, but tonight's show was significantly different in that both the male and female performers were clad in little more than loincloths and sashes and their movements were deeply, undeniably sensual.

It was impossible not to pause and watch the almost dreamlike way they positioned themselves against and around each other in a dance that was saturated with a sort of primal physicality. The strength and grace and utter trust required of every member of the troupe was simply beautiful to observe.

And Caillie wasn't the only guest in attendance who'd crept close around the stage to watch the fascinating performance.

Caillie noticed with a rush of delight that there was an equal balance of men and women present. Men and women of all sorts. Caillie recognized several members of the ton—earls and marquesses, viscountesses, and even a duchess. But they didn't look as they did when out in London society. There were no stiff smiles or forced postures. Cravats were loosened, inhibitions were even more loosened, and a general sense of ease and gaiety filled the air. No doubt, encouraged by a generous flow of champagne and spirits.

A flow Caillie eagerly engaged in as a footman passed by with a tray of glasses.

She would have loved to watch more of the sensual performers, but she'd come here with a specific purpose and there was only so long she could afford to be away from the house. Neda would do her best to circumvent any chances of Caillie's absence being discovered, but Caillie would have to be home before dawn and sunrise was only a few hours off.

Sipping freely of the bubbly wine she adored, she wandered through the shifting crowd. Giving a smile or nod to those who acknowledged her presence in the same congenial way, she scanned the room for her target. A few discreet but effective inquiries had assured that the man she sought would be attending this party tonight.

Just as her impatience and anxiety began to tick upward, her attention was drawn toward a far corner of the room where a door opened to allow the entrance of a gorgeous woman with a full, bouncing figure. Her cheeks were flushed and a rather satisfied smile curved her lips as she desperately tried to right a very askew bodice while simultaneously attempting to tuck a few stray curls back into a scattered coiffure. The lady coyly glanced back to blow a quick kiss over her shoulder before rushing forward to blend into the crowd.

A moment later, another guest came through the same door.

The man Caillie had been looking for.

Her breath caught on a quick and sudden inhale and she found herself unable to look away as the tall, broad-shouldered young gentleman sauntered into the room. He casually swiped his hand over his mouth before giving a sharp tug to his impeccably cut evening coat. A sparkle of wickedness flashed in his gaze and wry amusement twisted his mouth.

The Honorable Mr. Reginald Vane, heir to a viscount, and one half of a pair of brothers known about town as the Villainous Vanes, also often called The *Dishonorables*. This one, a conscienceless rake beyond compare. And the other, a broody figure rumored to be prone to bursts of anger and violence.

Caillie had only caught distant glimpses of the Villainous Vanes since her debut considering they certainly didn't move in circles appropriate for young ladies, but their reputations had fascinated her for years.

Though she knew her curiosity was likely quite obvious, Caillie couldn't bring herself to look away as Vane swiped up an abandoned glass of whisky from a side table and slowly made his way through the crowd. She studied the line of his jaw, the subtle shadow of a dimple in his chin—not unlike Colin's—his strong, straight nose, and the vivid blue gleam of his eyes.

He was undeniably handsome. Tall, muscled, and blond. A true Adonis.

And her brother.

At that exact moment—while her brain tried desperately to sort through the myriad of thoughts and feelings flooding her system—Mr. Reginald Vane glanced her way.

It was clear that it was meant to be a passing look. He scanned almost dismissively over the room, his focus lighting on Caillie for only the briefest moment before sliding away again. But then he seemed to pause. The moment was subtle, but Caillie caught it. No doubt because she was staring so intently, and she stood frozen in place—nerves abuzz—as his gaze returned to settle more directly on her.

There was a fleeting dip of tension between his brows before it slid away and his perfect features hitched into a secretive sort of smile that could only be considered roguish... or impish...or downright devilish. Or perhaps the right word for it hadn't been invented yet as it seemed a thing all his own.

The Villainous Vane then turned and strode directly toward her.

Caillie smiled. She liked him already. There was no prevarication in him. No subterfuge or games. The man had decided he wanted to talk to her and here he came. Along the way, he threw back the rest of the whisky in his glass then traded it out for two glasses of champagne from a passing footman.

As he drew near, Caillie had to tip her head back to look up at him. He was undeniably the tallest of her brothers, but his build was most similar to Roderick's or Max's, strongly muscled but trim...as opposed to Colin's leaner frame or Beynon's more burly build. His blue eyes were a similar shade to Roderick's and Colin's, but they held a curious sharpness—an edge—that was all his own. And his smile—a flash of even teeth and a slight crinkling at the corners of his eyes—was also his alone.

Caillie could see why the man was considered one of the most devastating and accomplished rakes in town. Aside from his obvious handsomeness, there was an air of devil-may-care confidence that strongly suggested he was not one to follow the rules...especially if they happened to hinder a good time.

And if there was one thing Caillie could appreciate, it was a rule breaker.

A grin of nervous excitement widened her lips and she spoke before he even came to a complete stop before her. “Good evening, Mr. Vane. I was hoping for the chance to speak with you tonight.”

His brow twitched at her enthusiastic greeting, but he didn't miss a beat as he replied, “So happy to accommodate you. Champagne?” he asked, offering one of the glasses.

Caillie glanced at the empty flute in her hand with a blink of surprise then set it on a nearby table before reaching for the full one he offered. Flashing him a bright smile, she said, “Thank you, sir. I didnae even notice my first had gone so quickly.”

“That’s the way of champagne, I’m afraid,” he said with a hint of a smile. “I blame the bubbles.”

“Devious little things,” Caillie agreed as she took a sip.

“You obviously know who I am,” he noted smoothly, eyeing her with a slight tilt of his head. “But I cannot say I recall an introduction.”

“Oh, because there wasnae one,” Caillie replied quickly as she held out her hand. “Miss Caillieach Claybourne.”

He took her hand and performed an efficient but courteous bow. “A pleasure, Miss Claybourne.” Releasing her hand as he straightened, he asked with casual curiosity. “Scottish?”

“Aye,” Caillie said with another grin. “How’d you ken?”

He smiled with easy charm. “The brogue. It’s subtle but undeniable.”

Caillie nodded her acceptance of the answer. She’d never managed to smooth out her accent completely and honestly hadn’t wanted to. “I hail from Dumfriesshire, though the last several years have seen me in England most of the time.”

“You miss your home,” he noted astutely.

“I do,” she replied, somewhat surprised and yet not at all at how easy it was to be open with him.

“So, what keeps you here?”

The muscles along Caillie’s spine tightened. He’d just presented the perfect opportunity to test his knowledge of his own origins.

After reading the misplaced volume of her sire’s journal collection, she’d easily determined the identity of the lady he’d targeted to carry another of his bastards. A young lady who was betrothed at the time to the Viscount Withersfield.

When the young lady advised the prior Earl of Wright of her delicate condition only days before her wedding, the earl predictably rejected her. The wedding went forth and either Withersfield never knew of his bride's betrayal and believed himself to be the natural father to his heir or he did know and had decided to claim the child as his own anyway.

Unfortunately, neither possibility guaranteed that the child himself knew anything of those long-ago circumstances. Which meant the man before her might have absolutely no idea that the Viscount of Withersfield was not his sire. And, obviously, in that case, he would be very shocked to discover he had several half siblings.

At best, Caillie hoped to subtly ascertain how much he might know so she didn't unintentionally shock or insult him, ruining any future chances to get to know him.

Looking at him now as he eyed her curiously, waiting for her answer, Caillie already felt a kinship with him.

And she really didn't want to muck this up.

Meeting his gaze, she gave a bit of a smile as she replied, "Family. The Earl of Wright is my brother," she said carefully. "A fact he only discovered about twelve years ago."

She watched Vane's face carefully as she spoke—when she mentioned Colin and when she acknowledged their relationship—looking for any indication that he was aware of his own connection to the Wright family. And to her.

Surely, he'd heard the whispers of scandal that had swept London when Colin first started to acknowledge the children who'd resulted from the prior earl's dishonorable actions.

Then again, Reginald Vane would have been a lad of only fifteen or so at the time and had likely been away at school. Perhaps he wasn't aware of the scandal. In watching his reaction, she suspected he knew absolutely nothing of his connection to the Earl of Wright...and herself by extension.

The realization hit her rather heavily in the chest. It would seem she might've hoped he'd recognize their connection right

off and react with the kind of joy she'd experienced at the revelation.

Instead, this situation was going to be a much greater challenge than she'd anticipated. If he had no idea of the truth of his birth, she certainly couldn't advise him of it here and now. The repercussions were far too significant and involved more than just the two of them.

There was not a flicker of acknowledgement or even curiosity in his eyes as he nodded in response to her answer. "I don't know Lord Wright, but I've heard he's a noble sort, which leads me rather directly to my next question. What on earth is the illustrious Earl of Wright's young sister doing at a party like this?"

His words had Caillie glancing about the room and she couldn't help but notice that the revelers had gotten significantly more... uninhibited in the time since she'd started talking with Mr. Vane. Laughter had gotten louder. Some cravats had been discarded altogether. A few ladies were leaning rather heavily on their escorts while others openly flirted with several gentlemen at once. One young countess stood quite elegantly with a glass of whisky in one hand and a cigar in the other as she regaled a small crowd with an apparently very riveting tale. And it appeared as though the contortionists might have discarded with their scant body coverings altogether.

Glancing back to the golden Adonis—yet another older brother who might not know she was his sister but somehow managed to question her decisions as well as the others—she gave a cheeky grin and a casual shrug of her shoulder. "Would you believe me if I said I mixed up the address with another invitation?"

He chuckled. "Not for a second." Then his blue eyes flashed and he lowered his head toward her to say a bit more quietly, "Did you forget that you said you'd been hoping to speak with me?"

Caillie did her best to conceal her inward cringe. She had forgotten that. Her excitement had obviously overruled her

sense for a moment.

Opening her mouth to answer even though she hadn't the slightest idea what she'd say to explain away that unfortunate slip, her gaze slid about the room in search of anything that might inspire a plausible answer.

Instead, as her glance passed by a group of people hovering near the stage, she first caught a glimpse of a stunning woman dressed in a vibrant peacock-blue gown. Her pale blonde hair was dressed with glossy ringlets draping against her impressive and significantly displayed bosom. Caillie had once coveted a bosom like that—before she'd learned to accept her much more modestly curved form. The beauty flashed a sultry smile as she turned to glance at the man behind her.

Following the lady's gaze, Caillie nearly choked on her next breath.

It was Bishop's mouth that hovered so close to the lady's ear. His dark, brown gaze looking intently into hers. His hand at her curvaceous waist.

Caillie's stomach churned with jealousy as she watched him murmur something obviously salacious to his companion. When she gave a rich, seductive laugh that Caillie could hear even across the room, Bishop gave a smile of deep satisfaction before his eyes lifted with a careless flicker.

Caillie turned away, a startled squeak of sound escaping her lips as she took a quick side step in an effort to put Vane in the way of Bishop's gaze.

He hadn't seen her. Surely. And if he thought he might have caught a glimpse of her—amongst such a crowd and at such a distance—he'd assume he was mistaken, wouldn't he? He'd never believe Cailleach Claybourne would be present at a party such as this.

“Have I lost your interest already, Miss Claybourne?”

With a blink, Caillie looked up at her newly acquainted brother who had no idea of their association. Despite his words, there was no offense in his gaze, only amusement.

Giving a quick smile, she decided to be honest. “I just caught sight of someone I’d verra much like to avoid.”

Vane gave a nod. “I’m familiar with the experience. May I lend my assistance in spiriting you away from here? I know a few routes that could make for a quick retreat.”

The offer could have been made with salacious intent. Vane was a notorious rake after all. He had no idea she was his sister and she’d made her interest in him abundantly clear. But Caillie chose to believe his offer was more humanitarian in nature.

Shaking her head, she reached out to pat his forearm. “Nay, though I appreciate your offer. I’ll just hie myself off. Perhaps we’ll have a chance to talk more another time.”

Before he could reply, Caillie downed the last of her champagne then handed him the empty glass. Taking a quick peek past his broad shoulders, she noted that Bishop was no longer standing near the whist table. Neither was his gorgeous lady friend.

A pang of jealousy twisted through her stomach. She’d have to deal with that frustrating little emotion later.

With a quick smile at Vane, she began to weave through the crowd back toward the open double doors. Bishop’s unfortunate presence meant the night would be ending far sooner than she’d anticipated. Even unintentionally, the man managed to interfere with her activities. She’d barely managed to learn anything pertinent about her brother other than that he didn’t seem to be aware of his own illegitimacy or his connection to the Earl of Wright.

A quick glance back revealed that her rakish brother had already engaged himself with another lovely lady. Caillie quirked her lips in amusement. He was proving himself to be so much like her other brothers—none of whom ever did anything in half measures.

Though her attention was averted for only a moment, it proved to be a vital mistake as she suddenly found herself caught up in the midst of a thickening crowd that was

gathering rather enthusiastically around the makeshift stage. People around her jostled and pushed to get closer to the performers, taking Caillie with them. Intensely curious as to what had sparked such excitement, she craned her neck to see what was happening.

But just as she caught a glimpse of naked bodies twisting and turning about each other, a very strong arm looped around her waist and spun her about until her back was to the performers and her front was pressed warmly to Bishop's hard chest.

She tipped her head to meet his intent, unreadable stare and her belly erupted in flutters. Her breath came swiftly from between her parted lips, causing her breasts to rise and fall against his velvet coat. Though they stood locked in a sudden embrace, the crowd around them grew more enthusiastic in their enjoyment of the show—whistling and calling out their encouragement. Bishop, however, remained silent and still, his gaze fiercely focused on her face.

When she tried to twist free of his embrace if only to glance back at what everyone was so clearly enjoying, he tightened his arms around her.

“Don't look, Cailleach.” His voice was low—nothing more than a warm whisper.

Roderick was the only person who regularly called her by her full name and she'd always appreciated how he liked to go against the grain. But the way Bishop said it...in his subtle, textured cockney...felt oddly intimate. Almost like an endearment.

It took her a moment to fight past the sudden heat infusing her body to respond to his words. “Are you still thinking you can tell me what to do?”

Though her words were challenging, they came out far too breathless. And instead of flashing her a look of disapproval and frustration, Bishop smiled. His sensual lips curved upward slowly before curling at the corners in a devilish way. Then he gave a shallow nod and his voice was rough though his smile remained in place. “Turn around then. If you must.”

It was clearly a dare. And Caillie could rarely resist such blatant challenges.

His arms loosened only very slightly where they were doubled around her waist. Enough to allow her a bit of movement within their circle, but not enough that she could step away from him completely. She realized then that her hands were securely wrapped around his biceps, allowing her to feel the taut, curved muscle beneath the layers of clothing.

She did not release her grip.

And suddenly she didn't want to turn around. Staring up into Bishop's dark gaze seemed far more intriguing and exciting than anything that could possibly be occurring on the stage behind her. And even though he had a clear view if wanted, he never shifted his attention away from her face.

She lifted her chin. "Are you going to demand I tell you why I'm here or insist I leave?"

His wicked grin slipped then as the muscles along his jaw clenched and released. "I should."

"But you dinnae have to," she countered quickly.

He took a breath and released it.

It should have felt odd to engage in such a conversation while standing within the tight circle of his arms in the midst of a crush of revelers as something undoubtedly salacious occurred right behind her.

But it didn't feel odd at all.

"Will you release me?"

A pause and another clench of his jaw. His attention dropped to her lips and his reply came out gruff and weighted. "Do you want me to release you?"

"Nay."

His gaze flew back to hers at her unhesitant response. "So, where does that leave us?"

Caillie didn't know.

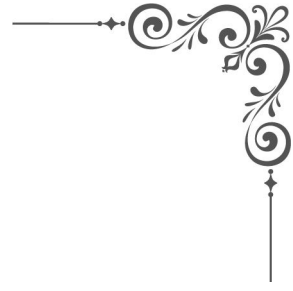
Tilting her head, she slid a quietly assessing gaze over his face, noting the barely perceptible crease in his brow, the harsh tension of his jaw, the full, generous lines of his mouth, and the intent steadiness of his stare, which seemed to bore straight down to her core.

Her entire being felt ensnared by that gaze. Possessed. Held as strongly as his arms around her physical form. And the oddest thing of all was that she had no desire to escape. No wish to free herself and stand on her own. Instead, she experienced a rush of unfurling heat. Endless chills. A delicious twisting and a melting rightness as something strange and sparkly filtered through her, starting at her crown and raining down through her entire being, all the way to her fingertips and toes.

“I reckon that depends,” she finally answered in a low murmur.

“On what?”

“On what happens next.”



Chapter Eleven

Bishop's heart pounded against his ribs. He'd barely managed a full breath from the moment he'd caught sight of her across the room. Her elegant form encased in shimmering burgundy silk. Diamonds sparkling around her neck and a hint of pure mischief teasing the corners of her mouth.

His initial response had been alarm.

Marcus's parties were not for the tame. It's why he was there. He'd needed some sort of reminder of who he was. But surrounding himself with old friends and former lovers with the intention of indulging in familiar hedonism and debauchery had been far more appealing in theory. He'd known the second he walked through the door that the night wouldn't end the way he'd planned.

Still...he sure in hell hadn't expected *this*.

He shifted his hold, sliding one hand up the curve of her spine to wrap warmly around the back of her neck where the curls at her nape teased the backs of his fingers with wispy caresses.

Her eyelashes fluttered and the gold in her gaze sparked as she softened against him.

He shouldn't have intercepted her. If he hadn't, she might have been on her way home by now and he wouldn't know the feel of her supple body burning his.

But the second he'd spied her talking with that rakehell Vane, he'd lost his ability for rational thought. He couldn't see her—be in the same room with her—and not be drawn to her. And though he'd started to suspect that he might have underestimated her as she'd claimed, someone had to step in and protect her from her own reckless nature.

“What on earth could've brought you to a place like this?” he asked, unable to resist the urge to brush his thumb along the outer edge of her ear.

Her breath caught delicately at the caress, but her voice was firm when she replied. "I thought you were nae going to ask me that."

Bishop shook his head and his brows furrowed. "So many secrets..."

She sighed, her breath warm against his throat. "I dinnae *like* keeping secrets," she whispered. "But oftentimes it's necessary."

"No, it's not," he insisted roughly. "Those who care about you can't protect you if they don't know what you're up to."

"I see to my own protection."

"Is that what this is?"

She arched a brow. "*This* is a party."

Against his conscious direction, his hand tightened at her nape, causing her lips to part on a breath of surprise. "Parties like this are not for you." His tone was a harsh warning. "Coffee houses in Covent Garden are not for you. I am..."

He managed to stop himself from saying the last, forcing his voice to fade into a ragged breath.

"You're what?" she asked, her voice a matching whisper, husky and weighted.

The sound wound through him like a sultry sigh, heating his blood and threatening to tangle his intentions. He should've said that he was made for such places and worse, but before he could, she tipped her head back and whispered, soft and silkily, "Are *you* not for me, as well?"

Forcing air into his lungs, he replied, "I'm not meant for anyone. But especially not you."

"Why?"

The thunder of his heartbeat roared in his ears as he looked deep into her eyes. Expressive eyes, swirling with emotions he didn't want to read, sparkling with bold resolve. He'd sensed this in her years ago, during that first impulsive, drunken kiss. Her fire and tenacity. He'd also sensed passion and certainty

and an unfettered hunger. He hadn't known then if that riotous hunger was hers or his own.

But he knew now.

It was both of theirs.

Back then, he'd somehow managed to end the kiss. And in the years since, he'd strengthened and honed his resistance. But with a single whispered query, she threatened to destroy it all.

Bishop did his best to employ a flippant tone, but even he heard the harsh edge buried beneath his words. "You don't want me, pet. And I don't want you."

The words were outright lie, but she couldn't know that.

"You're lying."

Fuck. She was going to be the end of him.

He should laugh or say something impertinent. But all he could manage was a desperate steeling of himself against her. A hard, indrawn breath. A tensing of every muscle as he looked down at her with a narrowed gaze.

"Shall I tell you how I ken?" she asked lightly, oblivious or uncaring of the fierce denial flowing through his blood. She didn't wait for his response before continuing. "It's right here," she whispered as she lifted her hand to drift her fingers lightly down his throat. "Your pulse races wildly"—she pressed her fingers to a spot just above his collarbone—"right here, whenever I get close to you."

He needed to deny it. He needed to step back, force some distance. But the heady scent of roses had invaded his good sense, his will, his fucking sanity. And he stood rock hard and unmoving beneath her touch, as though made of stone that would crumble if he made the slightest twitch of a muscle.

A flash of gold lit her gaze and her lips slowly curled upward.

"I wonder..." she murmured. "What if I were to..."

She slipped one hand to his shoulder as she leaned close and pressed her lips—warm, soft, devastating—in a whisper-light kiss to the that very spot where his pulse rioted.

It was too bloody much.

He should never have gone after her. Shouldn't have taken her in his arms and talked to her in lowered tones. Now the feel of her kiss on his skin would brand him forever.

Leaning back again, she looked up at him with a glittering gaze. “Do you still deny it?”

What could he say?

What a fierce clench of his jaw, he forced a glance around them. They weren't the only ones clasped in an embrace of one sort or another. The sensual performance had inspired a large number of guests to express their heightened arousal in various ways. His arms tightened possessively around Cailleach as she also took a moment to look around.

As a rosy blush darkened her cheeks and her eyes flew swiftly back to his, he lowered his chin to murmur against her ear. “Time to go, pet.”

She nodded and he quickly turned to guide her through what would soon become an all-out orgy. Neither of them spoke as they left the drawing room behind them and continued down the stairs to retrieve their outer garments before stepping out the front door.

When they reached the street, Bishop would have hailed a nearby hack, but Cailleach gave a jaunty whistling bird call instead. Within a few seconds, a nondescript carriage driven by a man in a red cap rolled toward them from the darkness.

Cailleach flashed a quick smile in response to his inquiring glance.

The driver was young and nearly as cocky as Bishop had been at the same age and he gave Bishop a bold stare from his perch as Cailleach climbed into the vehicle. Bishop took a seat on the opposite side, not trusting himself to sit beside her, and they rode for a while in silence. Despite the hum of energy that

emanated from her person, she did not fidget. Her hands rested in her lap and her gaze remained steady on him.

After a long while, she finally spoke. “Will you tell Roderick? About tonight?”

Bishop tensed. He hadn’t even thought of her brother. Roderick would be beside himself to discover his young sister had been at one of Lowth’s notorious parties.

He *should* tell Roderick.

“I won’t,” he muttered reluctantly, “but you can’t—”

“I reckon it’d be best if you just leave off that last part,” she interrupted in a firm tone followed by a stiff smile.

Amusement tugged at Bishop’s lips. “So, I’m to pretend you’re *not* traipsing all about town, ducking into dangerous places, engaging in reckless activities, attending scandalous parties?”

“You dinnae have to pretend anything,” she replied. “Not if you can manage to acknowledge that I’m capable of handling my own affairs without your interference or anyone else’s. You do realize I’ve going about my life just fine before your return.”

Bishop shook his head. “You’re relentless.”

“I’ve had to be.”

There was something heavy in her words, but before he could question or comment, the carriage came to a stop. Cailleach immediately reached for the door and hopped to the ground before waiting for assistance.

As he stepped out behind her, Bishop noted that they were in the shadowed mews behind Wright House.

Turning to him, she noted, “If you’d like, Thomas can take you back to the party...or to the club...or anywhere else you desire to go.”

What he desired was not possible.

“I’ll walk.”

She nodded and pulled the hood of her cloak up to shadow her face then gave her driver a quick salute. With a click of his tongue, Thomas urged the horses forward and the carriage soon disappeared from view, leaving Bishop and Cailleach standing alone on the narrow, darkened lane.

The light of the moon and stars overhead were just enough light for him to see her gaze slide almost hungrily over his face before dipping to his mouth, then the hollow of his throat, where her kiss still scorched his skin. Her smile was soft and secretive and undeniably sensual when she flicked her eyes back up to his. Her voice was a sultry whisper.

“Do you want to kiss me, Bishop?”

That and so much more.

He clenched his jaw and stuffed his hands into the deep pockets of his greatcoat.

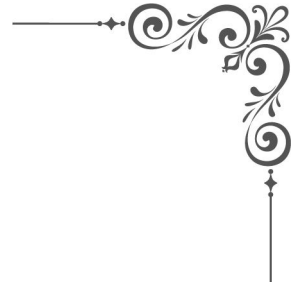
“You don’t want a kiss from me, pet.”

“Dinnae tell—”

“Because if I did kiss you right now,” he continued in a low and forceful tone, his attention falling helplessly to her parted lips, “I wouldn’t be able to stop there. I’d need to feel your body beneath my hands. I’d need your moans of pleasure in my ear and your limbs wrapped tight around me. I’d need a helluva lot more than a kiss, Cailleach. *You’d* need more. And more can’t fucking happen.”

Her breath came short and shallow before she took a long, steadying inhale. Her next words were nothing but a whisper in the moonlight, but her gaze was bold and steady. “You’re the only one who believes that, Bishop Black. I reckon *more* would be bluidy beautiful.”

While his cock throbbed painfully and his stomach twisted into a knot of fierce denial, she turned and swept through a silent gate in the wall around the earl’s garden.



Chapter Twelve

The next day, Caillie could still taste Bishop on her lips. The salt of his skin. Cedarwood and amber from the soap he used. And a mysterious spice.

Even now, as she rode through Hyde Park at an ungodly early hour with Thomas following several paces behind, if she closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to her mouth, she could easily imagine the thrum of Bishop's pulse. And she could hear his parting words. Words of desire and fierce denial.

"Miss. *Miss*," Thomas grumbled as he rode up beside her, his tone suggesting he'd been trying to get her attention for a while.

"What is it?" she asked, glancing to him expectantly.

"The one you're looking for showed up."

Caillie's heart gave a wild leap before settling into a rhythm of anticipation. "Where?"

"Just there," Thomas noted with a tip of his red-capped head.

Gazing in the direction he indicated, Caillie spotted the man right away.

He sat atop an enormous black stallion, his greatcoat billowing around him as he rode at a pace that was just shy of racing but certainly far too fast to encourage conversation from anyone he happened to pass.

Biting her lip, Caillie considered her next move.

She needed a proper reason to strike up a conversation. But if all accounts of this man were true, he had an extreme aversion to social interactions and had no trouble being outright insulting in order to avoid them. She had to find a way to approach him without giving him the opportunity to evade her intentions.

Despite the very early hour, there were quite a few people making use of the park, though most—like her target—were focused more on riding than socializing.

Suddenly, Bramble gave a sharp bark before darting away. It had been years since the senior canine had displayed such an intense burst of energy. Caillie stared in shock before realizing with a rush of dread what had inspired Bramble's unexpected mad dash.

On their very first sojourn to the park twelve years ago, Bramble had experienced an unfortunate run-in with the swans that enjoyed sovereignty over the large pond. The ruthless birds did not suffer the interference of rowdy Scottish collies, as they'd quickly learned that day. Ever since, Caillie had been very careful to keep far from the pond whenever Bramble accompanied her to the park.

Today, however, her distraction over Bishop and her determination to intercept her quarry had allowed them to get far closer to the vicious creatures than they should have.

And Bramble had taken immediate advantage, darting straight for a small group of swans that wandered about near the pond's shore.

Unfortunately, or perhaps very fortunately indeed, the man in the billowing greatcoat and stern top hat was about to cross right in between Bramble and the swans.

This was going to get a bit ugly.

Caillie braced herself to let out a fierce shrill of a whistle to call Bramble back, but it was too late. The swans had spotted him and, as if they'd remembered the last encounter with the intrusive collie who'd once mistakenly tried to herd them like the docile lambs back home, they rose up en masse, arching their long, graceful necks and flapping their wings in an intimidating show.

A show that happened to spook one apparently sensitive stallion.

As the giant horse reared up, his rider held secure to the saddle, giving not an inch as he forced the great beast to heed

his command.

In the meantime, Caillie nudged her own horse into a canter, reaching the other rider just as he got his horse settled down.

The swans, however, were still squawking and making a veritable scene.

As the man turned to glare at her approach, Caillie noted that his blue eyes were nearly as bright as his brother's. Yet, whereas Reginald Vane had a sharp, edgy gaze, his twin, Nicholas, possessed a stare that somehow managed to cancel out any natural light, leaving behind a stark gaze that appeared utterly devoid of any emotion beyond irritation.

If Reginald Vane was known for his raffish ways, his twin brother, Nicholas, was far more notorious for his sinister manner. People whispered about some tragedy in his past that had damaged him in unseen ways, but no one seemed capable of agreeing on just what had occurred and various tales abounded unchecked in the gossip mills.

“My apologies, sir,” she said with a warm smile. “Please forgive Bramble for disturbing your ride. He and the swans have a rather contentious history.”

Glaring down at Bramble, who'd been brought to heel by her whistle and now stood complacent at her side, Vane noted gruffly, “Undisciplined mutts shouldn't be allowed in the park.”

Her open smile slid into a fierce scowl as Caillie returned his glare with one of her own. “Excuse me, but did it occur to you that perhaps it is your mount that needs a bit more discipline? A horse of such mass and power shouldnae be so easily upset.”

It was clear he would have issued a curt retort if one of the still very upset swans hadn't managed to get distressingly close, causing his stallion to sidestep and scuff the ground in a nervous dance. The display managed to prove Caillie's point while infuriating Vane even further.

Well, this is going bluidy swimmingly.

Then, to her utter astonishment, Vane turned his glare toward the swans, giving a low muttered command that immediately had the violent creatures lowering their wings as they retreated to the water.

Amazing.

“What on earth did you say to them?” Caillie couldn’t resist asking.

Vane cast her a dark look before pulling his reins to spin his horse in the opposite direction. He was going to ignore her and just ride away.

If there was one thing Caillie hated as much as being told what to do, it was being ignored. This whole interaction hadn’t gone anywhere near as planned, but she couldn’t just let it end. Not yet.

“You’re one of the Villainous Vanes, are you not?”

She had no idea why she’d decided to say such a thing, but it had the desired effect.

The stallion came to a stop as Nicholas turned to look back at her. “You dare much.”

Caillie’s smile then was genuine and utterly without remorse. “True. But I almost always have proper cause.”

For some reason, her reply had him arching a brow. “Almost always?” he asked.

“In this case, most definitely.”

There was a short silence during which Caillie held her breath, before he narrowed his gaze. “Out with it then.”

Relief. He was giving her a chance. But she suspected she wouldn’t get another, so she decided to take a very necessary risk and be direct.

“Have you heard of the Earl of Wright?”

Another short but stark pause. “Of course.”

“And do you ken the scandal regarding his family?”

His only response to that was a furrowing of his brows which could have indicated any number of things. Caillie forged on.

“Surely, you’ve heard of the infamous Wright bastards,” she noted.

Still, no reply. Either he truly hadn’t heard any of the tales which had flown about society for the last decade or he knew exactly what she was talking about and had decided to be unreasonably dense and stubborn. She was rather inclined to believe the latter was true.

With a frustrated sigh and an impatient wave of her hand, Caillie clarified, “The prior earl was a dastardly sort who sired multiple illegitimate children throughout Britain. Children he willfully abandoned and neglected. His only legitimate son, however, the current earl, has taken great efforts to rectify his sire’s perfidy.”

“How noble.”

The words were flat and unemotional, leaving Caillie uncertain if they were spoken in earnest or in sarcasm.

She returned the man’s scowl with one of her own. “Colin is noble,” she agreed fiercely. “Noble and compassionate and reasonable and kind. Everything his father was not.”

There was the slightest tensing of the man’s jaw. “Are we done here?”

“Nay, we’re not bluidy done,” Caillie replied sharply, her tone and her words finally seeming to draw out a bit of emotion from the man, even if it was nothing more than shock at her brazen attitude. “I’d hoped to have this conversation in a much more civil manner, but you’ve managed to vex me, sir. The truth is, I’ve recently discovered something I thought might be of interest to you.”

“I doubt it.”

Caillie ignored the interruption. “The current earl is under the impression that he’s located all of his siblings. I ken that he hasn’t. There are two more—”

“I don’t know what in hell you’d hoped to accomplish here, but you’ve now managed to vex *me*. This is finished.”

Before Caillie could utter another syllable, he turned his mount and leapt into a gallop, racing away from her with reckless power and speed.

She’d never catch him on her mare, lovely as she was, and could only sit and stare as he disappeared.

“Bluidy hell,” she muttered, slapping her thigh.

That went dreadfully. And the worst part...she *still* had no idea if either twin were the slightest bit aware of their origins.

Unfortunately, while she sat there, staring after her long-gone, newly found brother, the swans had returned. Now that the scary man on the black horse was gone, they’d apparently decided to once again display their wrath for Bramble—and Caillie by extension. If she’d been prepared for the feathered charge, she might have managed to keep her mount steady. But she wasn’t ready.

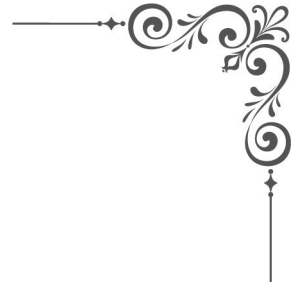
Her mare sidestepped to get away from the mob as Bramble leapt back into action, barking and circling the birds, which only aggravated them further.

Though Thomas rode in from where he’d been discreetly waiting a short distance away to chase the swans back to the pond and call Bramble off, it was too late. Caillie was going down.

Her last thought as her mare reared up was that at least her newest brother was no longer around to witness her humiliation.

She managed to twist as she fell to land on the cushion of her bottom, and though she’d likely have a sore rear for a while, it was the mud she’d landed in which proved to be the greatest indignity.

Cursing, she glanced up to see Thomas already leaping from his own horse to offer her a hand. With a rueful smile, she let him pull her to her feet. Looking down at herself, she gave a heavy sigh. “I’ve mucked it up good this time.”



Chapter Thirteen

After a very hot soak and a liberal scrub to wash away the mud, Caillie tossed on a casual day dress and braided her still damp hair in a simple plait before heading out again. Though her rear was rather sore from her fall, her pride was bruised far worse. Her recent failures were piling up and it was not an experience Caillie was familiar with. She didn't like it. Her inability to make true headway with her newly discovered brothers was a devastating blow. And she didn't even want to *think* about Bishop's recent rejection.

She was feeling dejected and frustrated and mayhap just a wee bit doubtful of herself. But she wasn't giving up yet. She just needed to pause and take a little time away from her current troubles. An afternoon amongst like-minded women felt like just the thing to distract her and bolster her sense of well-being.

On Sundays, Caillie met with her friends for coffee and conversation... and perhaps, if the attendees were so inclined, a bit of embroidery, mending, or other needlework.

On Mondays, she gathered with a group of ladies from all levels of society (prostitutes, housewives, and aristocrats alike) for lessons with Emma's highly skilled sister Portia, who offered training in the use of a variety of weapons. They practiced with knives, discreetly sized pistols, hatpins, umbrellas, or any other tool which might be at hand when a woman found herself needing to defend her person. Since their group had just about mastered the techniques Portia instilled, Caillie was already considering what physical skills they might like to explore next.

The salon she hosted every Tuesday covered a different topic of interest each week and was also open to any woman curious enough to join. One week, there might be a lesson on painting the nude male form. The next week, she might bring in a lecturer on paleontology or entomology or astronomy. After that, perhaps a class on how to perform the traditional dances of India or how to write bawdy limericks and sea

shanties or how to cook traditional foods from around the world. Regardless of the subject, every lesson was taught by a woman who had mastered her field of interest.

Wednesdays were spent in St. Giles with Elle. The two of them, within the ever-present shadow of Elle's numerous guards, strolled the often-avoided slums and alleyways of one of London's roughest neighborhoods, where Elle was known as the fearsome Lady Griffin. This was Elle's way of discovering where her assistance might be needed most and ensuring the residents of the area always had access to the resources and protection of Max, the Griffin himself, who'd appointed himself guardian of the rookery's most vulnerable residents.

Today, however, was Thursday, which meant Caillie was due to lead her weekly reading salon at Mrs. Beaumont's. In the years since she'd started the salon, they'd covered an array of subjects—from mathematics to titillating erotic novels recommended by Emma's other sister, Lily—and a variety of authors, from Wollstonecraft to Shakespeare. At present they were well into a light yet emotional novel by Jane Austen and the plot had taken an interesting turn during their last meeting.

Thomas pulled Caillie's personal carriage right up to the west wing entrance. With her hood pulled forward to obscure her face, Caillie crossed to the door, where she was immediately allowed entrance. She handed her cloak to the doorman, an aging Black man whose short, curling black hair was liberally laced with silver. Despite his advanced years, the experienced bouncer could still easily toss a full-sized man out the door and halfway to the street. In fact, she'd seen him do it. More than once.

“Hiya, Grady. How was the night?”

“Uneventful, miss,” he replied with a sparkle in his dark brown eyes. “No more'n a few rows between gents. Nothing I couldn't handle with one hand tied behind me back.”

Caillie gave a soft chuckle. “Good to hear it. But shouldnae you be abed by now?”

“Heading there soon,” he replied before nodding toward the stairs. “Blue parlor, as usual, miss.”

Flashing a bright smile, Caillie gave her thanks as she started up the stairs.

She was already feeling better. This place and these people had been a source of easy comfort for years. She only wished her visits didn't have to be maintained in secret. With some significant convincing, Worthy might come to understand her desire to cultivate the kind of important friendships as she'd found here and how important and valuable it was to have the freedom to explore interests most people deemed inappropriate for a young woman. But not a single one of her brothers would understand. It might be the only drawback to having four—nay, six, though the twins didn't count...yet—older brothers. Each and every one of them was overprotective to a fault. Even Max, who knew more about her clandestine activities than the others, would be against them if he knew *everything* she was involved in. She'd be forbidden from continuing and the possibility that they might actually find a way to enforce such a dictate had ensured she did not let anyone discover her activities. These or any others.

Reaching the second-floor landing, Caillie turned down the hallway toward the blue parlor and came to an abrupt stop. The way was blocked by the sauntering form of none other than Bishop Black.

His expression of easy amiability slid a bit when he spotted her in his path, but he didn't stop or even slow his progress. He continued toward her instead, his eyes darkening in an inexplicable way. She could already hear the words forming in his head.

Why are you here?

You don't belong.

Caillie spoke before he had the chance. “Not a single bluidy word,” she declared curtly, ushering up all the frustration and disappointment of her day to aim it straight at his subtly condescending, arrogant, breath-stealingly handsome face. Though her tone was as light as she could

manage, her words were anything but. “I’m in no fecking mood to hear anything you’ve got to say, Bishop Black. Just get out of my way and we’ll pretend this unfortunate encounter didnae happen.”

She noted the flicker in his eyes as the crude words left her lips, and for just a moment, she wondered if she’d possibly overreacted to his unexpected appearance. Then she decided she didn’t really give a damn if she was overreacting. What she did care about, however, was the fact that he didn’t step aside as she demanded. Instead, he braced himself, which only infuriated her further. As her Scottish temper, which rarely reared its head, rushed through her, she fully intended to shove her way past him.

She’d never know if she’d have succeeded because he grasped her shoulders in his large, strong hands and effectively halted every bit of her momentum.

Caillie huffed in frustration and tried to twist free, but—as always—he held her firm. And as soon as she realized there would be no escape until he allowed it, she ceased struggling and held herself painfully still.

“Relax, pet,” he muttered quietly. Almost...gently. “I’m in no mood to fight today.”

Caillie tossed her head back to glare silently up at him.

Perhaps *she* was in a mood to fight.

But then his brows dipped in a brief scowl before his hands flexed around her shoulders and he tilted his head. “What has you so tense?” When she would have replied with a sharp retort, he quickly interrupted. “If you say it’s me, I won’t believe you.”

She laughed and some of her humor was genuine. “Why should I tell you? So you can berate me as reckless and foolish? I’ll pass on that, thank you. Now, if you’d just stop being a fecking nuisance and release me, my friends are waiting.”

His eyebrows dipped and he instantly lowered his hands. But he didn’t step aside to let her pass.

They remained standing like that. Toe to toe in the middle of the narrow hallway. Him with his brow tugged low and his arched lips pressed firmly together as he looked down at her. And her, with head thrown back and her stare unrelenting.

“I’m sorry.”

His words stunned her.

She blinked. Opened her mouth to speak. Closed it. Then took a breath to ask, “You’re sorry?”

The muscles in his jaw bunched and released before he gave a definitive nod. “I am.”

Confusion littered her mind. “For what?”

He chuckled. The sound was warm and textured and Caillie’s senses loved it. “For being a *fecking* nuisance,” he replied, his lips curling wryly as he repeated her words. Then he took a breath and added, “For all of it, really.”

Caillie eyed him with open suspicion. “You expect me to believe that?”

He shrugged, then shook his head. “I’ve been thinking—” He stopped abruptly to flash a wide grin that instantly had her belly fluttering. “I know, I’ve been warned against it. But I’ve been considering everything you’ve said...during our various encounters.”

Caillie’s chin dropped. “You have?”

His scowl returned and he shoved a hand back through his hair, loosening it from his queue in the rakish way. “You’re right.”

“I am?”

“The world is unfair. Women aren’t allowed the same liberties as men. I imagine it’s frustrating.”

Caillie stared at him. “Frustrating might be an understatement,” she replied.

A frown tugged at his brows. “I know I’ve been adding to that frustration and I’m sorry for that.”

“Thank you,” she said tentatively. He sounded sincere, but she was skeptical.

Then his eyes darkened and he lowered his chin, causing a lock of hair to slide from his queue and brush his cheek. “But I won’t apologize for wanting to protect you.”

Caillie gave a small shake of her head. “Why do you insist on believing I need protection?”

“You take too many risks,” he insisted. “You go places—”

“I dinnae belong?” she finished for him, then gave a dismissive snort.

His scowl deepened, but he said nothing.

Caillie chuckled. Then sighed. Then chuckled again. “You almost had me believing you understood.”

“I’m trying to,” he muttered.

Tilting her head, she eyed him with a narrowed gaze. “Mayhap, but I reckon you could try a wee bit harder.”

His brows lifted and a smirk curled his lips. “I’m not even going to ask why you’re here. In a brothel. Just steps away from your brother’s business.”

Caillie’s eyes widened dramatically. “Bluidy hell, I may die of shock,” she breathed in wonder.

He flashed a disarming grin and lowered his head in a subtle bow.

Caillie’s belly fluttered as her gaze settled on the sensual curve of his mouth.

“Stop it, Cailleach.”

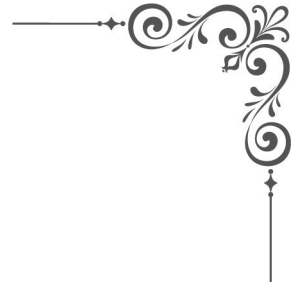
His voice was a warm, velvet whisper, meant just for her, and it slipped hotly into her bloodstream.

“Dinnae worry,” she murmured in a heavy voice as she lifted her gaze to meet his. “I havenae forgotten.” Placing her hand flat to his chest, she exerted just enough force to direct him to the side as she stepped past him in the narrow hall.

“You’re not for me. I dinnae want you. And you dinnae want me.”

His gaze was shadowed and long as he took a deep breath through his nose, as if to steady himself, but it seemed to have an opposite effect. His nostrils suddenly flared and his eyes darkened as his jaw tensed with a clenching of teeth.

Instead of saying anything else, she gave a soft laugh, then turned to continue down the hall.



Chapter Fourteen

Caillie was still trembling when she reached the blue parlor, but she hid her internal disquiet with a wide smile.

“Hiya, ladies,” she greeted gayly.

The room was already occupied by several women of the house, including Mrs. Beaumont herself. The middle-aged woman wore a navy-blue day dress that was quite modest if not for the very intentional way it accentuated her robust bosom and full hips. No doubt the teacup she lifted to her lips as she lounged in the corner of the sofa contained something far more potent than insipid tea.

“Miss Claybourne,” the madam answered with a smile. “We were wondering what was keeping you. It’s very unlike you to be late.”

Caillie waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, I encountered a wee distraction along the way,” she lied. Distraction? Yes. Wee? No.

Relaxing into her usual spot—an overstuffed armchair near the window—she poured herself a cup of tea, then glanced about to take note of who’d decided to attend today.

Mrs. Beaumont, of course. The madam rarely made it to a salon, as busy as she was, but Caillie was always grateful when she did.

Selena, a stunningly statuesque woman with pale hair and a keen gaze. She was a more senior member of Mrs. Beaumont’s household, having been there for nearly ten years, and was often called upon to set an example of behavior for the new girls.

Meera, a young Indian woman who could always be counted on to add something engaging and thought-provoking to their discussions.

Rachel, one of Mrs. Beaumont’s newest girls who’d attended her first salon with Caillie just last week. Though she

hadn't said a single word then, Caillie hoped she might feel more comfortable contributing a bit of her thoughts today.

Frannie sat in another armchair while her constant companion, Jo, perched elegantly on a footstool beside her, one arm draped over Frannie's knees as the two leaned toward each other in private conversation.

And lastly was Lucy, who gave Caillie a quick wink followed by a naughty little grin, which she tried hopelessly to hide behind her hastily raised teacup.

Caillie smiled back, though she wondered about the grin. When it came to Lucy, it could've indicated just about anything.

After taking a long, slow inhale, grounding herself in the easy companionship of the women around her, Caillie noticed that there was an unusual air of excitement amongst the group today. With the exception of Frannie and Jo, who spoke only to each other in hushed French, everyone else was enthusiastically discussing some topic of great speculation.

It took barely a moment for Caillie to realize the subject of their common curiosity and a flash of annoyance threatened to reduce the comfort she'd only just claimed. This was *her* space. *Her* friends. Did he really have to intrude here as he had everywhere else?

But then she caught Lucy's sideways glance. The other woman was watching her, waiting for some reaction.

Oh, right. Lucy had been at the coffee house that day. Caillie clearly wasn't going to get away with feigning ignorance on this one.

"D'ye expect he'll attend the masquerade?" Rachel inquired.

"I don't see why he'd miss it," Mrs. Beaumont answered.

"But why do you think he's returned?" Meera asked, her eyes bright with curiosity. "And where has he been all this time?"

“Who cares,” Selena replied with a feline grin. “All I care about is that he’s once again within our walls. Things had gotten bloody dull without that cocky grin of his and that lusty swagger.”

Mrs. Beaumont rolled her eyes and though her tone was sharp, a smile curved her lips. “The scoundrel had better not think to turn my business back into his own personal pleasure house. You girls gifted him with your talents far too frequently.”

Selena lifted a shoulder. “It was our private time, to use as we desired.” She smiled slyly. “And it was terribly difficult not to desire that man.”

Caillie fought against the burn of jealousy in her belly. It shouldn’t matter to her how Bishop spent his personal time any more than how she spent hers should matter to him. But it gutted her to think of him spending even a moment in the bed of one of these women—or any other.

“I doubt you’ll have to worry, Mrs. Beaumont,” Frannie noted confidently.

“What d’you mean, darling?” Jo’s tone was only lightly curious.

“He’s been in town for what? Several days now? And he hasn’t visited a single one of us, has he?”

“He visited me,” Selena replied quickly, lifting her chin.

“In your bedroom?” Frannie asked pointedly. When Selena frowned her response, the blunt woman continued, “Sure, he’s come to look in on us, ask how things have been. But that’s all. No bedsport. No pinch and tickle. Am I wrong?”

No one belied her statement.

“He’s changed, is all I’m saying,” Frannie asserted. “He ain’t the rogue he once was.”

“E sure is a ’andsome one though, ain’t ’e?” Rachel piped up, a note of awe in her voice.

“He is that,” Lucy agreed with saucy boldness. “Wouldn’t ye agree, Miss Claybourne?”

There it was.

Caillie tensed as all eyes fell to her. There was some obvious surprise and confusion that she might have an opinion on the rogue under discussion, evidenced most poignantly by Selena's lifted brows and Mrs. Beaumont's suddenly intent gaze.

Deciding to go with a nonchalant answer, Caillie shrugged. "I assume you're talking about Mr. Black? As you know, he was an important member of my brother's staff at the club and remains a good friend." She smiled. "But I didn't exactly know the man personally before he left."

"And since his return?" Mrs. Beaumont asked pointedly. "Have you gotten to know him... personally, now that he's back?"

"Of course not," Caillie assured with a wave of her hand.

It wasn't exactly a lie. She honestly didn't know Bishop any more now than she did three years ago. She just knew a wee bit better how the man tasted. And how his hands felt on her body. And how his eyes deepened and darkened when he looked at her.

"I've only run into him briefly," she added. "Honestly, my greatest concern when it comes to Bishop Black is that he doesnae go tattling to Roderick about my visits here. Remember, my brother could try to put a stop to all this."

"*Try* being the operative word," Mrs. Beaumont stressed as she sipped from her cup. "He has no dominion over the activities of this wing."

"That's right, miss," Meera asserted. "We wouldn't let him take you away from us."

Caillie smiled at the wealth of support. But these women seemed to forget that although Roderick couldn't dictate what happened in Mrs. Beaumont's place, as Caillie's brother, he certainly possessed a measure of authority over Caillie's activities.

Desperate to shift attention to something else, she scanned the room with a curious glance. "Well, then, shall we get

started?”

A few nods answered her question and Caillie reached for the book on the small table beside her. Resting it in her lap, she flipped through the pages to where she'd left off last week.

“All right, here we are. Volume two, part one.” Clearing her throat, she began to read, “*The remainder of Anne’s time at Uppercross...*”



AS HE STRODE THROUGH empty rooms filled with nothing but the promise and potential to hold all his waking dreams, Bishop realized he should be feeling much more satisfied than he was.

Of course, he was thrilled that his purchase of the Strand property had gone through with no difficulty, though he hadn't expected it to be challenged. One look at just a portion of his stashed wealth and the financiers nearly tripped over themselves to be a part of his venture.

He'd already managed to bring the architect he'd wanted above all others on board for the project and renovations were to start first thing in the morning, which was why he'd wanted to visit the place today, before it began to fill with the noise and production of dozens of skilled laborers who'd be working in three alternating shifts around the clock—for an obscenely generous wage—to finish the building on Bishop's preferred schedule. Time was not an effective excuse when money was no object.

Even as he strolled from one room to the next, eyeing the details that had drawn him to this place, studying the areas which would need most attention, and scanning for any problems he might have missed, he couldn't seem to concentrate as intently as he should.

His thoughts were ever being tugged back to that narrow hallway in Bentley's west wing. He could still see the flash of emotion in Cailleach's eyes, hear the exasperation in her voice, feel the longing in his own core as the desire to kiss her—to

hold her until her secret frustrations melted away—had grown nearly impossible to resist.

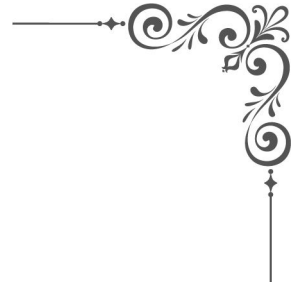
But he had resisted. And he should be relieved by that fact.

Instead, he felt...tense. On edge. Alert. And aching.

He eventually found himself standing on the second-floor balcony which extended from the cavernous ballroom. It overlooked a small, walled rose garden which might have been meticulously manicured at one time but had since become overgrown—twisted and tangled—with greenery covering the pathways and tumbling over stone benches. Roses were everywhere. Dozens of varieties and colors in no discernable plot or pattern. It was a mess and would need serious attention but, for now, Bishop couldn't keep himself from reveling in the undisciplined wildness of it. The boldness and freedom and beauty as fragrant blooms in red, pink, yellow, and white overflowed the small space, claiming their right to exist beyond their original borders, reaching into spaces not intended for them, and thriving because of it.

And because of how riotous and unapologetic they'd grown, their heady scent filled the air. Lush and lovely. Brazen and brave. The scent flowed through him. Deepening the ache in his chest, urging him to resist lest the flowers' essence take root and never leave him.

But after a while...he started to wonder why he fought so hard against something that might simply be inevitable.



Chapter Fifteen

“All’s clear, miss,” Neda whispered, peeking her head through Caillie’s bedroom door. “But you’ll have to hurry.”

Caillie gave a vigorous shake of her head, testing the security of her wig. The two-foot-high powdered masterpiece was fashioned into a veritable garden, complete with a trellis and waterfall of real roses in full bloom and a stuffed bird perched on top. The piece paid homage to those formidable creations worn by the most fashionable ladies of the prior century. It didn’t move an inch, which was what she expected considering the thousands of pins Neda had used to secure it to her head. Her scalp was already aching.

But it would be worth it.

Just as the intense corset that shoved her breasts nearly up to her chin while cinching her waist to an unnatural size and the giant caged hoop beneath her many-layered and ruffled skirts would be worth it.

This year’s costume was one of her best.

Giving herself one last critical assessment in the mirror, she was confident that no one would ever be able to recognize her in the elaborate Georgian gown and powdered wig. With her mask on, all that could be seen of her face were her red-painted lips and the beauty mark placed at the corner of her mouth.

She looked nothing at all like herself.

“Miss,” Neda urged. “Every minute Thomas waits in the mews is a chance for him to be noticed. You must hurry.”

“Sorry. You’re right. I’m ready.” She flashed a wide smile. “Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need it.” Neda grinned. “Not with your skill. You’ll be fleecing those poor gentlemen at the tables in no time.”

“That’s the plan,” Caillie said with a chuckle.

She loved this night. In part, because it only came around once a year, making it a rare event she spent more than half the year anticipating. But also because in the three years since she’d been attending, she’d never once left the party without a small fortune won at the tables and a wealth in memories to get her through the next year.

And tonight—with the added stress Bishop, Reginald, and Nicholas had recently introduced into her life—she was desperately in need of a joyful diversion.

With Neda’s help, Caillie swept her wide skirts through the servants’ halls of Wright House to the garden entrance. Cloaked from head to toe, she dashed along the darkened footpath to where Thomas was waiting to take her to St. James.

As expected, Bentley’s club was lit up like a beacon. Chandeliers made every room glitter and gleam with a particular sort of magic. The magic of anticipation, expectation, and the promise of adventure.

Or, at least, that’s how Caillie always viewed it.

One night a year, Bentley’s went all out for its members. A special event to celebrate the club’s anniversary, the masquerade was a grand display of excess and indulgence. An endless flow of the finest spirits, musicians in every room, an elegant buffet of delicacies from Bentley’s French chef, and deep, reckless play at every table.

Caillie had first gotten the idea to attend the annual event from Roderick himself. He probably should have known that telling the story of how his wife, Emma, had once disguised herself to attend his party would ignite a spark in his sister.

Since Bentley’s elite membership—as with other such clubs—was strictly limited to the gentlemen of high society, women were never seen in the gaming rooms. The masquerade being the one great exception. On this night, members were given leave to bring female guests, and the women from Mrs. Beaumont’s wing mixed and mingled with the throngs as well,

contributing to the sense of general merriment and sensuality of the evening.

Callie loved it all. The glitz and glitter. The song and laughter. The utter relaxation of inhibitions. She'd discovered during her very first costumed foray that she fit right into the merry chaos. As long as she took meticulous care with her disguise and avoided being assessed too keenly by Roderick as he strolled about the club, she blended perfectly with the other revelers. She became one of them. She laughed and flirted and gambled and won. She also made sure she didn't stay so long or win so much that she garnered undue attention.

After being ushered through the front door by a pair of footmen she knew only in passing, she immediately claimed a glass of champagne and started her evening by strolling unrushed through the common rooms.

Since she'd had to wait for the household to settle in for the night before she could risk sneaking out, the party had been in full swing for a while now, yet it likely wouldn't end for several more hours. The room reserved for dancing was nearly a crush. As was the refreshments room, while the dining room held a good number of guests who seemed to be competing over who knew the most ribald joke. Weaving amongst the partygoers as she strolled from one room to the next, Caillie thought she recognized a few of the gentlemen. Some of them didn't bother too much with costumes and wore only short masks over their faces. Others strutted about in full elaborate regalia.

She gave a smile and a nod if she happened to catch the eye of one of her friends from the west wing. Those women had insisted she let them know how she'd be dressed so they'd be able to keep an eye on her...in case the party got a bit too rowdy in some respects. Though Bentley's didn't suffer any member who might think to force unwanted attentions on any of the women present, things could still happen. It was reassuring to know that in a sea of anonymity, Caillie had friends to rely on if anything went sideways.

Of course, she'd considered that Roderick might not be the only man whose gaze she wished to avoid. There was a good

chance Bishop would also be present tonight.

Considering his role when he'd still been employed at Bentley's, it was likely he'd have been tasked with patrolling the party all evening, keeping himself on hand to handle any disturbances or threats of all kinds. Though he was no longer employed by her brother, his presence tonight would *not* be in Caillie's best interest. Even though her identity had never been detected before—not by her own brother or any of his staff—she feared Bishop might be the one person to threaten that.

But she'd never let that possibility stop her from attending and she wasn't going to let it stop her from fully enjoying herself now that she was here.

Caillie circled round to the game room last. It was her favorite area of the club. Spacious and grand, it was lit by two sparkling chandeliers which illuminated the elaborate décor. This year's theme was a secret garden and the air was filled with the scent of flowers. A wide trellis covered in vines and blooms framed the entrance. Hedges and whimsically shaped topiary were placed throughout the space, creating pathways and dividing different areas into smaller rooms within the room. And everywhere, flowers.

It was breathtaking and wonderful, inspiring a bubble of delighted laughter in Caillie's chest. She couldn't wait to dive into the games. But where shall she start?

Strolling along a garden path, her palms began to itch as she glanced about with rising anticipation.

The faro table? Vingt-et-un? She adored piquet, but she preferred to save that game for last. Perhaps she could see about getting in on a game of whist or loo.

She still hadn't decided when a shout of elation went out from a small crowd around a hazard table. The excitement drew her and she wandered over to join them. Sidling up between two gentlemen—one an older masked fellow she was quite certain had hosted a ton ball just last week and the other a much younger man dressed in the costume of a Roman emperor—she peeked between their shoulders to get a view of the game.

The Roman glanced at her, then turned to her more fully, a wide smile flashed even, white teeth. “Hello, lovely,” he said good-naturedly as his shining gaze slid down her figure. “Why don’t you come in a bit closer.” He smoothly slipped an arm around her cinched waist and drew her in front of him, tucking her in between the table and himself.

Laughing at the quick maneuver, Caillie glanced over her shoulder at him. “I don’t wish to block your own view, sir,” she noted with an upward glance at her towering coiffure.

Though the firm shape of her skirts had required he take a small step back, maintaining a bit more distance than he perhaps would’ve wanted, his height still allowed him to peer over her shoulder at her lush, upthrust bosom.

His lips tilted. “My view’s just fine.”

Caillie laughed again then admonished, “As long as it’s just your *eyes* doing the viewing and nothing else.”

The Roman lifted his hands to show his palms. “On my life, good lady. Believe me, the sight alone is generous enough to satisfy.”

Quirking her lips, Caillie accepted his assurance. For now.

Turning back to the table, she quickly became absorbed in the play. Hazard being a game far more reliant on chance than skill, it still fascinated her as she calculated odds and placed her bets on each toss of the dice.

An hour later, Caillie was breathless with laughter and revelry and the excitement inherent in the process of winning and losing. Though she had a knack for gambling, that didn’t mean she didn’t have her fair share of losses. And she appreciated every one of them. They kept her more balanced and aware of her risk.

Though Bishop liked to accuse her of being reckless and careless and, no doubt, thoughtless, none of that was really true. She never did anything without considering all of the potential perils and pitfalls. She simply took proper steps to mitigate those challenges whenever possible. It was interesting

how many dangers could be overcome by careful consideration and proper planning.

Caillie could be more than a wee bit stubborn on occasion, and was known to be single-minded and rebellious as well. But she wasn't ignorant of the many ways a young woman could be harmed or exploited by a world that forever saw her as the weaker sex. She just took great care to lessen the chances of such things. Surrounding herself with people she trusted, never pushing too far, always staying aware and alert for changes in circumstances. Beyond that, she understood and accepted that many risks still existed no matter what she did. It was simply the way of the world. But it was all worth it if it meant she could experience the life she wanted for herself.

Stepping away from the hazard table, to the chagrin of more than a few gentlemen with whom she'd been honing her skills in the art of flirtation—including her noble Roman—she exchanged her empty champagne glass for a full one. The heat of the lights and her own excitement had her feeling a bit flushed. In order to minimize possible distraction for the players, there were no windows in the large gaming room, so Caillie made her way toward one of the rooms at the back of the club which often had their windows open to the night air.

She'd just passed beneath the trellis to step into the hall when a petite young woman stepped up beside her to link an arm through hers. The woman was dressed in a vivid green gown with her brown hair piled high on her head in tumbling ringlets and a gorgeous mask of peacock feathers covering her face.

“How's it going, dove?”

Caillie met Lucy's sly smile with a wide grin. “A few losses but far more wins.”

“Any broken hearts?”

“Perhaps just one,” Caillie noted, “but the night is young.”

“Indeed!” Lucy crowed, obviously caught up in the celebratory atmosphere of the evening. “Care to dance a jig?”

“Soon. I need a breath of air first.”

“All right. Ye know where to find me,” the other girl said as she released Caillie’s arm to sweep off toward the lively music flowing from the dance room.

Smiling after her, Caillie continued toward the refreshments. Though she wasn’t hungry, a cool waft of air invited her in and she strode past the buffet where a handful of people lingered over their choices. Reaching the open casement windows, she took a deep and even breath.

Freedom.

That’s what nights like this felt like.

Freedom from rules and expectations and the hopes and dreams others had for her future. She loved Worthy and appreciated all the woman had done in raising her after Caillie’s mother died in childbirth. And she adored all her brothers. But...sometimes, she simply wished they’d trust her more. She could understand why they’d tried to rein her in when she’d been a child. It probably wasn’t the best thing for an eleven-year-old to head across London with only her dog as companion without telling anyone where she was going. But Caillie had always been driven by her own instincts as to what was right, even if it didn’t coincide with what society deemed good and proper.

Especially when it came to making decisions about her own life. Worthy seemed to understand better than her brothers why Caillie had struggled to acclimate to the social whirl of the haute ton. Since she’d never really wanted to engage in the marriage mart, she’d eschewed the typical behaviors expected of debutantes. Even so, she’d gotten more than a few proposals over the years. None she cared to consider.

Life had always seemed too big to settle for one course so soon. She wanted to live a bit first. It was possible that she might never marry at all. There was far too much she wished to accomplish. Too much to experience.

Like the best bluidy party in London.

Draining the last of the champagne from her glass, she turned away from the window. Excitement bubbled through

her once more, as effervescent as the sparkling wine that tingled through her bloodstream.

Her steps were light with anticipation and her thoughts were already focused on the music she could hear coming from next door. Unfortunately, in her distraction, she failed to notice another guest entering the room just as she was leaving. They might have collided right there in the doorway if the gentleman didn't react quickly and step suddenly to the side so she could pass.

Caillie drew in a swift breath at the near collision, gathering enough sense to grasp her voluminous skirts and draw them in so they wouldn't knock the poor fellow over as she flew past him. Flashing a quick smile of gratitude, she glanced up to his face just as she came even with him.

And then time seemed to slow to the speed of honey dripping from a spoon.

Her heart stopped.

Velvety brown eyes stared down at her from behind a black satin mask. Bishop's perfect lips teased into a smile within a full beard. His hair was secured in a messy queue that allowed rakish locks to brush his temples and hard jawline.

Caillie's lips parted on another swift breath. How was it possible he could look even more devastating than usual? Dressed all in black with a flowing short cape tossed over one shoulder and a wicked-looking dagger tucked into the sash around his narrow hips, he was the epitome of a dangerous rogue. A man with a hunger for adventure and not a single care for consequences.

For tonight, at least, he was her perfect match.

"My thanks, sirrah," she murmured, purposefully lowering her voice to a throatier tone.

"M'lady," he said in return with a tip of his head.

As soon as she stepped past him, time resumed its regular pace, while her heart seemed to jump into double time.

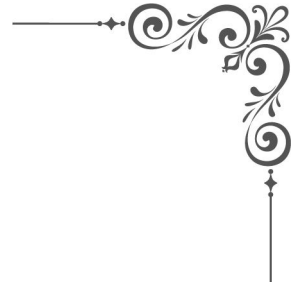
Bishop.

Had he recognized her?

Unlikely, or he'd have grabbed her and hauled her away in an instant.

She should be grateful and scurry away, but she couldn't resist taking another peek back before she entered the dance room.

He was still standing where she'd left him. Staring after her with an intent gaze.



Chapter Sixteen

Bloody fucking everlasting hell.
He couldn't breathe.

Before the woman disappeared into the next room, she cast a quick glance over her bare, smooth shoulder. It was anything but coy. Bold, aware, curious. But not coy.

He had to have to her.

After a moment of hesitation that lasted less than half a second, he turned to follow her. Everything inside him sparked and sizzled with anticipation.

The dance room was crowded and hot and full of revelry. This was no high-society ballroom. The music was a bit too loud, the movements a bit too free, and the dancers held each other a bit too close.

Despite the constantly shifting crowd, he spotted her easily. Even if the insane height of her powdered wig didn't tower over everyone and her costume wasn't an elaborate concoction of lace and ruffles and gleaming satin hugging a too-tight bodice, he'd have seen her. In fact, he swore she was the only person in the room.

Possibly sensing his pursuit, she glanced back. Catching his intent stare, she gave a husky, rolling laugh that angled straight to his cock before she picked up her skirts to dash recklessly through the twirling dancers.

Lengthening his stride, he cut through the crush of guests as if they were made of mist. He caught her at the far edge of the dance floor, sweeping an arm around her corseted waist to halt her reckless flight. Her gasp of shock slid sweetly into a laugh of delight as he spun her around and drew her into the waltz. Grasping tightly to his shoulders, she fell into perfect step with him—aligning her warm body with his, matching his rhythm, *following* his lead rather than resisting it at every turn.

“Sirrah,” she exclaimed, looking up at him through the slits of her mask. “You dare much by claiming a dance without

permission. What if I'd already promised myself to another?"

"There'll be no one but me for you tonight," he replied easily.

Her eyes widened and a laugh, full and rich, escaped her throat. "Is that so? You're very confident."

Bishop lowered his head beside hers to draw in a deep breath of her sultry, cock-aching scent. In a low whisper, he replied, "With good reason."

She tensed subtly in his arms and when he lifted his head to look into her fathomless eyes, he acknowledged how fucking lost he was. Because that tiny hint of uncertainty in her gaze nearly undid him. But then it was gone, replaced by reckless courage as her eyes glittered with fire, reflecting the golden glow of the chandelier above them.

A smile teased at her mouth, drawing his gaze to that naughty little heart-shaped beauty patch pasted above the corner of her lip. He suddenly ached with the desire to flick his tongue against that cheeky little heart and had to clench his teeth to resist the temptation, forcing his gaze away from her mouth. Unfortunately, his focus fell to the swell of her bosom where it pressed firmly to his chest. The force of her corset pushed the pale swells into lush cushions that made his mouth water. And there, on the inner curve of her right breast, she'd placed another tiny heart-shaped patch.

Holy bloody hell.

Lost and damned.

"What are your intentions, sirrah?" she asked in a saucy tone, recalling his attention back to her face and the pink silk mask that shielded much of her features. "I suspect you might be an unconscionable thief, set to accost the innocent and unwary?"

Bishop smiled, for once anxious to play along...to become someone else for the night. Someone who'd claim a woman like this as his due. "A man often must survive by the skills he's given, m'lady. And I happen to be very good at thieving."

“I’ve no doubt of that at all.” Her voice lowered to a throaty whisper that did dangerous things to him. “Should I be concerned for my jewels? Or my virtue?”

He clenched his jaw. There were so many things he *should* say. But only one he *wanted* to say.

Noting his sudden tension, she gave a little laugh. “Have I offended you? A brigand with a conscience? How novel.”

With a shake of his head, he murmured, “You misunderstand, luv. ’Tis not my conscience I war with tonight.”

“Then what?” she asked, her eyes searching his. “What prevents you from taking what you desire?”

Instead of answering, Bishop tightened his arm around her waist and spun her in a tight circle, lifting her off her feet. Her arms slid around his neck as she clung to him. Delight shone in her face and pure joy glittered in her gaze. Her laughter was free and unfiltered. Sweet and sultry and full.

Bringing his mouth to her ear, he whispered, “Who says I haven’t?”

The waltz came to an end far too quickly, leaving them both slightly out of breath as they came to a stop in the middle of the floor.

When she drew back, placing her hands on his shoulders, he automatically loosened his hold on her, dropping his hands to her small waist.

Tilting her head, she looked up at him. Though her smile was bold and sensual, there was a growing shadow in her eyes. “You’ve stolen your dance, sirrah. Is that all you want of me, then?”

Bishop’s hands tightened on her waist. “Not nearly, m’lady,” he answered truthfully. “I’d have all of you. Every inch of smooth, soft skin. Every sigh and murmur and gentle laugh from your lips.” He lowered his voice, the tone thickening with his desire. His hunger. His need for this woman. “I want every shiver of your body. Every tingling

response. Every moan and gasp of your pleasure. I want everything you'd see fit to give me.”

Though her breath quickened from between her parted lips with every word he spoke and the black of her pupils expanded in her searching gaze, Bishop also noted the tension that slowly claimed her body.

“You want all that,” she asked softly, a thread of something dark and heavy in her voice, “though you barely know me? Would you say as much to any of the ladies here? Do you share your desire so easily?”

Bishop lowered his chin until his mouth hovered above hers. He paused to breathe in her scent, then clenched his teeth against all it made him feel. Looking into her eyes, he whispered, “I know you. And nothing about what I feel for you is easy.”

Her warm sigh wafted across his lips. Her eyelashes fluttered over her gaze then lifted suddenly as she stared into his eyes. Another song had started up, and though the dancing continued around them, they remained still where they stood. Focused only on each other.

When she would have pulled away, he tightened his hands and gave a small shake of his head. “If you run, I shall simply follow.”

As if recognizing the futility of flight, she slowly released the tension that held her stiff beneath his hands. Tilting her head slightly to the side, she gazed up at him from the small slits in her pink silk mask.

“Did you ken it was me right away?”

“If I say yes, will you be terribly disappointed?”

She harrumphed and Bishop smiled.

“Will you haul me off to Roderick so I can be chastised for my foolishness and sent home?”

He thought for a moment, sending a quick glance about the room, considering everything he knew about the nature of

Bentley's grandest event of the year and the woman standing before him.

"What if I offered to be your escort for the evening?"

"Escort?" she scoffed. "You mean guard. It rather defeats the purpose, I reckon."

"And what is your purpose tonight?"

She sighed heavily, the action causing the lush cushions of her breasts to threaten the confinement of her low-cut bodice.

"You wouldnae understand."

"Try me," he murmured.

Her eyes found his and held, but she said nothing. She didn't trust him.

And that fact bothered him far more intensely than it should have. His stomach tightened.

"Perhaps, instead of a hinderance I could be of some assistance," he offered, the words coming easier than he expected.

There was a slight widening of her eyes and a spark of curiosity or amusement or both lit within their depths. "My apologies, sirrah. I've clearly gotten you confused with someone else."

Bishop laughed then pulled her closer. He loved the way her breath caught at the increased contact of their bodies and how her hands tightened around his arms. Bending his head toward hers, he noted in a dark whisper, "It's me, pet."

Her lashes gave a barely perceptible flutter before she narrowed her gaze dramatically. "If I were to believe in this sudden adjustment in character, how exactly might you assist me?"

"Well"—he cleared his throat—"assuming you're here tonight with a purpose similar to most and acknowledging that you are *not* in need of a guard or a chaperone or even an escort... I imagine I might be able to satisfy the role of... companion in revelry?"

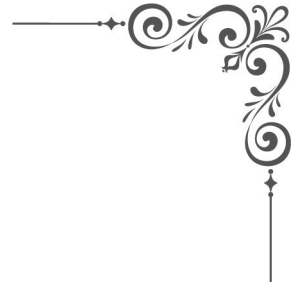
Her eyebrows shot upward and her painted lips parted in surprise before spreading into a wide grin. “No longer my enemy, now my friend?” she asked with humor warming her tone.

“I was never your enemy, Cailleach,” he countered in a thick murmur, “and we could never be something so benign as friends.”

There was a long moment while she stared into his eyes with her breath coming short and swift and her pulse fluttering rapidly beneath the soft skin of her throat that Bishop experienced a totally irrational depth of fear that she might refuse him.

Then she rolled her lips in against the tip of her tongue and offered a quick little half smile. Her voice was quiet but assured when she finally replied.

“Companions in revelry, then.”



Chapter Seventeen

The next couple hours felt like a dream.

A wild, adventurous, titillating, sensual dream.

Because Bishop fulfilled his role to perfection. He remained at her side but didn't crowd her or try to direct her. He joked and teased and engaged with her as a true companion. Cheering her on at the gaming tables, joining in her conversations with the other guests, dancing with her when the music moved her.

And even though he didn't hold her as intimately as he had during that first waltz and he didn't flirt with her or talk to her in that private, sensual tone of voice, the memory of him doing so lingered with tantalizing detail at the front of her mind the entire night.

I'd have all of you. Every inch...every sigh and murmur and gentle laugh...every shiver ...every tingling response. Every moan and gasp. Everything.

He'd said those things to *her*. Knowing who she was.

He wanted *her*.

And surely, he knew by now that she wanted him, as well. Yet, he made no move to claim her. He didn't even try to kiss her again.

And though such a thing might have made her frustrated, she was enjoying his easy companionship far too much.

Much later tonight, however...when she finally lay alone in her bed, under the shroud of night with the revels of the party another memory, she'd recall those words and the rich, weighted way he'd said them and she'd crave his presence.

But for now, he was beside her as they wove through the crowd that had grown rowdier and more celebratory with every win at the tables and with each round of champagne delivered by the many footmen in attendance.

Caillie hadn't seen any of her friends from the west wing in some time, the last having been Selena, who'd passed by on the arm of a newly minted duke, obviously heading back toward the west wing. She'd given an upward flick of her eyebrows at the sight of Caillie and Bishop sharing a plate of canapés. But before sauntering past, the other woman gave Caillie a quick wink that seemed to indicate approval or even encouragement.

Though she'd known the night would have to soon come to an end, Caillie was loath to accept it. She'd never admit it out loud, but spending the party at Bishop's side had only enhanced her enjoyment rather than dampening it as she'd feared.

Unfortunately, the hour was growing late.

"Am I boring you?"

Caillie blinked and quickly slid her gaze to Bishop, who stood beside her at the faro table.

"What? Of course not. Who'd dare to be bored at the event of the bloody year?"

"Then why the heavy sigh?" he asked, a teasing smile quirking the corner of his lips. "At least the fourth in the last quarter hour."

Before she could stop herself, Caillie sighed again, inspiring a deep chuckle from her companion in revelry. She gave his arm a playful swat.

"Because unlike you," she answered, "my night expires at dawn. I must return home before the servants arise. Even if I manage to sneak past them—as I often have in the past—Worthy will be up and about shortly after sunrise to tend to young Fergus and getting past her is not an easy feat."

Bishop's brows lowered. "How much time have you got left then?"

"Close to an hour, I reckon."

"We'll make the most of it," he said, grasping her hand to tuck it into the bend of his elbow as he turned them away from

the faro table. “What’s your pleasure, m’lady?”

Though she knew his words had no sensual intent, Caillie couldn’t help from imagining they did and her insides melted with longing. Spending the evening with him had been a torment as much as a delight. His cocky smiles and arrogant glances and the brief brushes of his shoulder or quick grasp of his hand or low-muttered word meant just for her had all contributed to a sense of intimacy between them. A sense that it was just the two of them in a world of their own despite being constantly surrounded by dozens of noisy revelers.

Forcing a wide smile to her lips, Caillie glanced about. She hadn’t played piquet yet, but she might want to claim the opportunity for another dance. If she managed to drag him into another waltz, she’d end the night in his arms, at least.

As she took a moment to consider her options, Bishop tensed abruptly and a low curse slid from his lips. She would have glanced at him in question, but before she could, she caught sight of what had inspired his sudden discomfort.

Roderick.

Heading straight for them, his blue gaze intent and his stride direct.

They’d managed to avoid her brother throughout the night, veering from his path and occasionally melting into thick crowds as he passed. But it was clear they wouldn’t manage to avoid him this time.

“I’ll distract him,” Bishop managed to mutter just before Roderick reached them.

“Finally caught you,” her brother said with a flashing grin. Luckily, his attention was on Bishop, allowing Caillie to take a few shuffling steps back and to the side so she became partially hidden behind Bishop’s broad shoulders.

“Just testing your tables, mate,” Bishop countered with a sweeping gesture toward the games. As soon as Roderick’s gaze flickered to the side, Caillie turned away and started to gently weave her way through the crowd in the opposite direction as Bishop said behind her, “You didn’t think I would

waste the opportunity to experience this grand event as a guest, did you?"

"You're a full member now, Bishop. You can enjoy the games any time you wish."

Though her wide hooped skirts made progress a bit tedious, Caillie was soon able to step into a less crowded area of the room. A quick glance behind her proved that Bishop was still in conversation with Roderick and had somehow managed to turn her brother so he faced the opposite direction.

Though she hated the idea of leaving early and so suddenly, Caillie acknowledged that she'd just come a bit too close to discovery and she probably shouldn't tempt fate further this night. She reluctantly headed toward the main exit, but the sudden appearance of Mr. Metcalf, Roderick's manager, required a quick change in direction and a new escape plan. Instead of leaving the club, she'd have to retreat upstairs until she could slip back through the building unseen.

She was halfway to the private staircase which would take her up to the second level and a hallway that led straight to her room before she recalled that it wasn't *her* room anymore.

Damnit.

Unfortunately, there was no longer an alternative. Hopefully, Bishop wouldn't curse her presence in his bedroom for such a short and necessary while.

Since the stairway and corridor were strictly off-limits to guests and every available staff member was focused on tending to the party below, Caillie made her way to the bedroom near the west wing with no further trouble or intervention.

Once tucked into the familiar sanctuary with the door closed firmly behind her, she closed the drapes and lit a couple candles so she wouldn't bump her shins against the furniture as she moved about.

Now that her time at the party was officially over, a heaviness slowly settled within her. It was the same at the end of every grand time cut short by unfair obstacles and

limitations. As though all her excitement and happiness had been fully spent in the last hours, she started to feel irritated and a bit forlorn. And her costume suddenly felt ridiculously uncomfortable.

With a harsh, groaning sigh, she removed her mask then started releasing the many pins securing the elaborate wig. But she soon grew impatient and ended up tugging the thing free with pins still in place. The stinging pain in her scalp was a welcome distraction from the frustration knotting in her chest. Frustration born from years of having to conceal her actions and behaviors from those she loved. Years of hiding who she was and wanted to be.

After tossing the wig to a chair, she lifted her skirts to release the ties of the hoops beneath. Then she kicked the monstrous caged thing into a corner, followed by her heeled shoes. She would have loved to open the gown and release the pressure of the corset, but she couldn't loosen the many ties crisscrossing her back without Neda's assistance.

She was stuck.

Plopping down onto the foot of the bed, she released a ragged sigh.

Her favorite night of the year—somehow made even more magical by Bishop's presence—cut short because she wasn't even supposed to be there.

In the darkened silence, she couldn't keep her mind from dancing through every perfect memory of the evening, reliving it all in order to keep it from fading away too fast now that it was over.

Her thoughts lingered on that first waltz. The feel of Bishop's large hand at the small of her back, holding her close. His rakish grin. His suggestive words and the sensual tone in which he said them. Somehow, her desire had been strengthened rather than softened by the hours of easy companionship that had followed. His teasing and encouragement and lack of judgement. His sideways glances and ready smirks and the frustratingly occasional and brief touches.

Her recollections were interrupted by a soft, barely perceptible knock on the door, drawing a swift gasp to her lips.

Who would know she was there?

Had her flight been witnessed after all?

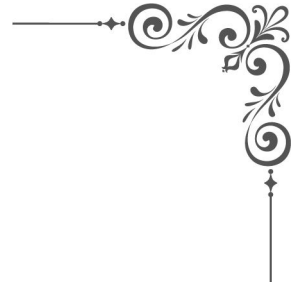
She stiffened. Surely, not Roderick...

Another knock, just a touch more forceful and impatient.

“Open the door.”

Bishop.

She clutched the silken brocade of her skirts in tight fists. Relentless desire bloomed warmly in her low belly, along with an unexpected flare of anticipation and foolish hope.



Chapter Eighteen

Unable to wait any longer for permission, Bishop turned the doorknob. It was unlocked. He stepped inside the bedroom and closed the door behind him. But that was as far as he got because the sight of her stopped him dead.

She sat straight in front of him on the foot of his bed, her mask stripped away. Her hands were buried in the voluminous skirts that fell heavily over her legs now that they were no longer supported by the old-fashioned hoops. The elaborate wig was gone and her rich brown hair was a mess, with portions of it still pinned up while more of it fell around her shoulders in twisted, tousled locks. The beauty patches remained, but most of the red tint had worn away from her lips. Her skin was slightly flushed a soft, warm pinky-peach in the low candlelight.

She was devastating.

Fresh and fierce and utterly unpredictable.

He had no idea how to proceed with her. Never had. Even when she'd been a girl of eighteen, she'd been such a force. He'd never met anyone like her and the intensity of his attraction to her had rocked him to his core. So much that he'd left London and the only life he'd ever known.

But now he was back. And his desire—his lustful longing for her—had only grown and deepened.

He had no idea how much time passed while he stood there, silent and staring, but eventually she took a breath and gave a graceful gesture toward the room.

“I’m sorry to intrude. Metcalf blocked the exit. I thought only to hide out for a few moments.”

Bishop held up his hand to stop her rambling explanation. A smile tugged at his lips but didn’t quite manage to form. “I know. I saw you change direction. It’s fine.”

She frowned gently and tilted her head. “You kent I’d be here and came anyway?”

He chuckled. “I’m not exactly in the habit of knocking on my own door when I believe the room to be unoccupied.”

“Och,” she scoffed quietly, smiling. “Right.”

A zing of lust arced sharply through him. He’d torn his mask off as soon as he’d left the party and now he shoved his hands back through his hair. He was tempted to start pacing but feared stepping one foot away from the door lest he lunge for her.

The sexual, ravenous tension that had been building inside him all evening—with every roll of her husky laughter and rich, honeyed glance and accidental brush of her skirts—suddenly felt far too heavy and demanding to be contained within him.

But instead of taking her in his arms as he longed to do—as his body demanded he do—he stayed firmly against the door. He probably looked a bit mad as he stared at her through the flickering candlelight, with his jaw clenched hard enough to ache and his arms taut at his sides.

But she looked back at him—unafraid, eyes bright, shoulders drawn back, and spine straight. Then she rolled her lips in against her tongue, wetting them before taking a swift, short breath.

His stomach twisted with desire.

“Bishop?” The huskiness of her low voice wound like a flaming snake through his blood. “*Why* did you follow me to your bedroom?”

Her words were so bold and brave. But there was a vulnerability in her eyes that he’d never seen before. Vulnerability and a silent, near-desperate yearning.

How did he reply to such a question when he could barely put the answer into words?

He shoved his hand through his hair again, loosening it further, but he couldn’t care. His voice was rough when he replied. “The last thing I fucking want is to hurt you, Cailleach.”

There was a quick and sudden catch in her breath and her hands fisted more tightly in the material of her gown. But her golden stare held his. “What is the *first* thing you want?”

Bishop’s heart thundered. Desire and longing rushed hot through his veins. All he could manage was a ragged murmur in reply. “Don’t you know?”

“You want me,” she whispered, but there was an uneasy weight to her voice. “Enough to risk Roderick’s precious approval?”

Bishop lowered his chin and opened his hands to his sides. His response was a heavy whisper. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

Her eyes widened with desire and uncertainty together. As if she was afraid to believe what he said but desperately wanted to.

The fierce and undeniable urge to make her understand how intensely he wanted her—how badly he seemed to *need* her—threatened to overwhelm him. But he realized in that second just how afraid he truly was. Afraid to touch her—to express all that he’d been denying for so long. Afraid to hurt her anyway.

Though Bishop had walked among the wealthiest of lords and the finest of gentlemen for years, he’d never have been mistaken for one of them. He was a cockney bastard, raised in a seedy warehouse and educated on the streets.

And Cailleach...Cailleach deserved so much more.

With a rough and ragged sound, he lowered himself to the floor. Extending one leg straight in front of him, he planted his other boot firmly to the floor and leaned his head back against the door. Closing his eyes, he breathed deep. Long, audible breaths. He had no idea what they were supposed to accomplish, he just needed a moment. A moment without the vision of her sitting so proud and beautiful on his bed. A moment without her glittering, penetrating gaze staring into him, trying to *see* him, trying to *know* him.

“Bishop?”

Keeping his head tilted back, he opened his eyes.

She hadn't moved from where she sat, but something had changed in her. He sensed it more than saw it. It reached out to him, like a magnetic draw. Or like a flame's pull on the moth.

Inexorable. Inevitable.

"Do you know why I left?" His words were a raw, ragged murmur. And though he didn't elaborate, he knew she'd understand what departure he was referring to.

She tilted her head with a faint smile. "You grew bored with London...and all of us."

Bishop slowly shook his head. "I was afraid."

"Afraid?" She blinked in surprise. "Of what?"

Lowering his gaze, Bishop fought to find the right words that wouldn't make him sound like an ungrateful wretch.

"I loved working here. This place was more a home to me than anything had been before. But it's impossible to interact with Bentley's elite membership so frequently and not constantly be forced to acknowledge that I'd never be one of them."

"And why should you want to?" she countered.

He chuckled. "That's my point. I didn't want to be like them. And I didn't want to become a replica of Roderick." He gave a quick shake of his head. "Don't get me wrong. I understand why Roderick started his club—why he wanted to target the society which had rejected him. But I realized I didn't really know who I was or what I wanted outside of Bentley's. I had to leave to figure that out."

There was a pause. Then she asked, "And did you?"

He looked up again to find her staring at him with a calm, open expression. Utterly devoid of judgement. His chest tightened.

"As much as I could expect to."

She nodded her acceptance.

"But that's not the only thing I needed to discover about myself," he added in a lowered voice.

There was curiosity in her gaze but also compassion and acceptance. “What else?”

This was going to be far more difficult to express than the prior explanation. But he needed to say it. She deserved to know. He *wanted* her to know. To understand.

He took a heavy breath. “When it came to my experiences with women, I’d never felt anything deeper than the pleasure of satisfying mutual lust. And shortly before I left, I started to wonder what it might be like...to have more.”

“I see,” she whispered quietly. And though her voice and manner were soft and receptive, he could see her fingers tightening again in the material of her gown.

Was she jealous at the thought of him with other women?

Fuck, he hoped so.

“You don’t,” he replied with a shake of his head. “Not yet,” he muttered thickly.

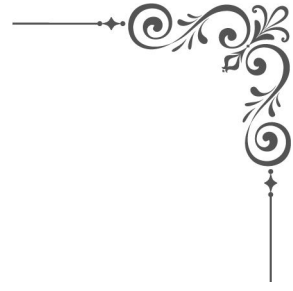
He wouldn’t—couldn’t—tell her that she had been the one person to inspire his desire for a deeper connection...and the yearning for emotional as well as sexual satisfaction. *She* had been the singular and undeniable catalyst for a longing unlike any he’d experienced previously. It had rocked him to his core.

It still did.

But he couldn’t tell her that.

She leaned forward, just slightly, and her eyes darkened with her quiet plea. “Then help me understand.”

He did not look away from her this time as he explained. “I knew that if I ever wanted to have something *more*—just as I had to discover who I was without Bentley’s, I also had to learn who I was without...women.”



Chapter Nineteen

Bishop saw the exact moment she understood. Her eyes widened and her lips parted on a soft, swift inhale. And then, because she was Cailleach, she said it out loud. “You’ve been celibate. For five years?”

Bishop smiled at the shock in her voice and nodded.

“Bluidy hell,” she whispered.

“Bloody fucking hell,” he murmured with all the weight of his current torment.

“Is that why you’ve...pushed me away?”

He nodded again, and though it was true, it wasn’t the whole truth. The greater answer to why he’d been resisting the attraction between them was because he was still afraid.

Not that he might be incapable of experiencing everything he imagined with her.

But even more terrifying...that once he did, it might be too much. Too intense. Too wonderful. Too deep for him to handle. And that in his weakness, he might end up destroying something precious.

For that, he’d never forgive himself.

It would be far safer to never take the risk.

“So, even though you want me,” she asked in a sultry murmur, “mayhap even as badly as I want you...you willnae take me? Ever?”

The sensual longing in her voice drew a heavy groan from Bishop’s throat. He dropped his head back against the door and closed his eyes again. “I’d give my fucking life to have you. Just once.” He swallowed hard and took a deep breath. “But I don’t want to—” The words cut off as he opened his eyes to a thin slit and peered darkly at her sitting so tense and breathless on his bed. “I *can’t* make any mistakes.”

It was clear by the furrow of her brow that she still didn’t fully understand.

It was also equally clear that her desire had been steadily increasing during their conversation. Her skin was even more flushed. Her eyes were bright and shadowed at the same time. And her knuckles showed white with the tightness of her fists. She fairly vibrated with wanting.

And confusion.

“What can I do?” Her voice was soft and imploring. “Please, Bishop...you mun tell me what to do.”

His entire body trembled and sparked with the implication in her words, the breathy heat in them. The longing and the need. The uncertainty and the hunger.

She didn't even realize how starkly her plea contradicted everything she'd declared to him from the moment they'd met on his return. For the first time, she was willing to place herself into his hands—to accept his guidance and direction.

He would not squander such a gift.

Heart thundering so heavily it was almost all he could hear, he muttered, “Lift your skirts.”

She blinked, possibly in surprise but maybe not since she didn't hesitate to do exactly as he instructed. Inch by inch, she pulled her skirts along her thighs, gathering the material across her lap as first her feet were exposed—shoeless and perfectly shaped—then the lovely bones of her ankles, then the curves of her calves. She paused only when the hem reached her knees.

“Higher,” he managed gruffly. His voice didn't even sound like his own. It was darker, heavier.

He watched, entranced, as the skirts rose another inch, then another and another. Slowly revealing more of her elegant limbs, sheathed in fine pale pink silk stockings. Until the top edges of her bright red garters were revealed.

Bishop's heart lurched and his cock hardened to stone.

It was the red. So daring and unabashedly sensual against the pale stockings and the creamy golden skin of her naked

thighs. Clenching his teeth as his cock throbbed, he flicked his gaze up to hers.

The bold, fearless woman stared back at him. Her focus direct and steady though her breath came swift and erratic from between her parted lips.

Those damned heavenly lips. Full and sweet and lush. Lips that inspired sinful, decadent desires. A painful jolt of need shot through his body.

Bishop flatted his palms to the floor, fighting against the urge to leap at her.

“Higher,” he commanded, his voice raw.

Her skirts rose those last few inches, exposing the length of her thighs while keeping that most intimate part of her hidden from his gaze. Even so, the sight of her bared limbs was nearly enough to stop his breath.

But then she did something he couldn't have anticipated—couldn't have prepared for even if he'd expected it.

Slowly. Deliberately. She parted her legs.

His heart lurched, his stomach tightened, and his cock hardened to a painful degree.

“*Fucking hell, Cailleach,*” he groaned, “are you trying to kill me?”

She paused with her knees no more than four inches apart. “Shall I stop?” she asked. The husky, sensual tone of her voice was one of the most erotic things he'd ever heard.

“Don't you dare,” he threatened.

She flashed a smile that angled straight to his chest before she spread her legs wider. Then wider still. Opening herself to him. Until all that kept her sex from his view was the shadow of her gathered skirts.

Bishop forced his gaze back to meet hers.

He should stop this now.

There was no way in hell he was going to. But perhaps... he could resist touching her. Perhaps he could keep himself locked in place against the door...a couple meters away. Perhaps...

Swallowing past the raw burn in his throat, he asked in a low murmur, "Have you ever touched yourself? Between your legs?"

Holding his stare, she nodded and his heart threatened to leap right out of his chest.

"Show me."

The command was barely audible in his gruff tone, but she clearly understood. With her bottom lip caught between her even white teeth, she set one slim hand atop her knee. Holding him captive with her sparkling golden eyes, she slid her fingers gently up the inside of her thigh, past the red garter, to delve beneath the edge of her skirts.

When a soft sigh slid from her lips and her lashes fluttered, Bishop groaned.

"Is your feminine flesh soft and swollen?"

She nodded.

"Are you wet and aching?"

A quiet moan caught in her throat and she nodded again.

Bishop forced himself to ask the next question though he feared the answer might destroy him. "Do you know how to bring yourself to release?"

Though a rosy hue colored her cheeks and spread over her chest, there was no embarrassment in her reply. "Aye."

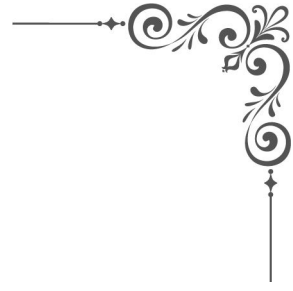
He clenched his back teeth and forced a breath through his nose. The scent of roses mingled with the scent of her arousal and the groan that escaped his throat then was nearly a growl.

Lowering his attention to where her hand made subtle motions between her thighs, he realized that in all his worry over hurting her, he hadn't acknowledged how easily this woman could utterly destroy him. She'd nearly done it already

without even trying. If she ever discovered the full extent of her power over him, he'd be lost forever.

“Would you show me how you pleasure yourself, Cailleach?”

Her breath caught and held before her answer slid from her throat on a sultry sigh. “Aye.”



Chapter Twenty

Caillie had no idea how she hadn't gone up in flames from the look in his eyes alone. Dark and swirling with a possessiveness that was almost frightening.

Each time he spoke, the rough and growly nature of his voice brought another rush of liquid heat to her sex. Making her tremble with a powerful need unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. And deep inside, her a hollowness grew, threatening to consume her.

He hadn't touched her since coming to this bedroom, yet she felt him over every inch of her skin. Her entire body felt poised and waiting for his next command. She was his to claim if he should simply reach for her.

God, how she wanted him to reach for her.

But now she understood that he couldn't. Or wouldn't.

Either way, the situation was the same. She might never have him as she wanted. But she could have this.

Slipping her middle finger along the silken folds of her sex, she kept her rapt gaze upon him. Though her eyelids grew heavy as sensation sparked along her nerves, she wanted to see him watching her. She needed to share this with him in some way if not the way she really desired, which was *his* hand between her legs. *His* fingers dancing over her flesh. *His* expert caress bringing her the pleasure that tingled through her bloodstream.

His gaze was focused intently on her movements. She knew he couldn't see what she was doing, but was he imagining it?

She usually started slow when she touched herself. She enjoyed the exploration. Learning her body's reactions. Discovering what she liked. But slow seemed impossible tonight. She might have thought that pleasuring herself under another's gaze would be difficult, but not with Bishop. Her desire was amplified a thousand times by the man watching

her. Her body was already trembling. A fine sheen of sweat moistened the back of her neck and a flush covered her skin.

When she circled her clitoris with the pad of her finger, the rush of sensation caused her to draw a swift breath. The sound seemed to affect him, making the muscles of his jaw bunch and tighten and his nostrils flare with deep inhales. His entire body was tensed and taut. His back pressed firmly to the door and his hands fisted against the floor, as though he were desperately holding himself in place.

He looked every inch the decadent rogue and she couldn't help soaking in the sight of him. The fierceness of his gaze as he peered between her legs. The power in his form and the strength in his limbs as he kept himself at a distance. The hard plane of his chest and the firmness of his thighs. The undeniable ridge of his erection pressing against the black leather of his breeches.

Once her eyes dropped to that part of him, she couldn't look away.

He was long and thick—the shape of his cock erotically evident as it angled toward his hip. And as she stared at him, it seemed to grow even larger.

She suddenly wanted desperately to go to him. Crawl atop him to straddle his lap and feel that hardness against her slick, heated flesh.

“Cailleach.”

Her name on his tongue—in those textured, tortured tones—was a harsh warning and a sensual promise at once.

She lifted her gaze. And her breath caught in her throat.

The lust in his eyes. The brutal hunger. The infinite need. It met and matched her own.

It was so intense that everything in her stilled. The expansion of her lungs, the beat of her heart, and certainly the gentle stroke of her fingers along her sex.

That didn't seem to please him at all.

Flicking a glance to her spread thighs, he made a low, rumbling sound that tightened her low belly before he lifted his gaze back to hers.

“You haven’t finished,” he murmured, the words thick and heavy.

“I...” Her tongue twisted in her mouth. For the first time in her life, she couldn’t seem to find the words to express what she was thinking. What she was feeling. Needing.

Her gaze fell again to his straining cock.

The truth was, she could easily find her release. It was already so close. The gleam in his eyes, the desire in his gorgeous, sinful voice...just knowing that he was finding some pleasure in watching her made her own pleasure so much more acute.

But she wanted more. She wanted him. All of him.

His gaze was dark—his visage a brutal mask of tension and lust. Staring into his eyes, hiding nothing, revealing all in her gaze, she eased her finger along her sex in a lush and languid stroke. A soft whimper escaped her lips.

The sound of it seemed to jolt him into action. He made another gruff sound and shifted his weight, lifting himself off the floor to lunge forward onto his hands and knees.

Caillie’s breath came to a full stop as he slowly moved toward her. She’d never seen anything so beautiful—so masterful and sleek and utterly seductive. He was a predator and a supplicant at once. She, both his mistress and his prey.

Holding her gaze, he eased between her spread thighs. Rising up until they were face-to-face, he wrapped his warm hands around her legs, just above her knees. Power and heat and sensuality emanated from him as he slid his hands up the outsides of her thighs, pausing to sweep his thumbs along the red silk of her garters.

Her ragged inhale was followed by a breathy sigh.
“Bishop.”

Thick locks of his hair that had come loose from his queue fell against his angled cheekbones as he lowered his head. Breathing deep, he seemed to soak in the scent of her.

“I need you, Cailleach,” he murmured. “I thought it would help to put half the world between us. I thought I’d forget how you smelled...how your lips felt under mine. Maybe I should’ve tried to erase the memory of you by spending my lust between the thighs of countless other women.”

Caillie stiffened, the idea of him making love to anyone else a painful shock to her arousal.

His voice lowered to a growl. “But I couldn’t. Just the thought of taking pleasure with anyone else leaves me cold.” He rested his forehead to hers and his dark, tormented eyes looked into hers as he confessed, “It’s been so long, Cailleach. So long that I’ve craved the scent of roses as I stroked myself off. So long that I dreamed of what you’d look like in my bed. What you’d sound like.” His voice lowered. “What you’d taste like.”

Her heart stuttered at the hunger in his eyes.

“I’m not waiting another fucking second.” He delved one hand beneath her skirts to take hold of her wrist. Lifting her hand, he pressed his thumb to the center of her palm as he slipped her middle finger into his mouth.

The heat and velvet softness of his lips and tongue as it swirled around her finger, licking and sucking her essence, sent shockwaves of pleasure through her body.

Her husky moan was answered by his, heavier and deeper.

Drawing her finger slowly from his mouth, he shook his head.

“I need more. I’m dying to slide my tongue between your soft folds and suckle your bud until you’re shaking with pleasure. Let me kiss your sweet cunt until you come.”

“Bluidy hell,” she whispered, her throat tight and her heart pounding. Her body buzzed with anticipation. Slick, molten heat flooded her core.

Her hands shook with the force of her suspended passion as she lifted them to frame his face. The texture of his beard was both soft and bristly against her palms and the jaw muscles beneath were fiercely tense.

His hands tightened again on her thighs, hard enough to cause pain, but it was a sensation she reveled in. It meant he wasn't going to let her go easily.

Staring into eyes gone nearly black with mystery and primal need, she whispered breathlessly, "I dinnae want you to do anything you'll regret."

The sound he made was barely human. His eyes flashed. "Regret is the farthest thing from my mind. Let me pleasure you," he growled.

She didn't know why he'd decided to end his abstinence now. But she wasn't going to question it further.

"This first," she murmured, then she pressed her open mouth to his, sweeping her tongue past his gorgeous lips to taste the decadent richness inside. When his tongue darted and twisted against hers with fierce, ravenous demand, she moaned. Though she'd taken the kiss, he easily took possession of *her*. His tongue claimed every breath of her passion, tasted every secret longing, and still, he insisted on more.

With a harsh sound, he shoved his hands higher beneath her skirts to grasp hold of her hips. His fingers dug into the softness of her buttocks as he pulled her roughly to the very edge of the bed. Then he lashed at her tongue with his before closing his mouth over her bottom lip to draw it in between his teeth.

Caillie managed to open her eyes just enough to see a devilish light flicker in his gaze before he lowered his head to press a hot kiss to the upper curve of her breast where she'd pasted the heart-shaped beauty mark. Then he lowered himself between her legs. His shoulders forced her knees wider as he grabbed her skirts and shoved them against her belly.

She barely had a chance to draw a breath before his mouth was there. Covering her with sultry heat. He found her clitoris first. Closing his lips over it in a short, swift, spine-tingling tug before releasing her to draw the length of his tongue with slow, savoring attention along her sex. The sound he made was one of ecstasy and command as he made love to her with a ferocity that stole her soul.

She fell back onto the bed. Her gasps and moans filled the room, accompanied by the wet, wicked sounds of his intimate kiss and the deep, rumbling growls of his pleasure. He consumed her. Ravished her. Demanded more from her body than she'd thought possible. New sensations. Delicious pleasures. Deeper and deeper yearning.

Without even realizing it, she'd reached one hand down to thread her fingers into his hair, holding him to her though it was clear he wasn't going anywhere. Her other hand clutched his where it splayed over her belly, keeping her heavy skirts out of his way.

His tongue was magic, working over her sensitive nerves, delving into the heat of her, and lavishing her flesh with velvet strokes.

Pleasure rolled through her like a storm, her climax building in the tightening of her muscles and the delicious swirling in her low belly. Her breath was little more than panting whimpers as that pleasure coiled deeper and stronger, tightening to a point of near pain, preparing for release. It was too intense. Too perfect. Too much. It was going to destroy her.

Her fingers fisted in his hair and he gave a soft grunt as his gaze flickered up to meet hers. The stark, animalistic hunger she saw there stopped her breath. The total possession. The ferocious demand.

She couldn't escape. Not his gaze. Not him. And sure as bluidy hell not the pleasure.

It tore through her like lightning. Sharp, sudden, and bright enough to illuminate the world. And through it all, he held her stare. While his lips and tongue moved relentlessly over her

sex, wringing every ounce of sensation from her body, his wicked gaze demanded more.

A full and utter surrender.

Her climax seemed to go on forever, rippling through her in shocking, tingling waves until finally, it receded almost gently to her fingertips and toes. Gasping a ragged breath, Caillie sagged as her spine went weak and her thighs began to tremble.

And still he lavished her delicate, pulsing folds with licks of his tongue that grew ever softer and slower. Until he placed a final, reverent kiss to the smooth skin of her inner thigh.

Then he rose up between her legs, leaned over her, and almost angrily took her face in his hands to claim her mouth in a life-giving kiss that tasted of his dark, unrelenting need and her own deep pleasure.

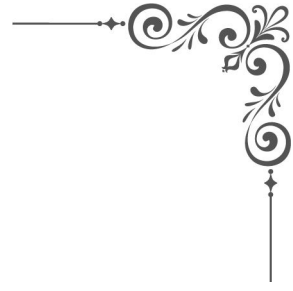
Caillie sighed into the kiss, twisting her tongue with his, tugging at his lips. She suddenly felt as though he might somehow try to disappear as he had five years ago. Fear of losing him before she truly had him urged her to wrap her arms fiercely around his neck as she tightened her thighs against his hips, locking his body to hers. She needed to claim him—possess him as he so easily possessed her. But he resisted. His shoulders tensed as he pulled back enough to murmur against her lips. “Cailleach.”

She clutched at him harder, pulling him closer.

“Cailleach,” he repeated, his tone weighted and firm.

Against every instinct inside her, she ceased her desperate kiss, allowing only enough space between them to meet his gaze.

“I’m here,” he murmured. “I’m here and I won’t be leaving you until my lips have touched every inch of your body. Until your skin is branded with my breath and bathed with my tongue. I intend to ruin you for any man but me.” His voice dropped to a raw whisper. “I need you, Cailleach, and I mean to fucking have you.”



Chapter Twenty-one

Bishop's heart thundered as he watched the sharp glint of panic fade from her shimmering gaze. Then she slowly eased one hand from around his neck to slide it along his hair-roughened jaw in a tender, sensual caress before she touched the tip of her finger to the corner of his mouth.

"I've dreamed of these lips," she whispered, her focus following the path of her caress along the curve of his lower lip. "Asleep, awake... they've haunted me." Her lashes fluttered over her eyes, making his chest lurch. Then she took a slow inhale and met his stare. "Bishop."

Her voice was a breath. A sigh. A vow and plea at once.

It drifted over his skin, lifting the hair on his arms and tingling across his nape, before diving into the very pit of him where it curled up like a cat before the hearth, making a home for itself.

In a rush of movement, he rose to his feet, pulling her up with him.

A husky giggle slid from her throat as she grasped ahold of him to keep her balance within the steady circle of his arms.

"I need you out of this bloody dress. Now."

She smiled then turned in place. Lifting the tangled locks of her hair, she held them atop her head so he could access the ribbons that crisscrossed her back.

Eyeing the knotted laces with a narrowed glare, Bishop withdrew the knife tucked into his sash. One smooth slash cut through the ribbons and loosened the gown in an instant.

Cailleach's gasp of surprise blended sensually with the sound of silk sliding against satin as the costume fell heavily to the floor. Another delicate slash of the blade sliced through the laces of her corset, releasing her from its cage to leave her in nothing but a short chemise, her pale stockings, and those damned red garters.

Still holding her hair atop her head, she twisted to give him a little glance over her bare shoulder. The mischievous sparkle of anticipation in her eyes angled sure and straight to his cock.

He made a sound deep in his throat—half primal need, half warning—and her lips parted on a swift inhale.

But instead of inspiring uncertainty or hesitation, his hunger seemed to bolster her confidence. Releasing her hair, she turned to face him. More pins fell from their moorings as her heavy brown locks tumbled down her back. After tucking the knife back into his sash, he delved his fingers into her hair, searching for the remaining pins. While he focused intently on his task, she stood still and self-assured, her hands roaming gently up and down his sides, then over his tense abdomen and up the firm planes of his chest. From the edge of his gaze, he could see her looking up at him with a sultry glimmer in her eyes and a soft smile curving her generous mouth.

The nearly overwhelming urge to pick her up and toss her back onto the bed so he could dive between her slim thighs and claim his place in her heat made his body tense to living stone. He clenched and unclenched his back teeth, forcing slow, even breaths through his nose in an effort to maintain control. But her rose-musk scent infused his blood, clouded his brain, and threatened his vow to go slow and savor this woman.

His struggle must have shown in his expression because he felt her hands flex and curl at his sides before she whispered, “We dinnae have to...go further.” Her voice trembled softly. “If you’d rather not, I mean.”

Bishop’s hands stilled in her hair. He angled his gaze sharply to hers. “What?”

Her lashes fell briefly over her gaze before lifting again. “You’ve kept yourself from ...this for a reason. I wouldnae be able to bear it you were to wake tomorrow and wish...you hadnae followed me.”

With a harsh sound, Bishop stepped into her, pressing his body to hers from chest to knees as he curled his fists in her hair. Perhaps a bit too tight since a low gasp escaped her lips,

but he couldn't bring himself to release her. Instead, he tugged her head back, lengthening her throat and forcing another husky sigh from her lips.

“Have I still not made it clear to you?” he asked gruffly. Lowering his head until his mouth was near enough to hers that he could taste her breath, he continued, “I *need* you, Cailleach. And I *will* have you. But I won't be rushed. I've waited too fucking long... There's so much I want to do to you.” He bent down to flick his tongue against the curve of her ear. “Places I want to touch. Kiss. Bite,” he whispered huskily as he sunk his teeth into the muscle that sloped from her shoulder to her neck.

Her moan was husky and sweet. She dropped her head back even more, offering herself, urging him to explore further.

“I'm going to leave my mark on your body and soul,” he murmured against her skin. “So you never forget this night... never forget the pleasure of my kiss or the feel of me inside you...all around you.”

Curving his spine over her arched form, he slid his lips along her collarbone to bury his face between her breasts. Her warm scent surrounded him and he breathed her in deeply, taking her inside himself. If he wanted to brand her, he also wanted to *be* branded. Forever changed.

When he closed his mouth over the peak of her breast, she gasped then gave a breathy laugh. Cradling his face in her hands, she murmured, “Why does it sound like you believe this will be our only time together?”

Bishop tensed. Lifting his head, he met her desirous gaze. “Cailleach, I'm not—”

“Meant for me?” she interrupted with a wry smile. “I thought you'd finally accepted that only I get to decide what's for me and what isn't.”

His stomach twisted. Could she really have no idea how totally unsuitable he was for a woman like her? His sigh was heavy and harsh as he straightened his spine and slid his hands

down the length of her back to grasp her waist. Firming his features, he studied her stubborn and slightly amused expression. He couldn't go any further unless she understood the situation.

“Cailleach, there can be no future between us.” *An earl's daughter and a cad like him.*

Her sigh was softer than his had been but carried no less weight. She lifted a hand to caress his jaw, then trailed her fingertips along the taut muscles of his neck to the hollow in the center of his collarbone. Stopping there, she pressed her middle finger to his pulse and stared intently into his heavy gaze.

“I reckon the future will take care of itself without us needing to cut it off before its time.” She tilted her head and lifted the corner of her mouth. “Mayhap, we should just enjoy each other in the now—however long that might last—without trying to define the limits of what's between us.”

What could he say to that? It was so damned reasonable and yet it terrified him. Perhaps it wasn't *her* he was trying to protect by placing limits on their passion. Perhaps he was more fearful of whether he'd survive the devastation of losing her after finally experiencing the full depths of her passion and his own?

When he didn't reply, her smile slipped and a flicker of concern entered her precious gaze as she gave a gentle shake of her head. She stepped toward him then, and his hands automatically tightened around her waist, drawing her against him even more fully, until their bodies were close enough to melt into each other. Then she lifted her lips to his and whispered, “Do you truly need me, Bishop?”

His answer was a low growling sound that vibrated against her finger at the base of his throat.

“Then take me.” The words were husky and sweet. “If you believe tonight is all we'll have, make me remember it for the rest of my lonely days. I'd rather have just one night than none at all.”

She barely finished speaking before he lowered his head to claim her mouth with a demanding sweep of his tongue. He hated hearing those words on her lips. In his head, they sounded inevitable. But in her lovely, honest voice, they were weighted with loss. And he wanted none of that between them now.

His kiss was purposely fierce and intently ravenous as he lifted her in his hands and tossed her back onto the bed as he'd wanted to do earlier.

He would have her this night. All of her. In every way. And he wouldn't think of the future or the stark differences between them. He'd embrace the *now*, which contained only them and a passion that would not be denied.

But standing there, looking down at her as she lay waiting for him, her gaze desirous and heavy, her body covered by nothing but stockings and a thin, barely there chemise, something clenched hard in his chest.

He'd bedded countless women before leaving London. Some of them many, many times. Flirtation, seduction, bed sport... It had been nothing but lighthearted, vigorous fun. No ties. No commitment. Just exploration and pleasure for the sheer enjoyment of it. He'd never wanted more than a few hours of physical diversion and his partners had never expected more.

But that kiss in the stairway on the morning he'd left...

The moment he'd first touched his lips to Cailleach's, he'd known—like the fucking blast of a cannon—that making love to her would be something else. That kiss had been everything he'd suspected and feared it might be.

Insistent. Unpredictable. *Altering*.

It had lasted bare seconds, but it had changed him and he'd spent the next five years trying to purge it from his system. And ironically, the one thing that might have worked to blur his memories of the woman he could never have was the one thing he couldn't do.

Other women had simply ceased to exist for him.

And now, as he tilted over the precipice of finally claiming exactly what he'd denied himself for so long, he felt... impatient, desperate, and shockingly inexperienced.

He'd fucked plenty, but he'd never made love.

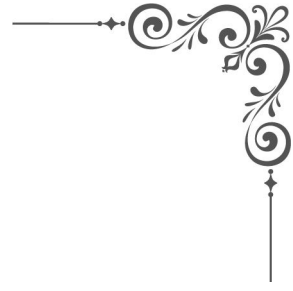
The truth of that made him tense even as his heart thundered and his hands shook with a desire that was overwhelming.

But then he looked into Cailleach's eyes, glittering and mysterious, and it all just felt so bloody right. Even his flash of uncertainty. Or maybe especially that.

“Bishop.”

His name on her soft lips was like a siren's call. There was no question in her tone. No demand or uncertainty. Her voice was that of a woman who knew what she wanted. And what she wanted was him.

He could no more deny her than he could stop his own heart from beating.



Chapter Twenty-two

Caillie's belly tightened with delicious longing and the sense of something desperately out of reach finally coming to pass.

Tonight, she would have him. And tomorrow...was for tomorrow.

His magnetic stare was silent but fierce as he placed a knee on the bed then leaned forward to brace his weight on his hands planted on each side of her legs. The candlelight flickered in his dark gaze, making him the predator once again.

Her heart quickened and her breath came short. The shallow pants drew his attention to her breasts as they heaved beneath the thin material of her chemise. As soon as his heavy gaze touched them, her nipples peaked. He made a low sound of appreciation but continued his perusal down over her trembling stomach to the shadow between her thighs.

Then he lowered himself, slowly, until he could press his warm lips to her low belly, just above her mound. Her legs tensed and shifted with restlessness. A soft sound of distress caught in her chest as she brought her hands to his shoulders, in part to satisfy an instinctive need to anchor herself to him, but also because she simply craved the feel of his strength and heat beneath her palms.

He brushed his lips back over forth over her belly before moving up to suddenly claim the tip of one breast in his mouth. Caillie arched her back. Sensations unlike anything she could've imagined rushed through her body. Her gasp was loud in the darkness and her moan when he swirled his tongue over her nipple came from the very depths of her being.

Her fingers curled into claws, latching on to his shoulders as she tried to pull him closer. She wanted to feel more of him than just his wonderful, decadent kiss. She wanted his weight and his power and possession.

But he held himself over her, caging her with his body while touching her only with his hot mouth soaking the soft cotton of her chemise.

With every flick of his tongue on her breast—every tugging pull of his lips—her desperation grew until he lifted his head to brush a kiss across her lips. The taste of him was heady, but the caress was too soft, too light.

Caillie took his head in her hands and opened her mouth against his to thrust her tongue between his teeth. He returned the kiss with equal fervor, twisting his tongue with expert skill and demanding sensuality. When he started to pull away, she held him tighter, but he slid his lips to her ear to assure her in a thick murmur.

“We’ve just begun, sweetheart. There are far too many things I’ve imagined doing to you and I intend to do as many as possible.”

“You’re not the only one who’s been dreaming of this,” she gasped, arching her back in an attempt to press her breasts to his broad chest.

He lifted his head to look deep into her eyes as he vowed, “Tell me your dreams and I’ll make every one come true.”

And she knew with every ounce of her being that he would. For tonight, at least.

She took a steadying breath, forcing her lungs to fully expand before she exhaled again. Her gaze slid over him as he braced himself on hands and knees over her near-writhing body.

She flicked her gaze back to his and whispered, “I’ve a desperate need to see you. All of you.”

His smile was slow and sensual and undeniably devilish. “Do you now?”

She made a rough sound of distress. “Dinnae tease me,” she pleaded.

With a warm chuckle, he eased back toward the foot of the bed and stood.

He removed his knife first and set it aside before unwinding the black silk sash from around his lean hips.

Caillie sat up to watch him with fascination and an almost painful anticipation.

He released the ties of his shirt next and grasped the material at his waist to lift it up and over his head. The lean and muscled perfection he revealed beneath had Caillie drawing a swift, stunted gasp.

Bluidy hell, the man was gorgeous. Fit and strong with the loveliest shadows curving round his shoulders and arms, dissecting his abdomen, and angling down beneath the waistband of his breeches.

It took her a moment to realize he'd paused in his undressing. Whether to give her the long moment she needed to admire his fine physique or for some other reason, she wasn't having it. Lifting her desirous stare to meet his gaze—rich and mysterious—she noted firmly, “You're not finished, Bishop. I wish to see all of you.”

He cocked his head to an impertinent angle. “You're a demanding sort, aren't you?”

Caillie was unabashed. “When I ken what I want.”

His slow grin was nothing shy of pure wickedness as he dipped his chin.

He toed off his boots then grasped the waist of his breeches, shoving them down to his ankles before stepping free and kicking them aside along with his stockings.

Then he stood tall and proud and completely nude.

Caillie bit hard to her bottom lip as the world spun around her in a haze of desire and longing and the sense that her greatest dream was truly coming alive before her eyes.

The strength of his upper body continued through his lean hips and muscled legs. But the most astonishing, inspiring, and downright captivating element of his anatomy jutted long and thick from his groin.

Caillie couldn't look away.

For years, she'd heard the women of the west wing lament the loss of Bishop's talents and gifts in the bedroom. Mostly they talked of his skill and creativity, but occasionally they'd murmur something about his impressive size. But those comments were often accompanied by sly sideways glances and a flutter of lashes.

She'd always wondered how exceptional a man's member must be to make a seasoned prostitute blush.

And now she knew.

Caillie didn't have to have seen any prior examples to understand that Bishop was undeniably well-endowed. But more than that...he was bludiy beautiful. Despite his significant size, there was an elegance to the shape and curve of his erection.

Her belly fluttered uncontrollably as an aching emptiness grew inside her.

She knew the mechanics of lovemaking and more besides. But she'd never really contemplated what it might be like to take a lover within herself. To feel his body become part of her own. But as she stared at Bishop, it was *all* she could think about. It made her throb with wanting even as her mind struggled to comprehend how it could even be possible.

And then, as she stared, he grew even harder, thicker, and longer. His cock jutting upward toward his firm belly.

A soft sound slid from her throat.

“Cailleach.”

Her eyes flew back to his at the sound of her roughly whispered name. His face was a study of lustful tension. His eyes blazed, his jaw was clenched tight, and the cords of muscle in his neck and arms had become more pronounced as he curled his hands in fierce fists.

“Bishop,” she sighed in response.

His voice was as dark and penetrating as his stare. “Your turn.”



SHE DIDN'T HESITATE for a moment. But when she reached for her garters first, he gave a fierce shake of his head. "Leave them."

Her brows lifted and a faint smile touched her lips, but she obliged. Shifting to her knees, she took the bottom hem of her chemise in her fingers and lifted the light garment up and over her head before tossing it carelessly aside.

Her body was stunning. It literally stopped his breath.

Gorgeous breasts the perfect size for his hands. Proud shoulders and a slim torso tapering to gently widening hips and long, smoothly muscled legs.

He lunged for her then. Sweeping his arm around her waist, he hauled her up against him as he tumbled them both back onto the bed. Her arms came around his shoulders and her soft laughter eased some of the aggression in his body. Lying beneath him, her legs tangled with his, her belly cradling the hard heat of his erection, her soft breasts flattened beneath the weight of his chest, and her light-dark gaze focused intently on his face, she was the epitome of every fantasy that had plagued him for more than five long years.

Sensual, strong, bold, and utterly honest.

He couldn't help but take a few long moments to soak up the sight and feel of her, draw her into the deepest cavern of his memory where the essence of this moment would be forever imprinted, branded, guarded as the most priceless of treasures.

Releasing a ragged moan, she pulled his lips to hers.

With her tongue darting like a silken lick of flame into his mouth, she undulated beneath him, arching and rolling her spine, as though trying to feel every part of him with every part of her.

He finally brought his hands up to cradle her face. Bracing himself on his elbows, he took control of the kiss. Gentling and easing it to a more sultry, seductive rhythm. He wanted

her to feel everything, wanted her to experience all the passion and desire and longing of their joining to its greatest potential.

As he slid his lips to her ear, tugging at the soft lobe with his teeth, she gave a soft, throaty giggle. And when he moved his lips along the side of her throat, the giggle turned to a breathy moan. Her arms eased around his shoulders, allowing him to lift himself enough to bow his head to her gorgeous breasts.

He suckled and teased. Scraped with the edge of his teeth over the peak and the sensitive undercurve before soothing both with the warm flat of his tongue. He devoured her and worshiped her. Until her breath was short and shallow between parted lips and her eyes were tightly closed.

Shifting his weight, he resettled between her slim thighs, low enough that her sultry heat remained just beyond reach of his aching cock. His heart thundered wildly and his hand trembled when he slowly reached down between them.

She was so slick and hot. Her body swollen and sensitive from her earlier release. Within moments, the questing strokes of his fingers had her straining and panting, arching her spine and lifting her hips to claim more of his touch. And when he slid a finger into her sheath, the moan that slipped from her lips was rich and low.

His entire body tensed at the sound, every nerve vibrating in resonance with it.

“Bishop,” she murmured, a heavy plea. “I feel so much need. Dinnae torment me.”

He added a second finger and twisted them deep inside her, curling them behind her pubic bone then spreading them to stretch and soften her inner flesh. She gasped and pressed her face into his neck, her breath swift and warm against his damp skin.

Withdrawing his hand from her lush and lovely sex, he grasped his cock and rose up over her to position himself at her entrance. Her silken wetness coated his tip and he ground

his back teeth against the rush of pleasure that flowed through him.

Not yet. He refused to claim his release until they'd been properly joined.

Holding himself on his forearms, he watched her face and pushed forward.

Her breath caught on a swift inhale and her entire body tensed as he attempted to breach her narrow passage. Fiercely, she held his gaze even as her thighs tightened against his hips and a soft guttural sound issued from her throat.

Bishop's heart pounded so loud it filled his ears. He'd known it would be difficult the first time, that his size wasn't easy to take. He'd hoped she was ready, but he had no experience with virgins.

"Cailleach?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she whispered quickly. "Dinnae stop."

But as he pushed forward the tiniest bit more, the light in her eyes flickered and her lashes swept down to shield her gaze as she tensed her jaw.

He stopped immediately, a hollow ache filling his chest. His crown pulsed insistently at her entrance, desperate to be inside her. But he couldn't continue. Not if it caused her such pain.

Her eyes flew open. "What's the matter?"

Bishop cradled the side of her face in his hand, brushing his thumb over the soft curve of her cheek. The thundering beat of his heart hit hard against his ribs and throbbed in his cock, but he forced himself to focus on her questioning gaze.

"I don't think I can do this," he whispered roughly, his voice weighted with denied lust and fear. "I don't know how to keep from hurting you."

She gave a vigorous shake of her head and tightened her arms around him. Her expression was fierce. "You cannae stop, Bishop. This pain is momentary and I swear I'd rather die than bear the loss of you right now."

Bishop wanted to smile at the ferocity in her words, but he felt them too acutely. Instead, he pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. "I swear I'll make it worth it."

"It already is," she assured.

Taking her mouth in a deep, sensual, drugging kiss, he tensed his buttocks and pressed forward. His soul nearly left his body as he gained entrance little by little. The softness and heat and tightness of her body taking him in bit by bit. Stretching to accommodate his girth. But as sweat rolled down the hollow of his spine and dripped from his temples to her breasts, he could see her discomfort and her determination to endure it.

Fuck. This wasn't working.

Pausing, he slid one hand beneath her buttocks and the other beneath her head. Then he kissed her with every drop of the desire he'd denied, every ounce of his pent-up passion, every last bit of the emotion rolling through him which he refused to name. Until her arms tightened around him and her knees lifted against his hips.

Then he withdrew the very little bit he'd worked inside her until his tip barely kissed her wet sex. As she drew a deep breath and met his gaze in silent question, he gave a few short strokes then a final forceful thrust, claiming his place inside her. A soft cry slid from her throat and her nails dug into his shoulders as she tensed in surprise. But her eyes never left his.

Finally, fully encased within her, he forced himself to keep still as he slowly filled his lungs with air. Then, with his cock throbbing painfully in her tight sheath, he rained soft kisses over her face and neck and shoulders, waiting for her body to accept his.

"Tell me you're all right," he murmured against her sweat-sweetened skin.

She took a heavy breath. "I'm verra well. I promise." She shifted beneath him, tilting her pelvis just a bit, as though testing the feel of him there. The slight adjustment in position

caused a subtle but devastating friction deep inside her where his cock throbbed in wait.

Bishop groaned and Cailleach gasped, her eyes widening. “That was...rather lovely.”

Unable to stop himself, Bishop smiled. “Was it?”

“Aye,” she replied but the word dissolved into a soft moan when he gave a gentle rock of his hips. She licked her lips and nodded. “Verra lovely, indeed.”

An odd giddiness fluttered in his chest and his grin widened. He gave a few more short, deep strokes, watching her expression shift from surprised and curious to dreamy, dark, and desirous. Then she planted her feet to the mattress and on his next abbreviated withdrawal and thrust, she met his rhythm with a roll of her hips, forcing a longer, more powerful stroke.

The pleasure that brightened her eyes and parted her lips was nearly enough to make him come, but he managed to draw on some unknown well of strength to hold it at bay. Lengthening his thrusts until he was able to withdraw almost completely from her body before plunging forward, he focused intently on the evidence of her pleasure. He needed to ensure she experienced every bit of the stunning sensations he was feeling. More than the unbelievable depths of pleasure he found with her, it was the intensity, the wonder, the fucking beauty of the connection. It was too powerful and fucking sublime to be real.

He had to make it last. Despite how insistently his climax demanded release, he forced it down. But watching Cailleach experience the building of her own pleasure made it so much more difficult than anything he'd had to do before.

Yet, he couldn't look away.

It was too beautiful. *She* was too beautiful. The glittering storm of passion in her lust-glazed eyes. The glisten of her lush lips, swollen from his frequent, demanding kisses. The sheen of sweat on her flushed skin. The soft and urgent sounds of her rising need.

Soon, his strong and steady thrusts grew faster and more intense. A desperation entered his blood, encouraged by her soft, moaning pleas and the bite of her fingernails in the tense flesh of his arse as he pumped between her shaking thighs. His control was slipping from his grasp.

“Cailleach.” Her name was a raw sound. More emotion than word.

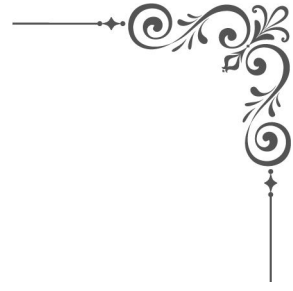
But she understood. Of course she understood. Taking his face in her hands, she pulled his mouth to hers. She held his gaze as she thrust her tongue past his teeth and shared his panting breath.

“I want it, Bishop,” she breathed. “Give me your pleasure. I need it. Now.”

Her husky voice released his control with a harsh twisting pull, like a frayed rope finally snapping. The climax tore through him almost violently, taking over every sense, obliterating time and memory. The pleasure rose from so deep within him, for a brief moment, he feared he might cease to exist once it was all over. But then, as wave after endless wave rolled through him, her ragged, throaty whisper floated atop the drowning sound of his own racing heartbeat.

“Oh my god. I can feel you pulsing inside me.” She gasped and her body tensed. “It’s so bloody beautiful...so fucking good...”

Her body shuddered with her release, her lips found his, and she whispered unintelligible words as his own climax swept him out to a dark oblivion on gently receding waves.



Chapter Twenty-three

Caillie crept about the room on her tiptoes, trying not to wake the man sprawled in all his magnificent masculine glory in the middle of the bed. Still, she couldn't keep herself from pausing between each item of clothing she donned to slide a quick glance at him.

Bluidy hell, the man was devastating.

But she could only allow herself brief peeks. Any more and she'd be far too tempted to stay and the hour was growing very late—or early rather, if one considered that morning was just around the corner. She needed to get home.

To save time and avoid undue hassle, she decided to leave behind her wig and the cumbersome hoop. She managed to fashion Bishop's discarded sash around her bodice to hold it in place, and after pinning her hair into a quick bun, she slipped silently from the bedroom and crept along the servants' hall and down the back stairs of the club. It was a path she'd taken dozens of times before, but never had she felt such an odd, aching resistance. It didn't feel right—leaving without a word of goodbye—after what they'd just shared.

At the thought of his lovemaking, tingling sparks rained through her—alighting every nerve and swirling through her blood with acute sensation. The night had been...so much more than she ever could have dreamed. It had been perfection. His care and concern for her comfort had been touching and the way he'd so intently ensured her pleasure made her shiver in recollection.

Was that what the ladies had all meant when they'd called him a generous lover?

A sudden, uneasy weight plummeted through her center as she realized that she was now just one more of so many women who'd enjoyed Bishop's lovemaking.

Nay.

Her pride came quickly to her rescue, insisting that what she and Bishop had experienced was different somehow.

Wasn't it?

Surely, sexual interactions did not always contain such intensity and depth of emotion as she'd just experienced.

But had Bishop felt the same?

The question twisted through her, snaking a shadowy path which doused what glittering sparks of joy and wonder still remained. Perhaps it was best that she'd left him sleeping. She wasn't sure she'd like to see the fierce need in his gaze dimmed and satiated—his passion spent.

Her body grew chilled as she stepped out into the alley. Tugging her cloak more securely around her shoulders, she kept to the darkest shadows and gave the call that would summon Thomas.

He drove up with the carriage in a matter of moments but his wide grin slid quickly to an expression of concern when he noted her significantly altered appearance.

“What happened?” he asked curtly as he leapt down from his driver's perch. “Who needs a facer?”

Caillie laughed despite the discomfort slowly expanding in her chest. “Probably me,” she answered wryly. “I might be as foolish as everyone seems to think I am.”

“Naw,” Thomas replied, taking her elbow to lead her to the carriage, his loyalty unwavering. “You're the cleverest lady I know. And that's saying a lot since I know some very clever ladies.”

Caillie smiled but said nothing further as she climbed into the darkened vehicle. Thomas closed the door and a moment later the carriage rocked as he leapt back up to his perch.

The drive home seemed to take no time at all.

Wright House was dark and silent as she slipped through the gardens to the back entrance then up to her bedroom. Neda had likely gone to bed long ago since Caillie insisted she not wait up for her on nights she'd be home exceptionally late. But

the loyal maid had left a single candle burning near the bed. The light was dim enough that Caillie managed to take several steps into the room before she noticed the silent figure sitting in the corner reading chair, Bramble curled at her feet.

“Oh, bluidy hell,” she breathed in fright before realizing the dark, shrouded figure was Worthy in a navy-blue dressing gown and woolen shawl, her dark auburn hair in a loose braid over her shoulder.

“Good morrow, lass,” the older woman said in a tone Caillie knew well, though it had been a while since she’d given Worthy cause to use it. “Do you plan to explain where you’ve been and what you’ve been doing until so early in the morn?”

Though her stomach turned with the emotion still tangling through her, Caillie gave a careless little shrug. “Nay. I dinnae believe that’s necessary.”

Caillie lifted her heavy skirts as she strode to her wardrobe behind the dressing screen in the corner. After untying the sash, her gown dropped to the floor as soon as she slipped the sleeves from her shoulders. After kicking off her shoes, she removed the rest of her costume then pulled a soft cotton nightgown over her head.

Since she hadn’t heard another word from Worthy, she’d half expected the woman to be gone when she stepped back around the screen.

She wasn’t, of course. Caillie should have known it wouldn’t be so easy to avoid the impending confrontation. Now that Worthy knew of tonight’s escapade, she wasn’t going to rest until Caillie confessed everything.

And the truth was, a part of her wanted to.

The burden of her secrets suddenly felt like far too much weight to carry and tears burned in her eyes as she met the warm and caring gaze of the woman who’d raised her since infancy, the woman who’d loved her and guided her through every trial in her life, the only mother she’d ever known.

Worthy came to her feet in a rush. “Och, Caillie lass,” she muttered as she flew across the room to wrap Caillie in a secure, unconditional embrace.

And the tears broke free.

And Caillie let them.

Somehow, Worthy managed to maneuver them both to the bed where they sat side by side. Worthy’s arms stayed strong around Caillie’s shoulders as she cried. Even Bramble ambled over to rest his chin on Caillie’s knee, adding his loyal support while she released the torrent of emotion.

She wasn’t even sure where the flood had come from. She wasn’t sad, exactly. Just tired. And mayhap a wee bit frustrated and wee bit frightened of having possibly lost her heart to a rogue with a voice like velvet and a smile that twisted her insides and a kiss that scorched her better sense to ashes on the wind.

“Och,” she muttered with a touch of anger as she pulled away from Worthy’s comforting embrace to wipe the tears from her cheeks with a furious hand. “This is ridiculous.”

“Deep emotions are never ridiculous, lass. They exist for a reason even if we cannae see it.”

Caillie snorted, inspiring a chuckle from the older woman.

“Sometimes, tears are the only way to release the pressure that can build inside a woman’s heart,” Worthy suggested gently as she lifted her hand to tuck a lock of Caillie’s hair behind her ear.

The gesture immediately made Caillie feel like a wee lass again. A lass who’d always known that no matter what she did, this woman would be there for her. Worthy was her cousin by blood and, with her marriage to Colin, had become her sister by marriage. But she would always be Caillie’s mother. A relationship forged by tears and hugs and scoldings and lessons and love.

She hadn’t really stopped to consider how dramatically things had changed in the last years. Throughout her childhood, it had been just her and Worthy—the two of them

against an unfeeling world. But then Colin had come around, seeking his sister and finding a lasting love with Worthy. Caillie had been ecstatic about their union. No one was more deserving of the kind of love apparent between the two of them than Worthy, and Caillie had been more than happy to allow the couple their space to develop a true bond. She'd been quite busy getting to know her new brothers, after all. And then Fergus was born. But Caillie absolutely adored the auburn-haired lad and had felt no loss in Worthy starting a family with Colin. Not when she was already creating a rich and fulfilling life beyond the walls of Wright House.

But suddenly, in this moment, she realized how long it had been since she and Worthy had sat down together. Just the two of them. It might've been odd that it would happen now, on the precipice of dawn just after Caillie had snuck into the house. But the two of them had never done things the conventional way. In fact, it was Worthy who'd taught her that rules were meant to be broken.

On impulse, she grasped the older woman's hand and pressed it to her cheek.

Worthy made a choked little sound before murmuring gently, "Willnae you tell me what has you so upset?"

As nice as it would be to unload her troubles on Worthy's lap as she used to do as a child, Caillie had been holding her secrets close for far too long. She muttered instead, "Nay."

"Is it Mr. Black?"

Callie gave the woman beside her a sharp look. "How'd you ken?"

Worthy rolled her eyes even as she flashed a gentle smile. "Because I ken *you*, Cailleach Davina Claybourne. And I saw the way you watched him that night he came to dinner. Your feelings were clear in your gaze, lass."

"What feelings? Frustration? Annoyance?"

"Infatuation."

Caillie scoffed though she couldn't deny it.

Worthy's gaze lowered as she took a steadying breath. "Has he...done something?"

The uncharacteristic hesitation in the older woman's voice was almost amusing, but her rich green gaze was full of understanding, acceptance, and ferocious love.

With a heavy sigh, Caillie told the truth. "Nothing I didnae desperately want him to do."

Worthy made a quiet sound as a blush colored her cheeks.

Caillie had forgotten for a moment that she wasn't talking with one of her friends. "Sorry. I reckon I shouldnae admit such a thing so freely."

"Dinnae mind me." Worthy gave a little snort and reached out to pat Caillie's hand. "It's just wee bit difficult to acknowledge that my lass is grown. But you *are* grown, Caillie luv. And I'd never fault you for having such desires and longings. They're beautiful, wonderous things when shared with the right person."

Caillie's stomach twisted and she asked quietly, "And what if I believe Bishop's the right person, but he doesnae?"

Compassion flowed through her mother's gaze then. "Och, lass." She wrapped her arms tighter around Caillie as they tipped their heads toward each other. "You've always been one to love with every ounce of your soul. You accept people into your heart with a certainty and a courage that astounds me."

"A foolish trait," Caillie muttered.

"Nay. Your heart has never steered you wrong before. There's no reason to think it has now. I've no doubt that whatever is happening between you and Mr. Black, it'll work out for the best," Worthy said with quiet assurance, then added, "If I didnae trust your judgement completely, I'd never be able to sleep at night."

Caillie tensed. "What do you mean?"

Worthy patted her hand and gave a snort. "Just because I dinnae interfere doesnae mean I'm unaware, lass."

"I dinnae ken what you're talking about."

Worthy stood then and tightened the sash of her robe. Looking at Caillie where she remained seated on the bed, her smile just a wee bit smug. “I’ve kent you from the minute you were born. I’ve cuddled you as I told bedtime stories of ancient warrior queens, and I’ve watched you run wild through the clover at Faeglen. I’ve also watched you with your brothers and I’ve seen you out and about in a society that barely understands or deserves you.” Her voice lowered and her smile softened as she leaned close to rest her warm hand against Caillie’s cheek. “I see you, lass. A spirit such as yours will never accept confinement. And I’d never expect you to,” she added with a wink before she turned to cross toward the door.

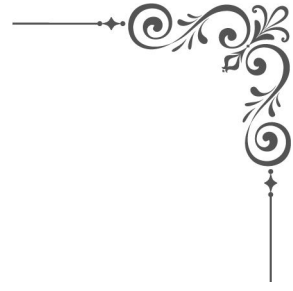
Just how much did Worthy really know about her activities outside the house?

“Someday, lass,” she noted casually, “I’d love to hear more about tonight’s escapade—such as where you went and why you were dressed in that getup.” She opened the door and glanced back. “But for now, I’ll just say good night.”

“Good night, Worthy,” Caillie replied softly, a lump of emotion rising in her throat. “And thank you.”

She fell asleep reliving faint memories of all the scrapes she’d gotten into as a child simply because she’d always felt herself more capable than most adults gave her credit for. How many times had Worthy watched from a distance, allowing her to experience the risks and consequences in her own way?

More than she’d ever realized, she reckoned.



Chapter Twenty-four

If Bentley's anniversary party was Caillie's favorite event of the year, then the annual ball thrown by the Earl and Countess of Wright (in truth, thrown by Caillie, since Worthy had handed such things over to her years ago) was her second. While the masquerade was Caillie's opportunity to experience complete anonymity and total liberation, the Wright ball was nearly the opposite. As hostess, Caillie spent the night in a state of constant socialization. Luckily, she didn't mind since the ball managed to bring so many of her favorite people to one place.

In addition to her brothers and their wives, who rarely failed to attend except for under the most extenuating circumstances such as the births of blessed children in Beynon and Anne's case, the ball was also unwaveringly attended by what Caillie considered to be her extended family. Emma's two delightful sisters and their dashing, mysterious husbands would be in attendance, as would their great-aunt Angelique, an eccentric elderly French woman who happened to be one of Caillie's favorite people in the world.

And in the last couple years, since Caillie had full control of the guest list, she'd started inviting more people who might not typically find themselves invited to a ball thrown by a titled peer. People Caillie much preferred to spend an evening with than some of the aristocrats she was obligated to invite.

If Colin or Worthy had noticed the somewhat liberal approach she'd been taking with the guest list, they hadn't mentioned anything to date. And the evening always ended up a grand success. With lively musicians, the finest champagne, grand cuisine, and an enlightened array of guests, the ball was destined to be a rousing good time.

The annual event had also presented a surprising opportunity for recruitment. On more than one occasion, Caillie had found herself in conversation with a lady who expressed a certain...dissatisfaction with the accepted activities of her daily life. The kind of dissatisfaction Caillie

knew well and for which she happened to offer a variety of solutions. Solutions which were held in the strictest confidence—something greatly appreciated by women whose reputations and social standing unfairly hinged on their ability to avoid criticism of any kind.

In the last couple years, as word of the unique *salons* Caillie offered and her extreme discretion began to spread in light whispers and quiet looks through the female portion of the ton, there had even been a few times when she'd been approached specifically with a request for a particular diversion. These types of requests had inspired more than one lecture topic or instruction class in recent months.

And though Caillie adored having the opportunity to introduce such experiences and educations for women who otherwise wouldn't have access, this year's ball presented a few unprecedented distractions.

A whole week and a half had passed since Bentley's party and what had come after. A week and a half since Caillie had crept from Bishop's bedroom while he'd slept. A week and a half during which Caillie had attended Sunday coffee, weapons training with Portia, a Tuesday lecture on ancient herbology, and a walk through St. Giles with Elle. But when it had come time for the reading with Mrs. Beaumont and the ladies in the west wing, Caillie had cried off, claiming a headache.

Up until that day, she'd existed in a state of constant internal debate about Bishop.

The night of the masquerade had been...beyond wonderful. Not only the amazing experience of coming to life in Bishop's arms and in his bed, but also the hours before. It had felt like they'd finally found the right rhythm. Companions in revelry and pleasure.

But after slipping away as he'd slept and the unexpectedly frank conversation with Worthy, Caillie had been forced to acknowledge that companionship and pleasure weren't enough.

Her heart was all in.

But she had no idea what that meant. No idea how to proceed. No view of the path before her and what her next step should be.

It was a new experience.

She didn't like it.

A part of her both hoped and feared that Bishop would somehow reach out to her in those first few days. That he'd decide what was next so she wouldn't have to. And that somewhere in his actions she'd be able to determine exactly how he'd felt about that night.

A critical voice in the back of her mind kept whispering that she was being a coward. And she readily acknowledged the truth of it. Another new experience that she utterly detested.

But she couldn't bring herself to do the one thing she knew she should—talk to the man.

So, she went about her days as usual while her heart grew heavier and heavier at the revelation that Bishop was doing the same.

It wasn't as though she'd expected him to send flowers or a note or anything to assure her that he'd been as totally and completely altered by their evening together as she had been—though it might've been nice. But she did half expect they'd encounter each other by accident, as they had so many times. And though she knew exactly why *she* hadn't tried to see him, she had no idea why *he* had stayed equally distant.

When the day of her weekly sojourn at Mrs. Beaumont's had arrived, Caillie just hadn't been able to imagine possibly encountering Bishop now—after so many days of silence. So, instead of enjoying an afternoon with her friends, Caillie had fallen into a grand sulk which had lasted through the next few days until the moment she'd opened her eyes the morning of the ball and felt an overwhelming sense of anticipation and excitement. Not because it was her second favorite event of the year, but because some time ago, she'd sent an invitation to Bishop, which he'd accepted.

Of course, he could still fail to make an appearance, but Caillie didn't think he would. Something inside her believed he'd come. And the possibility invigorated her. She still had no idea what she might say or how she might feel, or even more importantly, what he might feel and think and say.

But the prospect of seeing Bishop again kept her focused and tense throughout the first few hours of the ball.

That, and the fact that Bishop's wasn't the only extra invitation she'd issued. Two more gentlemen had been added to the guest list at the last moment.

After her abbreviated meeting with Reginald Vane and the somewhat disastrous encounter with Nicholas Vane, she was desperate and determined to discover exactly what the twins might think of the odd young woman they'd recently met.

Reginald had seemed receptive to her. However, Nicholas's instant dislike and the hint of suspicion she'd seen in his gaze before he'd ridden away might have set her back from her goal of bringing the brothers into the Wright family fold. Especially if Nicholas had relayed anything about the encounter to his brother, including his less than favorable opinion of her.

Considering the two were so very different from each other and the fact that they so rarely attended the same social events, it was impossible to know if the brothers were close or estranged, which many people suspected. She hoped they'd both be intrigued—or suspicious—enough to attend tonight so she could have a chance to assess their...current perspective and determine her next steps.

As the night went on, she socialized with the guests, chatted and laughed with her friends and introduced people to each other who might not have met otherwise, and teased her brothers whenever she had the chance. She even managed to encourage Anne and Beynon to take a turn about the dance floor though they were both quite reticent and then couldn't keep from grinning in delight as the couple waltzed with a vigor and grace rarely witnessed in London ballrooms.

It might've been a perfect night but as she finished her fifth dance and returned to her favored spot near the entrance to the ballroom where she could greet every new arrival, she began to believe she'd been overly optimistic about the evening. Clearly, Bishop and her new brothers had all simply decided to ignore her.

A touch of indignant anger rose up to defend her bruised heart, but she kept her chin lifted, her shoulders squared, and a winningly confident smile on her face.

The gown she'd finally settled on for the evening was a dark rose-colored silk with puffed short sleeves and a hem ornamented with elaborate flounces and pleats. Her coiffure was threaded through with matching ribbons and a necklace of multicolored semi-precious stones set in gold filigree spanned her collarbone. So...at least she knew she looked good even if doubts were beginning to run rampant through her mind.

But doubt wasn't something in which she allowed herself to indulge for long. And she'd experienced more than enough of her share of melancholia in the last week.

Which meant she very intentionally *didn't* think about Bishop.

The twins, however...

If not tonight, she'd just have to arrange another meeting with the Villainous Vanes. One at a time or together, whatever it took. Perhaps, she'd have to discover Reginald the rake's favorite brothel and instigate some sort of encounter there, where he'd least expect it. And surely, Nicholas involved himself in some sort of activity beyond brooding atop wild stallions.

"You're up to something and I want to know what it is."

Caillie slid a sideways glance toward Elle, who stunned in a scarlet gown adorned with a giant ruby broach pinned to the center of her bodice. Her reply was overly breezy. "Why on earth would you think I'm up to something?"

"I know that look in your eyes," her friend retorted with a haughty lift of her chin. "You're plotting."

Caillie chuckled. “Mayhap.”

“It’s a ball, Caillie,” Elle admonished. “A *party*. You’re supposed to have fun.”

“I am having fun,” Caillie assured even as her gaze slid almost involuntarily over the crowd yet again.

“Who ye peepin’ fer, minx?”

Caillie rolled her gaze to where Max had just stepped up behind Elle to place his hands on the generous curve of his wife’s hips. Without a single care as to who might witness it, he dropped a quick kiss to Elle’s bare shoulder before he lifted his head again to pin Caillie with a questioning stare.

“No one,” she replied a bit too curtly.

Her brother’s eyes narrowed. “Just don’t get yerself into any trouble ye can’t get yerself out of.”

Caillie waved a dismissive hand. “Honestly, what kind of trouble could I possibly get into at a ball?”

Both Elle and Max chuckled as they shared a look. Caillie was tempted to stick her tongue out at them like she would have done in her youth. Instead, she rolled her eyes and sighed her exasperation. “Why dinnae the two of you go dance or something and leave me be?”

Elle leaned to the side in order to glance back at her husband, saying in a soft, sultry tone, “A dance would be lovely.”

Max flashed a devilish grin before replying in a lowered voice, “A dance it is then, princess.”

As the two moved away, Caillie smirked at how easy it was to redirect them. Just give them the opportunity to gaze into each other’s eyes and any suspicion about her own activities was easily forgotten. Before they got too far, however, Elle turned back. “Almost forgot, two new ladies will be joining us for coffee on Sunday.”

“Wonderful,” Caillie replied. “I’ll send a message to Boris requesting the use of one of the private rooms so we can have a bit more space.”

“Come, luv,” Max muttered impatiently to his wife, “I’ve a need to have ye in me arms.”

Elle gave him a heated look and the two of them glided away.

Alone again, Caillie slid a glance toward the ballroom entrance. Since she’d basically given up on her most anticipated guests making an appearance, she was not ready for the shock to her system when she found herself pinned to her spot by an intent, dark brown gaze.

Against her stubborn Scottish will, her heart tripped into a lively jig.

He’d come.

The jig stumbled to a halt.

Why had he come?

Holding her breath and squaring her shoulders, she tried to read his intention in his expression. But it was frustratingly unreadable.

And then he was there. Standing in front of her with his rakish hair tied neatly at his nape, his cravat stylishly knotted, and his coat fitting to his broad muscled shoulders with mouth-watering perfection.

Still holding—no, *commanding*—her gaze, he gave a tense bow. When he straightened, he said in a gruff tone, “Dance with me.”

Despite the wild fluttering that erupted in her low belly, Caillie arched a brow. “Shouldnae that be phrased as a request rather than a demand?”

He stepped into her and lifted her hand in his. “Do you think I’m stupid enough to allow you a chance to refuse?” he muttered. Then he turned and tucked her hand into the bend of his elbow before guiding her onto the dance floor.

“You’re verra lucky I’ve no desire to cause a scene just now. But that could change at any moment,” she warned.

“Understood.”

Just as when they'd danced at Bentley's, their movements were in perfect rhythm. They slipped seamlessly into the flow of the other dancers circling the room in a slow, romantic waltz.

Though everything in her reveled in the experience of being his arms, for perhaps the very first time in her life, Caillie found herself at a complete and utter loss.

How on earth was a woman supposed to behave when seeing her lover for the first time more than a week after coming apart in his bloody arms?

With no ready answer forthcoming, she decided she'd simply dance. Directing her gaze over his shoulder, she did her best to act as if the situation were entirely normal even though her insides were a riot of anticipation, confusion, injured pride, and a damned mutinous hope.

Let the man speak if had something to say. *He'd* been the one to approach *her*, after all.



FOR SEVERAL LONG MINUTES, Bishop simply enjoyed the feel of her in his arms. Though her expression was uncharacteristically tense, her body was receptive to every nuance of his direction. She likely didn't even notice it, but *he* did. He felt it in his blood, along every sizzling nerve, and deep through his core.

He'd missed this. This physical connection. The call of her body to his.

He'd missed her light-dark gaze full of pride and challenge and desire she was currently trying very hard to hide. He'd missed her rose scent and the husky silk of her voice and the curve of her mouth.

He'd missed *her*.

He hadn't intended to attend the ball tonight. All while he'd bathed, then dressed in his finest eveningwear, then stepped outside Bentley's to hail a passing hack, he'd told

himself he might go anywhere tonight. Wright House was just one destination among many countless possibilities.

A blatant and ridiculous lie.

He couldn't stay away. And the moment he'd made the decision to go to her, he felt like an arse for not doing it sooner.

Damnit to hell. He wanted her. Always, he wanted her. He could barely remember a time when he didn't. Even when he'd been traveling through some of the most beautiful foreign landscapes, the vision of her—the essence of her—had been a constant. Subtly, inexorably luring him home.

When he'd awoken the day after the masquerade, he hadn't been particularly surprised to find her gone. He'd known she'd have to get home before anyone awoke.

What had surprised him, however, was how deeply he'd felt her absence and how badly he'd wished he could've woken up to find her tucked in—warm and content—along his side. He wanted to be there when she first opened her eyes in the morning and muttered incoherent nonsense. He wanted her lips to be the first thing he tasted. He wanted to move inside her and hear her gasps of pleasure and fulfillment before beginning the rest of his day.

Fucking hell.

The realization of how far gone he was for the woman had been shocking and terrifying. And wrong in so many ways.

Clearly, she'd known it as well.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected her to do after such an unbelievable night together, but he never would have guessed she'd go for avoidance.

The possibility that she regretted what happened between them tore at his insides. Every time he thought about it, he felt compelled to track her down and demand she explain what she was feeling.

But he feared that might be the best way to push her farther away. So, he decided to be patient, instead. She'd come

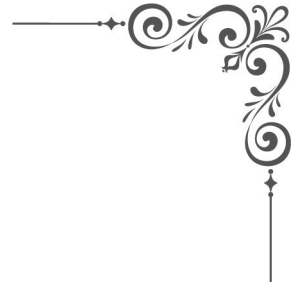
to him. Eventually. It wasn't in her nature to avoid anything for long. She'd need to confront it. Insist on clarification and state her position. She preferred to do things her way and in her own time.

Even now, as she danced within the circle of his arms, she accepted his lead but retained an undeniable air of self-command. She waltzed with him *only* because she chose to, which suggested to his hopeful mind that she might not be totally averse to his presence.

Finally, she must have lost her patience with his prolonged silence as she gave him a sharp glance from beneath her lashes. "I ken you dinnae come here for a dance, Bishop Black. I reckon you've something to say. So, speak, then."

Bishop smiled at the irritation in her tone. She wasn't completely unfeeling toward him.

He could work with that.



Chapter Twenty-five

“If you’ve nothing to say, then I dinnae see a reason to continue this,” she noted after a minute of silence.

Clearing his throat, Bishop pulled her toward him—not scandalously close, but almost.

“There’s much I *should* say,” he muttered thickly. “But I’d rather just hold you right now.”

Her gaze melted. Her spine softened and her lips parted. But only for a moment.

Tensing, she gave a slow shake of her head. Tipping her head back, she pinned him with a fierce, swirling stare. “Why are you here?”

“You invited me,” he quipped.

She responded with a huff and a roll of her eyes. But just before the indignant expression, he noted a flicker of uncertainty in the golden-green depths and something suddenly clicked in his brain.

Fucking hell.

What if she hadn’t been avoiding him out of a need to assert her independence?

Their night together had been her first time in a lover’s bed. Despite her superior cleverness and pride and obvious penchant for going her own way, she’d shared something extremely intimate with him. And he with her.

Just as he hadn’t known what in hell to do afterward, it seemed she hadn’t either.

“Cailleach.”

Her name was a rough murmur, but it brought her gaze swiftly back to his. He took a long moment to seek out the truth in her eyes. The subtle vulnerability, the stubborn self-assurance, as well as the tenderness and desire that threaded through it all.

He pulled her closer. Far closer than was proper for a waltz in an earl's ballroom.

She gasped but didn't resist. In fact, she melted.

"I'm a fucking bastard," he whispered fiercely.

"Nay," she whispered back, softly and with a wry smile. "I am."

Before he could reply—or even think of a reply to counter the self-deprecation in her answer, her attention was abruptly snagged by something beyond his shoulder. As they turned through the steps of the dance, her gaze remained locked on whatever it was, a heightened alertness in her stare.

Spinning them in another circle, he scanned the crowd, trying to determine what had captured her focus so intently. But there were people everywhere. It could have been anyone.

By the time he looked back to Cailleach, her expression was smooth once again.

Then she smiled.

Alarm pricked at his nape and his gaze narrowed. What in hell was she up to now?

Tilting her head, she asked, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you're trying to see into my mind," she noted with a subtle twist of her lips.

"Because I am."

"You could always just ask what you want to ken."

His brows rose incredulously. "And you'd actually tell me?"

She shrugged. "Depends on your question, I reckon."

He made a harsh sound then held her gaze as he said, "You said once that you don't like keeping secrets. But you don't have to. Not with me."

The way she looked at him then was reminiscent to how Roderick would stare when he was trying to discern something through his intuition. Then she gave a gentle shake of her head and parted her lips to say something in reply, but her gaze was once again drawn sharply toward the crowd at the edges of the dance floor. This time, a tiny frown tugged at her brows and a quiet tension seemed to slide down her spine.

Bishop tensed as well. A harsh weight dropped into his stomach. Nothing could have told him any more clearly that she had no intention of letting him more fully into her life. Even after their night together, she still didn't trust him enough to let him know what in hell could distract her from their dance *and* their conversation.

"I think I'd like some punch," she said in a casual tone that didn't fool him for a second. "Shall we stroll toward the refreshment table?"

Since she was already pulling free of his arms, Bishop couldn't exactly refuse. Besides, there was clearly a reason she wished to leave the dance floor and staying at her side was the best way to discover what it was.

Unfortunately, the way to the refreshments was through a veritable crush of people. Following close behind Cailleach, Bishop was tempted more than once to wrap his fist in the ribbons trailing from the sash of her gown in order to keep her close. But then, right in the middle of the thickest part of the shuffling crowd, she turned to him with a bright smile.

"Would you like to say hello to Roderick? I see him just over there," she said, pointing off toward their right.

Without thinking, Bishop turned to look, but she'd obviously been mistaken. Roderick wasn't anywhere in sight. And when he would have told her so...neither was she.

Bloody hell.

The woman had slipped away, leaving him stranded and bemused and oddly saddened.

He stayed where he was, amid a crowd of fine-dressed strangers, scanning in every direction for a glimpse of

Caillieach's dark hair or rose-colored gown. But the clever little hoyden had completely disappeared.

Bloody fucking everlasting hell.



CAILLIE DID HER BEST to rush through the crowd without *looking* like she was rushing. She hated leaving Bishop in the way she had—but it was necessary. Anything she might have said in that moment about needing to step away—alone—would have inspired instant suspicion. Not that he wasn't already suspicious. And if she'd had time, she certainly would've done her best to allay his concerns and convince him not to interfere. But she didn't have the time.

The look on Nicholas's face when he'd stared at her from the shadows beyond the dance floor had made it clear that his presence was going to be brief and his cooperation tenuous. If she wanted to speak with both brothers, she needed to do it now.

Bishop—bluidy hell, the look in his eyes when he'd pulled her closer in the dance!—would have to wait.

Even as she tried hard to convince herself of that, a hard knot of fear twisted inside her.

He wouldn't wait forever, though, would he?

By the time she got back to the edge of the dance floor, she worried she might have missed her opportunity. But a quick glance to where she'd last seen the Vane brothers indicated they'd remained, one on each end of the ballroom, like sentries awaiting her return—or ensuring she wouldn't try to evade them.

Catching each of their gazes in turn, she gave a pointed nod toward the row of doors that opened to a balcony overlooking the earl's extensive gardens.

It took some time for her to make her way through the crowd around the dance floor, but Caillie eventually stepped from the ballroom into the cool night air. The balcony was already occupied, and though his back was turned to her as he

stood at the railing, she knew by the all-black eveningwear and the very forbidding posture that it was Nicholas who'd gotten there first.

Gratefully, there was no one else outside. If there had been, no doubt Nicholas Vane would have scared them off with his glowering manner.

Despite the flutter of uncertainty in her belly, Caillie approached the man with a wide smile. "Good evening, Mr. Vane. I'm so verra pleased you accepted my invitation tonight."

"Are you?" he asked without turning around, his voice full of distrust.

Stepping up beside him, Caillie noted the sharp edge of tension along his square jaw and how intently he stared out at the garden, as though he couldn't stand to even glance at her.

Keeping her tone light despite the obvious animosity rolling off his stern, forbidding shoulders, she said, "Although I can understand why you might not trust my motives at the moment, I assure you, you've no reason for concern."

"No reason?" the man retorted harshly. "You think blackmail to be no reason for concern?"

Caillie flinched. "Blackmail?"

"Come now, Nic." Reginald Vane, the older of the two, spared only a fleeting glance toward Caillie as he stepped leisurely through the ballroom doors. He joined them at the railing to place a firm hand on his brother's shoulder. "We agreed not to rush to any rash assumptions."

Nicholas snorted, a rough, angry sound. "What other purpose could the woman have?"

"We could ask her," his brother suggested with a hint of amusement in his voice.

Caillie gave a nod of approval. "An excellent suggestion, Mr. Vane."

"Go ahead then, Miss Claybourne," he replied, finally settling his blue stare—so like Colin's and Roderick's yet so

very different, as well—in her direction. “You managed to get us here. And you now have our undivided attention. What do you want?”

“Well...” She cleared her throat then turned her gaze to the angrier twin. “You recall that day we met in the park...when I mentioned the scandal regarding the Earl of Wright and his illegitimate siblings?”

The man’s body visibly tensed and he fisted his hands at his sides. But he didn’t speak.

Caillie sighed and turned to the more congenial brother. “And at Mr. Lowth’s soiree, I believe I mentioned to you that Lord Wright is my brother?”

Reginald gave a short nod, sliding a sideways glance to his brother.

“Which is to say...” she continued with a wry smile and an open gesture with her hands, “that I am one of the prior earl’s illegitimate offspring.”

There was a brief but heavy silence. Then the angry one noted darkly, “Who in hell cares?”

Caillie almost missed the subtle nudge of Reginald’s elbow in Nicholas’s side. She took it as a good sign. At least one of the twins seemed willing to hear her out.

Reginald stepped toward Caillie to say in a smooth, almost charming tone, “I understand you also suggested to my brother that this topic should be of some particular interest to us.”

Caillie nodded. “I did.”

“Why?” The single word question was casually delivered, but there was a sharp edge buried beneath.

Keeping her attention divided evenly between the two brothers, Caillie took a deep breath. This was it. All or naught. “I’ve recently discovered that the earl had not only sired myself and the four older brothers I was already aware of...but he’d also fathered two more sons.”

A stark and sudden silence followed her words.

For a moment, Reginald's countenance nearly matched his brother's barely suppressed fury, but he quickly smoothed his features back into an expression of mild curiosity. "I think it's time you spoke plainly, Miss Claybourne."

Caillie released a heavy sigh containing most of her pent-up anxiety and followed it with a wide smile. "Excellent. Subtleties are not really my forte anyway. As you verra likely already suspect, the reason I've recently sought you both out is because I believe you are my brothers."

Nicholas grumbled fiercely beneath his breath and turned to pace in angry strides toward the darkest corner of the balcony. Bracing his hands on the railing, he gazed sharply into the lit gardens below.

Reginald watched him with a stern expression before he turned back to Caillie. "That's absurd, Miss Claybourne," he noted quietly.

"It isnae absurd at all," she countered with a quick, beseeching glance to Nicholas, who continued to stand stiffly staring out at the darkened garden. "Trust me, I wouldnae ever have approached you if I didnae have significant evidence to support the claim," she added with gentle conviction.

Nicholas gave another harsh sound while Reginald replied in a measured tone, "There could be no possible evidence to support such a blatant falsehood."

Caillie's stomach sunk heavily. It would seem the brothers had no idea that the father who'd raised them might not be the man who'd sired them. When she took a breath to speak, Reginald stopped her with a swiftly raised hand. "What exactly do you expect to gain from making this scandalous suggestion?"

"Yes," Nicholas sneered as he stalked back to his brother's side. "How much will you demand to keep this damned lie from becoming fodder for the gossips? How much is our reputation worth to you? Our mother's honor? Our father's?"

Starting to get a wee bit angry herself at her own honor being brought repeatedly into question, Caillie tried to remain

compassionate. Lifting her chin, she shrugged gently and smiled. “All I want is to ken my brothers. *All* of them. In whatever way they’ll allow. No one else need ken what I discovered, though I cannae say I won’t try to convince you to tell the others. They’ll want to ken you, as well.”

“Fucking ridiculous,” Nicholas grumbled to his brother. “She has no intention of keeping this to herself.”

“Feekin’ ridiculous, is it?” Cailleach challenged. “Why do you think I approached you as I did? I wasnae certain if either of you had any idea that your father might not be who you thought he was. It was never my intention to upset you. I was trying to be delicate.”

A rough snort of disbelief came from the one at the railing.

Deciding not to take offense, Caillie acknowledged, “I’ll admit, delicacy isnae something I’m verra good at. I’d much prefer being straightforward.” Speaking directly to Nicholas, she added, “I didnae expect our meeting in the park to go as it did. I’m afraid I forgot about Bramble’s attraction to the swans. And I admit your surly attitude managed to get my temper up a bit.”

“He’s good at that,” his brother noted, which earned a glare and a grunt of annoyance.

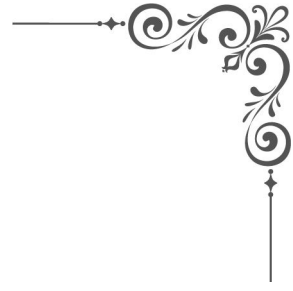
“Look, I ken you’ve little reason to trust me, but I swear I’ve no ill intent in seeking you out. I also cannae say I’ll just let the matter drop. I can be verra stubborn when I want something. And I cannae simply forget the existence of two more brothers.”

“You have no more brothers,” Nicholas declared in a low mutter. Then he turned and crossed the balcony to the stairs which led down to the garden. Within seconds, he’d disappeared into the darkness.

A long moment of silence followed before Reginald said, “Let it go, Miss Claybourne. No good will come of your efforts.”

Though she desperately wanted to argue, Caillie held her silence and watched as Reginald walked back into the

ballroom. Alone, she released a heavy breath and crossed her arms over her chest, frustration warring sharply with her disappointment and sadness. But one lost battle didn't end a war.



Chapter Twenty-six

Bishop noted the second Cailleach stepped back into the ballroom.

He'd already been heading toward the balcony when he saw Reginald Vane, the very same scandalous rake Cailleach had spoken with at Lowth's party, stride boldly through the balcony doors into the ballroom. The man held his features in an expression of light disinterest and didn't bother to interact with a single guest as he cut rather sharply through the crowd. Trepidation arced sharply through Bishop at the sight of him.

What in hell was he even doing here?

Bishop was tempted to follow him, but before he could, Cailleach reentered the ballroom via the same doors the gentleman had passed through moments earlier.

Bishop's trepidation twisted painfully into something else. A feeling unlike any he'd felt before.

Jealousy.

And as his gaze narrowed on Cailleach, he noted something concerning.

She was upset.

Not overtly so. In fact, the worry he saw in her eyes was a subtle thing and she kept it firmly under control. Almost...too firmly.

He knew her well enough to know that she was not one to hold back her emotions, pleasant or otherwise. She was likely the most forthright person he'd ever met. That she did feel a need to conceal her thoughts and feelings after coming from a private encounter with Vane suggested something extremely untoward had happened out on that balcony.

Fear and a fiery anger twisted through him then.

If that fucking asshole had done anything to hurt Cailleach...

Bishop could barely finish the thought as he watched her head across the ballroom in determined strides. Everything tensed inside him. Surely, she wasn't going after the other man.

But if she was...who in hell was he to stop her? She'd demanded enough times that he stay clear of her personal business. And despite the glorious night they'd spent in his bed, he had no claim to her—romantic or otherwise.

Yet the thought of her and that smugly handsome rake made his insides boil and churn.

Twin demons battled inside him. One demanding he follow her, the other insisting he let her go. It didn't take long for the first to win out over the other.

He'd always follow her.

Bishop started off through the shifting crush of guests. Though he didn't want to believe it, he couldn't completely discount the possibility that Cailleach had gone after the Vane fellow.

Once free of the ballroom, he strode to the front door, where the butler stood sentry to assist any guests coming and going from the party. Stepping outside, he caught a quick glimpse of Vane climbing into his carriage down the road. There was no sign of Cailleach.

She hadn't followed him then. He told himself his intense relief was in regard to her safety and not his personal dread that she'd been intent on sneaking away with another man.

If she was still in the house—currently overflowing with guests—where would she go if she needed a few minutes to herself?

Instinct lured him upstairs toward what seemed to be a private wing of the mansion. The noise of the ballroom was a distant hum here, and as he traversed the quieter halls, he started to hear the faint strains of violin music. Following the sound, he reached the open doorway to a music room displaying an array of instruments tucked here and there around the sofas and chairs. Cailleach stood gazing out the

window across the room. She held a violin tucked beneath her chin. And though her fingers danced with expert precision and she slid the bow with undeniable grace and ease, it was clear to Bishop that she wasn't really focused on the music. It was nothing but a background to her thoughts. Rising and falling, twirling and dancing. No doubt, a faint echo of the clever twists and turns within her deep, unfathomable mind.

Witnessing her in this unguarded moment of introspection and private purpose, Bishop was forced to acknowledge the beauty and intention and purity of her will. An entire universe existed within her soul. A universe very few were welcomed into.

He certainly hadn't been. And no wonder. He hadn't exactly done anything to earn it.

Dammit. She was fucking something. Something wild and wonderful. Something real and undeniable. Something utterly irrepressible.

How could he possibly be worthy of her? How could anyone?

After the song displayed its final note—not a gentle fading of sound but a fierce and holding resonance—Cailleach released a heavy breath and lowered her arms. Her posture was confident as she lifted her gaze to the stars spreading across the night sky. Then she muttered something soft and unintelligible that sounded almost like a prayer or a vow, before she turned to replace the violin and bow in the stand beside her. When she finally glimpsed back to see Bishop hovering in the doorway, she gave a subtle start. But her eyes didn't light up in pleasure or excitement at the sight of him.

In fact, she looked almost wary, though the possibility was instantly belied by the steady strength in her voice when she spoke. "What are you doing here?"

He probably should have given a careless shrug or some flippant reply to keep from revealing his feelings in that moment. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He started toward her instead. "Are you all right?"

She lifted and dropped one smooth, bare shoulder then tilted her head and gave a small smile. “Of course. Why wouldnae I be?”

“I know why you slipped away, Cailleach,” he said thickly. “I saw you leaving the balcony shortly after Vane.”

Her gaze flickered with surprise before she hid it with a quick blink of innocence. “I dinnae ken what you’re talking about.”

When she made as if to sweep past him, he stepped into her path, blocking her. “Don’t play that game with me, pet.” His voice was quiet and controlled, but not as neutral as he’d have liked. “Who is he to you? What did he do to upset you?”

“My business with Vane has nothing to do with you.”

He lowered his chin. “Tell me anyway.”

“Why?” Her hazel eyes met and held his. “Are you jealous, Bishop?”

His chest ached. His tongue twisted. And something dangerous wrapped around his heart. “Intensely,” he replied in a raw whisper.

She was obviously surprised by his honesty, but then she sighed—heavy and deep. “You’ve no reason to be.” Her hazel gaze was steady on his. “You’re the only man for me, Bishop Black.”

Bishop felt her words like a waft of heat from a blazing hearth. Rolling over him—through him. Warming his blood and bones and every single nerve.

And she was the only woman for him...though he’d done everything in his power to keep that truth concealed.

But for what?

What did his resistance do except hurt them both? His need for her was too deeply imbedded. He would never shake it. And he no longer wanted to.

“Cailleach.” Her name slid from his lips in a raw, weighted whisper. “I can’t be the sort of man you deserve.”

She slowly shook her head as a delicate frown tugged at her brows. “I’ve only ever wanted you to be you.”

“I’m the by-blow of a fucking bishop who preached of virtue during the day only to indulge in every vice imaginable at night,” he scoffed. “My mum thought it hilarious to name me for the impious hypocrite.”

“And I’m the by-blow of a simple Highland lass and an evil, vengeful lord. What bluidy difference does that make?”

He couldn’t explain it. Not in a way she’d understand. So, he said nothing.

Despite everything and anything he could possibly say, his need for her burned with unwavering strength. Smoldering and searing at his insides while he stood locked in place—yearning for her. Craving her. Wanting her with every conceivable element of his existence.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Cailleach.”

“I’m hurting now,” she confessed, the words husky and intimate.

In a few long strides and half a breath, Bishop swept her into his arms. The warmth of rightness of her body against his eased some of his tension. But not all.

Clenching his teeth, he took a long breath through his nose. Breathing her in.

“I still can’t promise—”

She stopped him with a press of her fingers to his lips. Her eyes darkened and flickered before she took a trembling breath. “I’ll take what I can get. But I want *all* I can get.”

She slid her fingers from his lips to curl her slim hand around his nape. Her eyes were dark, her lips parted for the passing of a soft breath, then she pulled his mouth down to hers.

Fire. Desperate need. Consuming hunger.

With a heavy groan, Bishop doubled his arms around her back, hauling her into the curve of his body. He wanted to

draw her into himself. Her heat and energy and life force.

His tongue swept into the depths of her mouth, claiming her soft, moaning sigh then demanding another. His teeth raked her bottom lip before he sucked the lush curve into his mouth.

Her gasp was followed by a husky moan and her fingers tightened on his nape, sending tingling jolts down his spine.

But then she pulled back, turning her head to the side to break the kiss.

A growl of denial escaped his throat. He wasn't letting her go now. He couldn't.

When she pressed her hands to his shoulders and tried to arch out of his hold, he dropped his mouth to the side of her throat and was rewarded with her moan of pleasure.

“Bishop.” His name was a ragged, lust-filled whisper.

He ignored it, drawing her pulse against his tongue in a sucking kiss that would surely leave a mark.

Her fingers dug sharply into the muscles of his shoulders. “Not here,” she gasped when he licked a path up to her ear.

“Where?” he growled, taking her delicate earlobe between his teeth.

“My bedroom.”

This time when she pulled back, he released her. The idea of getting her laid out on a bed was the only thing that could have interrupted him at that moment. She took his hand in hers, keeping him a half step behind her as she strode from the music room and practically ran down the hall. The music from the ballroom faded away as each step took them farther from the party and closer to the privacy and intimacy of Cailleach's bedroom.

Bishop wasn't sure how he managed to keep from exploding with anticipation. He could feel his blood rushing through his body, hear it in his head, racing with the with fierce beat of his heart.

With a sideways glance that revealed the same reckless, desperate desire in the depths of her gorgeous eyes, Cailleach pulled him into a room along the quiet upper hall. She released his hand to close the door and turn the lock, but Bishop allowed only a moment for her to complete the task before he brought his body flush against hers. Another step forced her back against the door. Taking her wrists in his hands, he lifted them over her head to pin them to the door.

Then he stared down into her upturned face, suddenly wanting to memorize the sultry light in her eyes, the flush on her cheeks, the glisten of her lush lips.

“You’re fucking incredible,” he murmured hoarsely. “You know that, right?”

She released a shaky breath then curved her lips in a brazen grin. “I’m glad you finally noticed.”

“I noticed,” he growled, shifting his weight so she’d feel the impossible hardness of his erection against her belly. “I noticed long ago, sweetheart. And I’ve been a tormented man ever since.”

Her lashes fluttered over her gaze as she tried to undulate between him and door. The press of his body allowed only a slight movement, but it was enough to make her gasp and him groan.

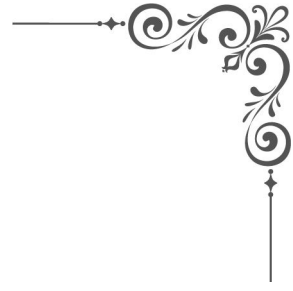
“Bishop,” she whispered, angling her head to press her lips to the pulse at the base of his throat.

Adjusting his hold on her wrists to one hand, he lowered his other hand to the narrow curve of her waist so he could hold her in place as he rocked into her softness.

Her husky moan shot through his blood like fire.

“Kiss me,” she murmured.

His mouth fell to hers immediately, transforming her gentle gasp into a velvety moan.



Chapter Twenty-seven

As Bishop's tongue thrust against hers, Caillie allowed some of her fear and desperation to slide away.

He was here. In her bedroom. Like so many feverish nighttime dreams.

His kiss deepened even more, and she moaned again. She couldn't help it. She was no longer a woman of flesh and bone. She was made entirely of longing and desire and sensation.

She rolled her spine, arching into him. Trying to press every achy, tingling inch of her against his hardness and heat.

It wasn't enough.

His large hand squeezed at her waist, as though assuring her, before he slid it higher to cover her breast.

Caillie broke from the kiss to release a panting breath.

He urgently brushed his thumb over the peaked crest. Even through the layers of silk and satin, she reacted to his touch as if it were a lick of flame. Panting and twisting as pleasure shot through her to swirl with rising insistence in her core. She tried once to pull her wrists from his grip, but he held her secure. And the low sound he issued made it clear that he wasn't ready to release her.

Blazing a fiery trail of open-mouthed kisses down the side of her throat, he paused to lick at her pulse before scraping the edge of his teeth along the cord of muscle that sloped to her shoulder. Intense shivers followed in the wake of his mouth, drugging her with sensation and anticipation.

In the next instant, he curled his fingers over the top edge of her bodice and tugged. Her breast was exposed with a tearing of seams and fabric. His gaze was warm on her bared flesh before he lifted his gaze to meet hers. Dark, hungry eyes flashed with wicked intent as he lowered his head to flick his tongue over the tightened bud of her nipple.

Caillie held her breath, staring in astonishment at the decadent sight of his sensual lips, slightly parted, brushing gently back and forth over her sensitive peak. The caress was barely there yet it ignited a thousand new sensations.

Her belly trembled with the desire to see him take her nipple deep into his mouth, surrounding it with heat. To feel his tongue swirling over the aching bud.

Instead, his lips widened into a dangerous grin and a gruff chuckle rolled in his throat.

“I can see what you want, sweetheart. It’s written all over your gorgeous face.”

Caillie allowed a quick frown. “Then why willnae you give it to me?” she muttered hoarsely.

“I will.” He gave another too-quick flick of his tongue. “But not yet.”

Caillie growled her frustration and rolled her hips. The movement allowed her to feel more of his unbelievable hardness against her belly and it brought a sharp glint to his eyes as he clenched his teeth.

“There’s something else you want first, isn’t there?” he muttered, the words thick with passion and need.

Then he reached down and roughly yanked up her skirts to thrust his hand between her thighs and boldly cup her naked sex.

Her gasp of shock slid into a shaky moan as she felt the firm pressure of his palm, the shocking sense of possession, and the wave of desire that flooded through her. Though her head fell back against the door and her lashes fluttered helplessly at the rush of sensations, he wouldn’t release her gaze.

“You want me here.” He gripped her more firmly, the heel of his hand grinding over her clitoris, which had begun to thrum with the rhythm of her heartbeat. “Should I cover you with my mouth again?”

Molten heat flooded her sex, making it slick and swollen.

Caillie whimpered and tried to tilt her pelvis, but his hold was secure.

Bishop made a ragged sound and dipped his head to blow a soft stream of air over her nipple. At the same time, he eased his hand between her thighs just enough to slide his fingers along her folds. “Or should I take your lovely breast into my mouth and claim this silken treasure another way?”

As he said the last, he pushed a finger into her body. She drew a swift breath, arching her spine with the pleasure of it just as he lowered his head to suck her breast into his mouth. The opposite sensations of being filled and drawn from at the same time were a heady thing to experience. She felt trapped between two sources of intense pleasure, each so different yet both so utterly consuming.

His tongue twisted expertly over her nipple before he sucked, harshly pulling her flesh into his mouth just as he added a second finger. Thrusting in and out of her, awakening nerves and sparking deeper pleasures. She could no longer tell one sensation from the other as they blended and swirled through her body.

Releasing her wrists, he wrapped his arm around her hips, anchoring her...or anchoring himself *to* her, as the movement of his hand between her legs grew more demanding.

Caillie slid her fingers into his hair. Craving the heat of his kiss and the taste of him on her tongue, she urged his mouth up to hers.

His kiss was voracious. And hers was no less so.

But as the pleasure he wrung from her body approached its peak, spiraling through her, dancing along every nerve, she grew taut in his arms. Her mouth opened on a silent moan and her lust-clouded gaze sought his. Her climax tore through her like wildfire. Lighting her ablaze and scorching her soul.

And he guided her through it with his dark, desirous stare, the relentless thrust of his fingers, and the gentle brush of his lips...over her cheek, her jaw, the curve of her ear, and then her sensitive breast. The subtle tremors of her release echoed

through her body, carrying her pleasure to every corner of her being as her heartbeat thundered in her ears.

She gasped as he withdrew his fingers from her sex and stroked gently along her slick, swollen folds. “Your pleasure is intoxicating,” he whispered, awe roughening his voice.

Caillie smiled and turned her head to catch his lips with hers.

He was intoxicating. The taste of his kiss made her drunk with desire and soon she was melting once again.

“The bed,” she murmured against his lips.

He didn’t hesitate. Swooping an arm around her back, he half lifted her off her feet as he swung her away from the door. Her laughter was soft and husky as she gripped his shoulders to steady herself when he set her back to her feet.

But then she took a step back. “Your clothes first.”

Though he arched a brow, he did as she directed, shrugging free of his fine evening coat before unwinding his cravat then tugging his shirt up over his head. His shoes were kicked aside and then rest melted quickly away, leaving him naked and *ready*.

Caillie’s gaze went straight to his cock. She couldn’t help it. He was so beautiful in a way so different from herself. So hard. Thick and straining. For her.

Her body responded to his obvious desire with a melting rush of heat. She squeezed her thighs to contain the sensation. Soon, that perfect part of him would be inside her again. Throbbing. Thrusting. Bringing her to new heights of pleasure.

“Cailleach. Are you gonna stare all night?” he asked in a voice of strained humor. “Or do you intend to put more than just your eyes on me?”

She was striding forward before he finished speaking. His entire body tensed—hardening before her eyes—muscles tightening across his abdomen, thighs, shoulders, and down to his hands. She brought her hands gently to his chest, flattening her palms over the rise and fall of his deep breaths. His skin

was smooth and so hot. The tight points of his nipples pressed to her palms and she couldn't resist exploring them with her fingertips. The sound he made was raw and deep, drawing her gaze to his.

"I've dreamed of touching you like this. For longer than you ken," she murmured.

The muscles of his jaw bunched then released. "Do it, then, sweetheart. I'm yours to explore."

She lifted her eyebrows. "Everywhere?"

His harsh groan vibrated through her. "I fucking hope so."

Caillie laughed softly, but the sound died quickly as she turned her attention back to where her hands smoothed gently over the contours of his chest, then shoulders, and down his arms.

Bluidy shite. She loved the feel of him even more than she loved the look of him.

Stepping around him, she eagerly explored the intriguing muscles of his back, the hollow valley of his spine, and then—with her bottom lip caught between her teeth—the taut curve of his buttocks.

He was formed finer than the most revered sculptures carved by masters. Instead of marble, he was art in flesh and blood.

As she came around to face him again, she slid a glance at his face, which remained stoic and resolved. The only exceptions were the glint of intensity in his eyes, the fierce thrumming pulse at his throat, and the subtle way his cock seemed to throb in time to his heartbeat.

Having denied herself long enough, she finally lowered her gaze. Immediately and without conscious thought she reached for him, wrapping her hand securely around the base of his cock.

His groan was deep and short as his entire body flinched and tightened at her touch.

But the sound mingled with her own breathless sigh as she discovered the astounding heat and silk sheathing a hardness unlike anything she'd ever known. Hard as steel or stone but thrumming with life. She added her other hand, wrapping her fingers gently around him just below the ridged head.

A glistening drop of moisture beaded up from the slit at the top.

Caillie drew a soft breath and lowered to her knees.

“Fucking hell.” Bishop’s voice was little more than a growl as he flexed his hands then fisted them again. “What are you doing?”

Caillie looked up at him as he towered over her with breath-stealing strength and masculine beauty. “Exploring,” she replied sweetly.

His reply was a hard clenching of his teeth as she slipped the tip of her finger along the slit on his tip, claiming the clear droplet to bring it to her mouth.

The desire to taste his issue had been impulsive—instinctive—but when Bishop’s hips jerked in response and he gave a rugged groan, she felt a swift and intense rush of power.

She wanted more.

Still holding him firmly at the base, she slid her other hand down his thick length then up again with a gentle squeeze near the top, urging another, larger drop to issue.

But this time, she claimed it directly with her tongue, leaning forward swiftly so he couldn’t stop her. Flicking her tongue over his tip, she took the salty drop from his flesh.

“*Fuuuuuck,*” he groaned thickly.

Sensing the effort it took him to remain unmoving during her exploration, she didn’t waste another moment as she swirled her tongue around his smooth, broad head before widening her lips to take him into the heat of her mouth.

“*Holy fucking everlasting hell.*”

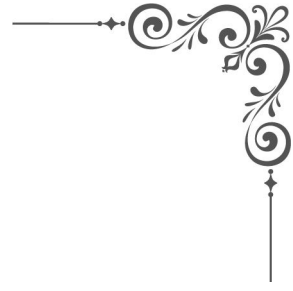
His curse sounded more like a benediction as his cock throbbed hot and so impossibly hard between her lips and against her tongue. She couldn't fit much of him in her mouth, though she tried, sliding her lips down as far as she could before lifting again to swirl her tongue along the ridged head. When another drop formed, she greedily claimed it with a long lick before it rolled down his length. Then she took him in again, this time moving her hand in companion with the slide of her mouth.

His low, rumbling growl of pleasure urged her to do more. More flicks of her tongue. A moment of suction before releasing him to start again. Quickening her rhythm and taking him deeper each time.

It was a heady experience. The satisfaction and power that thrummed through her each time she heard him groan his pleasure.

Could she make him climax with her mouth?

She was desperate to find out.



Chapter Twenty-eight

Had a man ever died from the sheer intensity of sexual pleasure?

If not, Bishop was certain he'd be the first.

Nothing in his life could have prepared him for the lush magic of Cailleach's lips and tongue moving over his cock. Her inexperience was enriched by her bold desire as she explored and tested and lost herself in the pure enjoyment of it. The first hot lash of her tongue nearly knocked him on his arse, but as her confidence and desire grew, so did his determination to hold steady. To give her the freedom to do as she wished—even though every moment threatened his ability to hold back his release.

Though it'd be so easy to let go and allow the pleasure to overwhelm him, he could not bring himself to come between her sweet lips. Not yet.

“Cailleach.” Her name came out as little more than a guttural sigh. When she didn't pause but sucked him even deeper, he groaned and slid one hand into the thickness of her coiffure. Curling his fingers into a fist, he gently pulled her mouth from him. She released him with obvious reluctance and looked up at him with glimmering, lust-filled eyes.

His cock throbbed heavily in response, craving the heat of her mouth again.

“Enough exploring,” he said gruffly.

She began to shake her head in denial, but he stopped whatever argument she might give by tightening his hand in her hair and tipping her head back. Then he bent over her to take her parted lips in a wild, open-mouthed kiss, sweeping his tongue deep into her mouth to steal the whimper that slid from her throat.

Fuck, he needed her.

In a swift motion, he scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder. Her short, husky laughter warmed the deepest

parts of him. When he dropped her onto the plush mattress of her four-poster bed, her fancy skirts draped in a mess across her thighs, showing off the elegant curves of her legs. The look of longing and physical craving she cast up at him caused his grin of humor to slide into a snarl.

Planting his knee on the mattress between her parted knees, he held himself on one hand and curled his other hand behind her neck to lift her mouth to receive another plunging kiss.

He loved the taste of her. The sound of her whimpering sigh. The arch of her spine which caused her breasts to brush lightly against his chest.

Propping herself up on one elbow, she looped her other arm around his neck, pulling him down. With a harsh growl of surrender, he settled his full weight atop her. His chest crushed her breasts and his hips settled into the cradle of her thighs. He rocked his pelvis against her, but instead of heated female flesh, his cock slid against the cool silk of her gown.

It wasn't an unpleasant sensation.

He rocked his hips again, positioning himself against her core. But her skirts remained between them, a thin but impenetrable barrier. The only thing stopping him from plunging deep into her body.

When she lifted her hips, seeking greater pressure, he gave it, guiding his length along her silk-covered cleft. Her gasp and moan inspired another long, thrusting caress. Then another and another.

Soon, she was writhing beneath him, lifting and angling her hips to claim every inch of contact. Her mouth became ravenous—licking into his mouth, nipping sharply at his lips, sucking his tongue—as the silk between their bodies became wet with her arousal and his own.

Grinding his back teeth, Bishop knew he couldn't take much more. And when she reached down to grasp at his buttocks in an attempt to force him more fully against her, he was done.

With a rough sound, he rolled to his back, wrapping an arm around her waist to bring her with him. Pink silk fell over his chest and covered his thighs.

“What...?”

“Dress off,” he replied, his voice a raw whisper.

Pushing herself up to sit straddling his hips, she twisted her arms behind her to tug impatiently at the ties of her gown as Bishop slid his hands up the length of her thighs.

But she slumped in frustration, swearing under her breath as she dropped her hands in defeat.

Bishop laughed and grasped her hips to push her back on his thighs just enough so he could sit up. He took her mouth in a quick and forceful kiss and reached around her to find the tiny row of buttons down her back.

She sighed and her lips curved into a smile against his. “Too bad you dinnae have your brigand’s knife at hand.”

Meeting her sparkling gaze, he arched a brow. “You want me to destroy another gown?”

Her hands lifted to frame his face. “You could destroy a thousand frocks, every petticoat, and every bluidy corset if it meant I’d get to feel your body against mine.”

He grasped the edges of her gown and gave a violent tug, tearing it down to her hips.

Cailleach’s delighted laughter filled the room as she grabbed fistfuls of silk to lift it over her head. With Bishop’s help, the gown was swiftly whisked away. The petticoats were next, but the corset, which lifted the soft mounds of her breasts so enticingly, took a bit longer. In part, because Bishop kept getting distracted by the beautiful, pale pink swells of her breasts tipped with perfect peachy-pink nipples. He couldn’t stop kissing and licking and sucking the lovely flesh into his mouth.

But she obviously didn’t mind the delay. Her hands threaded through his hair to grasp his head and hold him to her as her hips rolled gently in his lap.

Too gently.

His cock throbbed hot and demanding against his belly. The pain of his need almost unbearable.

Until Cailleach, Bishop had never known the deep ache of denial. It inspired a yearning that was complex and undeniable—a hunger that seemed to rise from the very center of his wasted soul. He both craved it and cursed it.

The ties of her corset loosened at the insistence of his deft fingers and he tossed it aside before whipping her chemise away as well.

Then his breath caught on a harsh and ragged groan. She was seated astride his lap, finally entirely naked but for a gilded, jeweled necklace collaring her slim throat and silken stockings gartered at her thighs.

He grasped her hips in his hands, forcefully enough that his fingers would likely leave marks on her soft flesh. Then he pulled her toward him, trapping his aching cock between their bellies. He was desperate to be inside her, but he didn't want to rush. Every single moment felt precious.

Cailleach smoothed her hands over his shoulders and gave him a mysterious smile before she lifted her hands to her hair and began to remove the many pins, one by one.

The position lengthened and arched her spine, lifting her breasts in offering.

Bishop couldn't refuse.

Grasping her rib cage, he slid his hands up until they rested beneath the curves of her lush breasts. Then he leaned forward and took one peach-pink peak into his mouth, drawing it deep, swirling his tongue over the pebbled peak.

She responded with a husky groan—arching even more—but didn't lower her hands from her hair.

Releasing the first breast, he turned his head and flicked his tongue over the other peak then watched as her nipple tightened to a perfect bud before he covered her with his demanding mouth.

Her moans soon slid into panting breaths. As her hair tumbled free down her back, she wrapped her arms around his neck and shoulders, holding him close. Her hips rolled, seeking deeper contact. She moved over him. Demanding more. Passionate.

Releasing her breast, he smoothed his hands up her slim back then delved into her thick hair to hold her head as he brought her mouth to his. The kiss was open and hot, without a hint of seduction or skill. It was pure need. Raw hunger.

She took it and responded in kind. Twisting her tongue around his, moaning her desire, curling her fingernails into his skin, flattening her breasts to his chest until their heartbeats thundered between them.

Taking her lush bottom in his hands, he lifted and tilted her hips, easing her slick, heated sex along his cock. He sucked in a harsh breath at the delicious contact. Their eyes met and they stilled, staring at each other, both of them panting for breath.

Bringing one hand up to her face, he brushed his thumb over her cheek.

“Cailleach,” he murmured.

She smiled and replied in a sultry whisper, “Bishop.”

Something strange and sharp caught in his chest. He held his breath, waiting for it to go away. But instead of leaving him, the sensation spread out in rippling waves until he was filled with it.

But before he could catch a proper breath, Cailleach took his bearded jaw in her hands and tilted his mouth to hers for a fierce, commanding kiss. One that was clearly meant to possess and claim.

But he was already hers.

Had been for ages.

When she finished the kiss with a hot flick of her tongue against the corner of his mouth, she murmured thickly, “I need you inside me, Bishop. I want to be filled with you. Until your heartbeat pulses against the deepest part of me. Until we’re

drenched in sensation and you release your pleasure into my soul.”

The woman was a bloody poet.

He growled and reclaimed her mouth in another kiss, but when she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and shifted her weight as if to roll back onto the bed, he held her firmly in his lap.

“I don’t want to hurt you, sweetheart,” he murmured thickly.

She shook her head and quickly assured, “You willnae.”

“I know,” he replied as he held her hips in place over his lap then lay back. The sight of her—gorgeously naked astride his hips, her sex resting against the base of his cock—drew a ragged moan from his throat. “You’re going to take the lead tonight.”

He smoothed his hands along her thighs, loving how she trembled beneath his touch.

Her eyes widened in understanding, excitement flickering in their depths. “I dinnae ken...” she began, but he gave a rough sound and shook his head.

“You’ll figure it out, clever girl.”

She smiled and gave a small testing roll of her hips.

Bishop clenched his teeth at the alteration of pressure and the glide of her heat.

Her next roll was bigger, more intentional, as she slid her sex along his erection to the ridged head. With her gaze steady and bold on his face, she teased him with small, short movements against the sensitive underside of his engorged tip, until she was gasping and trembling over him and Bishop gripped hard to her thighs, doing everything in his power not to lift his hips and thrust more forcefully against her.

“You’re a wicked woman,” he bit out from clenched teeth.

The smile that tilted her lips was pure sensuality.

But then she leaned forward to drop a quick kiss to his lips before bracing herself with her palm flat over his heart. Then she lifted her hips and reached down to grasp his cock in a warm, possessive grip. Holding his gaze, she positioned him against her entrance.

And then she paused.

Bishop tensed his thighs and squeezed his buttocks. His jaw ached from grinding his teeth. But he somehow managed to keep himself still.

And still, she remained poised above him—with his cock kissing her silken folds—doing nothing to take him inside her.

“You are everything, Bishop Black.” Her whispered words were soft and velvety rich, the tone deepened by the weight and wonder in her gaze.

An odd thickness gathered in his throat, making it difficult to reply, though he was compelled to. “I’m nothing.” His voice was raw and hoarse.

Cailleach shook her head and slowly eased her hips down over him, finally accepting him into her tight, devastating heat.

Bishop groaned at the torturous pleasure of it. His eyes threatened to roll back in his head, but he couldn’t escape her heavy-lidded gaze. And didn’t want to. The flickering light in their depths mesmerized him.

She was everything. The sun, the moon, and the stars. Breath, lifeblood, and spirit.

After taking just a bit of him inside her, she lifted again, coating him in her moisture. Stars danced in his vision. Then she lowered, going farther before lifting again. Over and over. Taking more and more each time. Slow. Decadent. Patient. And so fucking perfect.

By the time she’d lowered her full weight, claiming every inch of him, they were both panting and sweat sheened on their bodies.

“You fill me so completely,” she gasped, amazement in her voice. “I can feel you in the verra depths of me.”

“Cailleach,” he groaned, utterly unable to form any other word or thought. His hands sliding up to grip strongly around her narrow waist, but he just held her.

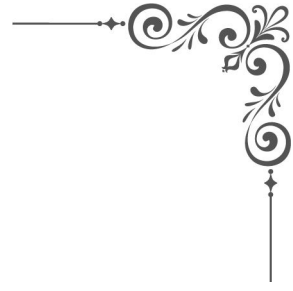
She smiled, running her smooth hands over his chest and belly and sides. “Dinnae fret, luv,” she murmured. “I’m going to take care of you.”

And then she did, moving along his cock in a rhythm that was at first rolling and sensual as she tested herself and him. But it wasn’t long before she grew more demanding, rocking her pelvis in a more furious motion as she circled her clitoris with her fingertips. Drawing her pleasure from him as intently as she gave it.

Despite his best intentions, he wasn’t able to stay unmoving beneath her for long. His hips rose and fell, increasing the depth and power of her thrusts. Their gasps slid into heavy moans. Her gaze became unfocussed and her body shook as she finally lowered herself to his chest. She took his face in her hands and slid her tongue into his mouth.

Pleasure snaked up along his spine and coiled around the base of his cock. As her inner muscles began to quiver around him, he wrapped his arms tight around her slim form, holding her to him as he thrust in a pounding rhythm. Her jaw dropped open, her breath came short and fast, and her spine arced in a gorgeous curve as she opened to him, accepting all he had to give as pleasure shook her body.

His climax ripped through him like a force. It was all he could do to hold her tight in his arms as pleasure blasted him into a million pieces of light and dark, life and death, heart and soul.



Chapter Twenty-nine

He broke from sleep feeling instantly disoriented. His heart hammered unnaturally as the truth shot through him like a rifle blast.

Shite. He'd fucking passed out.

After experiencing the most amazing, mind-shattering orgasm of his entire blasted life, he'd just... fallen asleep? *Again.*

That was twice now that he'd dropped into unconsciousness immediately after making love to Cailleach.

It was unprecedented. He'd only ever been as anxious to leave his lovers' beds as he'd been to have them gone from his.

Yet here he was, sprawled in the middle of a lush four-poster bed beneath a coverlet of yellow silk that appeared to shimmer beneath the silvery moonlight flooding through the windows. And there, tucked into the corner of the window seat with her arms loosely wrapped around her bent knees and her dark hair falling thick down her back as she gazed out at the star-glittered sky, sat the most beautiful creature in existence.

With panic pressing outward through his chest, he had a sharp and sudden wish that the world outside that window might spin on without them, leaving everything within these four walls utterly untouched. Forgotten.

Before he could sink too deeply into the futile fantasy, Cailleach glanced toward him. Seeing that he was awake and staring back at her, she smiled. It was slow and soft, and if he didn't know better, he'd say it contained a hint of melancholy.

"You're awake?"

Her sultry Scottish burr triggered a rush of warmth through his chest and a shot of lust to his cock. He didn't think he was imagining the added hoarseness in her tone after her ragged gasps and husky moans.

How could he have slept for even a moment with Cailleach within his reach? He should have been soaking up every brief glint of her gaze, every smile, every brushing caress.

How much time had he wasted?

At least she hadn't slipped away this time. He'd have to visit her in her bedroom more often.

Every goddamned night, perhaps.

"So are you," he replied, trying to keep the majority of his thoughts from his expression as he flashed a casual grin and pushed himself up to sit and lean back against the mound of plush pillows behind him. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Nay," she replied as she slipped her feet to the floor and stood.

Bishop couldn't keep his gaze from sliding covetously along the lines of her figure as she strode toward him.

Was she naked beneath her thin green robe sashed tightly around her narrow waist?

His already rock-hard cock pulsed at the thought. It took great effort not to rub his hand along his length. Instead, he forced his gaze back to hers and thought he caught sight of a knowing little smile tugging briefly at the corner of her mouth.

Then he frowned. "You didn't sleep at all?"

She gave a gentle shake of her head and sat on the edge of the bed. Leaning her weight on an outstretched hand, she angled toward him. "I was too...wound up, I reckon. Too many thoughts swirling through my head. Too many..." She paused and pressed her palm over her heart as she took a heavy breath. "Too many feelings," she finished with another smile.

"Good feelings?" he asked gruffly.

Her mouth widened and her eyes grew soft. "Wonderous, glorious feelings," she whispered as she leaned forward far enough to brush her lips lightly across his. Before he could lift his hands to grasp her nape and pull her in for a more thorough kiss, she drew back. "Anxious feelings," she added in an even

lower voice. “Sad feelings and grateful feelings. Scared, angry, and blissful feelings.” She laughed and shrugged. “Just too many feelings.”

He understood entirely though he couldn’t admit it. “And now?”

“Now, I feel...” She sighed, a warm, heavy sound. Her gaze drifted with gentle hunger down his exposed chest to where his erection tented the satin coverlet draped over his lap. Her lips parted and she peeked up at him through the thick fall of her lashes. “Now, I feel empty. And needful.”

Heart thundering, Bishop lifted his hand to trace her smile with the pad of his thumb. His voice was low. Rough. “You’re not sore?”

“I’m verra sore,” she replied as her eyelids grew heavy. “It’s a soreness I reckon I’ll crave for the rest of my life. But it’s the ache I’m more concerned with now.”

Bishop smoothed his fingers down her throat before he swept his hand beneath her thick hair to wrap possessively around her nape. “Where do you ache, sweetheart?”

She took his other hand in hers and brought it to her breast. Holding it there so he could feel the quickening of her heart, she whispered, “Here.” With their gazes locked, she moved his hand down over her belly, then gently parted her legs until the edges of her robe fell open. She boldly eased his hand between her thighs, until his fingers slid along the swollen folds of her sex. “Here.”

Bishop’s chest hitched and his stomach tightened with the swift force of lust raging through him. Holding her in his hand, he curled two fingers into her squeezing core.

“And here?” he asked in a guttural murmur.

The sound she made in response was a gorgeous mixture of shock, pleasure, hunger, and gratitude. She parted her legs farther and lifted herself into his hand, urging him to go deeper.

“Aye,” she answered, her eyes already glazing over with desire. Then she stretched forward to bring her mouth

forcefully to his. With his hand still lodged between her thighs, she rose to her knees and repositioned herself astride his lap. “I’m afraid you’ve made a glutton of me.”

“I’ll give you what you need, pet,” he answered thickly. “Whenever and however you need it.”

Bishop gave a few beckoning gestures within her sheath, drawing sharp breaths and low sounds from her throat as she tossed her head back in gorgeous abandon. Needing to see the full glory of her beauty straddling him, Bishop released her sex and tugged at the sash holding her robe in place. The soft material slid free easily. With his breath short, he smoothed his hands over her body from her shoulders, down over her lovely breasts, then her slim waist and the curve of her hips, spreading the robe wider as he went until it fell down her arms to pool around her fully exposed body.

She was fucking stunning.

Straddling him with her dark hair a tangle around her. Her thighs spread and her glistening folds resting atop his loins.

He gripped her thighs, curling his fingers into the toned flesh. Her beauty and strength and everything else that made up who she was never ceased to amaze him. How could she possibly be real?

When he lifted his hands to cover her breasts, she moaned softly and arched her spine. The movement caused her to shift along his length. The satiny friction was unbelievably erotic. But it wasn’t enough.

With a harsh mutter, Bishop grasped her waist, lifting her enough that he could tug the coverlet down, freeing his fiercely erect cock. Cailleach hummed at the sight of him and eagerly took him in both of her hands, sliding her soft palms up and down his length.

As she massaged his member, he kneaded her tits, bringing the rosy nipples to hard peaks.

Fucking hell. He needed to be inside her.

With one hand on her hip to guide her, he reached down to take himself in hand, but just as she shifted to prop herself up

with her hands on his chest, something bumped against the bedroom door.

They both stilled sharply, their breath catching mid-inhale and their eyes locking on each other.

Cailleach glanced over her shoulder then whispered. "I'm fairly certain I locked it."

Bishop lifted a brow. "Fairly?"

The sound came again followed by an odd sort of huff.

"What in hell?"

Cailleach suddenly relaxed and gave a low laugh. "Och, the naughty boy," she muttered as she swung her leg over his hips to scoot from the bed. She swept her robe back around her shoulders and belted it just as the door rattled again.

Bishop tensed, pulling the coverlet back over his intensely throbbing erection, but the woman was clearly unconcerned as she strode across the room to open the door.

"Come on then, Bramble, my lad," she greeted in a whisper as a black and white border collie entered the bedroom.

The obviously aging dog moved somewhat slowly, but once he was in, Cailleach closed and locked the door again before crouching to give the collie all the pets and kisses Bishop had been hoping for. The dog soaked up her attention with a toothy grin and lolling tongue, but when he caught sight of Bishop, he broke from Cailleach and trotted toward the bed. Lunging up to rest his front paws on the mattress, he gave an excited whimper.

Bishop scowled. "What does he want?"

"He wants to say hello," Cailleach explained with a laugh. "My Bramble isnae as spry as he once was, poor lad. With my frequent late nights, he's taken to sleeping in the nursery with Fergus, Colin and Worthy's lad." She gave the collie a loving stroke on his head. "He must be missing me."

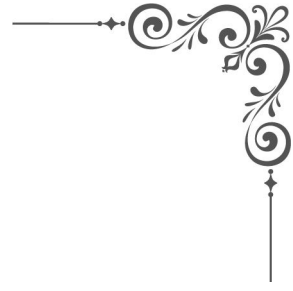
Eyeing the dog with no small bit of suspicion, Bishop asked. "Is there anyone else we should expect to come by?"

Her grin was full of humor and her eyes flashed with mischief. “Nay.” A low murmured word had the collie ambling toward a cushioned dog bed in the corner of the room where he circled three times then lay down with an audible grunt. Then Cailleach climbed back onto the bed and stretched herself atop Bishop. He immediately started smoothing his hands up and down her slim back.

“Since I expected to be up late enjoying the ball, my maid’s been instructed not to bother me before noon.”

Bishop lowered his hands to grip her buttocks and lifted his hips to press his cock against her belly. “So, our night’s not yet over,” he murmured thickly.

“Not even close,” she replied with a sultry smile as she curled her hand around his neck.



Chapter Thirty

It was more than three hours later that Bishop finally managed to gather the motivation required to leave Cailleach's bed.

She'd fallen into a deep and easy sleep some time ago, and though he'd been telling himself that he needed to take the opportunity to slip away, he'd been unable to do so. Lying next to her, with her leg tossed over his, her hand resting against his belly, and her head cushioned by his shoulder had been too... satisfying. Her warmth and trust and slow, even breaths had been a novel thing to experience. And though he knew she hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep, more than once he'd been tempted to wake her with hot licks of his tongue along her most sensitive flesh.

Making love to her could easily become addictive.

Which was exactly why he had to leave. Now. Before the sun rose too high in the sky and that annoying voice in his head got any louder or the tugging in his chest drew any tighter.

Yet still, he struggled. In his mind, he kept reliving the feel of her kiss on his throat and the desperate claw of her fingernails holding him close. He'd never known anything so stirring as her husky moans of pleasure or that gleam of discovery and delight in her eyes as she ran her tongue up his length. It all felt so new to him. But it wasn't the five years of celibacy that made him feel like a lad experiencing such things for the first time. It was *her*. Because it had *never* been like this with anyone else.

Cailleach Claybourne was destined for so much more than Bishop Black. She deserved so much more. Yet, he couldn't keep himself from imagining her as his.

Unfortunately, he soon began to hear the faint sounds of distant stirring in the household and finally forced himself to ease away from her smooth and lovely limbs. With a clenched jaw, he unwound her thick locks from around his arm and

slowly eased from her bed. Though she groaned then whimpered then muttered some mostly incoherent nonsense about how vital it was for a young lady to learn to play something called a banjo, she didn't stir anywhere near to actual wakefulness.

Bishop was sorely tempted to stop and ask her a bit more about the banjo. But no matter how interesting, confusing, and entertaining her sleepy mutterings were, he could not be found in her bedroom.

He moved silently about the room, redressing under Bramble's watchful stare. He was contemplating how best to sneak away without being seen by anyone in the household when a quiet but firm knock sounded on the door.

Bishop froze.

She had locked it again after Bramble's intrusion, hadn't she?

He glanced to the collie, who didn't bother to raise his head at the knock though his eyes moved curiously from Bishop to Cailleach still sprawled in the bed to the door, where another knock was heard, followed by a woman's voice. "Miss. Miss, a message arrived for you that you'll definitely want to see."

When there was no response, the door handle jostled but didn't open.

A muttered curse could be heard from the other side, then another knock. "Miss. You really want to wake up for this message. The boy said it was urgent."

Cailleach finally started to stir in the bed, muttering incoherently under her breath as she stretched and rolled to her back. "No lessons today, Worthy," she groaned sleepily. "It's my birthday..."

Bishop scowled. Her birthday? Lessons?

"Come now, miss," the voice beyond the door urged gently but firmly. "It's Neda and you need to open this bloody door for me so I can give you this important message."

As Cailleach forced herself up to sit, Bishop rushed quietly to the bedside.

“I’m coming,” she grumbled. “No need tae get testy. Ned gets outta the pasture all the time.”

There was an incoherent mumble from the maid, but Bishop was more concerned with the fact that Cailleach had risen and donned her robe, appearing as though she actually intended to go open the door.

Bishop stopped her with a hand on her arm and a fierce shake of his head. She tossed her hair back from her face and looked up at him with a sleepy grin and an unfocussed gaze. “Hiya, handsome.” Then she rose to her toes and pressed a warm kiss to his lips. “I’ve gotta see to the girls ’afore the snows come,” she muttered with a pat to his cheek.

The woman was clearly still half-asleep. Her odd behavior reminded him of how she’d been the night of his return to London when he’d found her in his bed. Did she always awake with such difficulty?

As she stumbled across the room, Bishop had just enough time to conceal himself behind the door before she unlocked it and swung it wide.

“About time,” the maid muttered, then asked, “Are you fully awake yet? Or still locked in your dreams?”

Cailleach’s face brightened. “Och, I had the most wonderful dream.” She glanced back toward the bed. “He was with me...all night...” A note of confusion entered her last words and her voice faded away. With a blink, her gaze seemed to sharpen suddenly as she scanned the bedroom with a frown before glancing back to the maid. Only then did she catch sight of Bishop pressing his back to the wall beside the open door.

Her eyes widened and she bit her bottom lip in an obvious attempt to hold back a sudden burst of amusement.

Bishop arched his brow and silently crossed his arms over his chest. Then he tilted his head pointedly toward the maid,

who stood just inches away from him with nothing but a slab of wood between them.

Cailleach blinked again and tensed. “Neda? What are you doing here so early?”

“There you are,” the maid said with an exasperated sigh. “I’ve been trying to tell you that you received an urgent message. I figured you’d want to read it right away.”

A folded note was passed to Cailleach and she looked at it with a little dip of her brows before she seemed to realize who it was from.

“Thank you, Neda,” she said in a distracted tone. “That will be all.”

“Do you need help dressing?”

“Nay,” Cailleach replied quickly, then smiled. “I’ll manage today. Thank you.”

The maid’s voice was thick with suspicion as she replied, “All right then. Ring if you need me.”

Once the door was shut and the key turned in the lock, Cailleach turned her back to Bishop and strode to the window, where she unfolded the note and read through it. Her expression shifted gently from curiosity to subtle surprise, then a quiet sort of hope.

Something heavy and dark washed through him, settling like lead in the bottom of his gut. Bishop told himself not to ask—that the message wasn’t his concern. But then he recalled her encounter with Vane the night before, as well as her denial and flat refusal to explain it.

Jealousy was an uncomfortable and distressing companion.

Coming up behind her, he asked, “Who’s it from?”

She immediately lowered the note to her side and glanced over her shoulder at him with an expression of pure innocence. “No one.”

He narrowed his gaze.

So many blasted secrets.

Her refusal to tell him pained him more than he cared to admit, stirring that weight in his stomach to a churning force, filling him with an utterly irrational anger. He hated it. And had no idea how to deal with it.

He clenched his back teeth and curled his lips into a sardonic smirk. “What is it? An invitation to coffee in Seven Dials this time? Or another orgy at Lowth’s? Or is it a request for you to join Vane in a private tête-à-tête to finish whatever had started on the balcony last night?”

Her dark brows lowered further with each harsh accusation and her spine stiffened until pride filled her slim frame. “You dinnae ken what you’re saying, Bishop. This message is private but that doesnae mean it’s cause for such suspicion and anger. I told you you’re the only man for me.” She started to turn away as she spoke, as if dismissing the conversation. “You’ll just have to trust me.”

Bishop stopped her with an arm around her middle. Though her body tensed, she didn’t resist. When she looked up at him, her lips were pressed to a line and her gaze was shadowed.

“And when will you trust me?” he asked, his voice low and rough. His heart started tumbling like a large boulder racing down a hill—wildly out of control. “You’ve so many secrets, Cailleach. Am I just one more, then? Another thing to keep separate and isolated from the rest of your life?”

She started to shake her head in denial but stopped herself. Her jaw was tense as she replied, “My secrets dinnae belong to me alone. I’d share everything with you, Bishop, if I could.”

It was all he could do to mutter thickly, “Somehow, I don’t believe you.”

She lifted her chin but said nothing more to try to convince him.

The boulder crashed to the bottom of the hill, shattering into a thousand pieces.

His arm dropped away from her and he stepped back, putting a necessary distance between them. “I think I finally

understand.” His stomach clenched. “You’re happy to take me into your bed—into your body—just as long as I don’t *interfere* in the rest of your life.”

Her expression turned fierce as she took a step toward him. “That isn’t true at all.”

His laugh was rough and humorless. “You know, there was a time I would’ve been thrilled by such an arrangement.”

He lowered his chin and shook his head. He could no longer look at her without a stab of pain arcing through his chest. “But not anymore,” he murmured heavily. Then he turned away and strode to the door.

“Bishop, wait. Don’t leave like this.”

Her voice was breathless with urgency but he didn’t bother to glance back.

“Don’t worry. I won’t be seen.” Then he opened her door and slipped from the room.

He made his way swiftly but carefully through the house then the gardens to the empty mews beyond without encountering a single soul. A good thing, since he wasn’t sure what he would’ve done if his presence had been noted or challenged. Emotions unlike anything he’d ever felt before rolled through him, making him itch for a fight. The pain of a few meaty fists to the face would be far better than what he was feeling at that moment.

When he reached the end of the mews, he just kept walking. Taking long strides with no destination in mind as he slogged through his tumultuous thoughts. It didn’t take long before he fully regretted the harsh accusation he’d thrown at her. He didn’t really believe what he’d said. He’d lashed out—cruelly and senselessly—out of fear and jealousy.

Bloody fucking hell. He was in love with the bitch.

Unequivocally. Deeply. Painfully in love with her.

The undeniable certainty hit him square in the chest and brought him to an abrupt halt.

Fuck.

And he'd just done the one thing he swore he'd never do.

He'd hurt her. Badly.

His stomach twisted as he thought of the stricken look in her golden eyes before he'd turned his back on her and the desperate plea in her voice as he'd walked away.

He was a fucking asshole. He didn't deserve her trust. He'd taunted and questioned her. At every bloody turn.

He'd done absolutely nothing to prove himself worthy of her confidence.

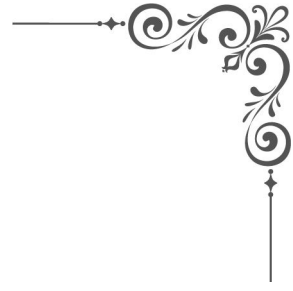
He had to make it up to her. Somehow.

Turning on his heel, he started back the way he'd come. But his steps slowed again once Wright House came back into view. He wanted nothing more than to march back inside, charge up to her bedroom, take her forcefully into his arms, and beg her forgiveness before declaring his undying love.

But he hesitated.

Perhaps he should knock on the front door and call upon her like a suitor. The idea made him smile. She'd be duly shocked and it might give him the opportunity he'd need to beg her forgiveness.

Nearing the mansion, he caught sight of a familiar carriage driven by a young man in a red cap pulling up a short way down the road from the house—Cailleach's preferred method of travel when she didn't want anyone to know where she was going. Then he saw the woman herself, looking rushed and gorgeous in a sky-blue walking dress as she strode hastily from the house. After speaking briefly with her driver, she'd climbed into the carriage and it promptly set off.



Chapter Thirty-one

Caillie sat in the slightly swaying carriage and clenched her jaw to keep the burning tears of pure frustration from falling.

Why was it so difficult for Bishop to understand that there were some things she simply couldn't tell him?

She'd promised her brothers that no one else would know of their association. It was vital she kept that promise if she ever hoped to earn their trust.

She wanted nothing more than to share her frustrations and doubts and worries about her brothers with Bishop. But making progress with Reginald and Nicholas was far too important, and anything she might say could put the whole thing at risk.

Unfortunately, she couldn't explain any of that to Bishop. And she shouldn't have to. Just because she couldn't share everything with him didn't mean she was deserving of such suspicion. And she sure as bluidy hell hadn't done anything to justify his ugly accusation.

She told herself that Bishop didn't *truly* believe what he'd said. That he'd spoken in anger because he believed she didn't trust him. Because the alternative—the possibility that he honestly thought she was capable of using him in such a way—was too hurtful to consider.

The saddest part was that she did trust him.

She was even starting to think he might actually understand and support what she was doing with her friends and the ladies of the ton and the ladies of the west wing. And it wasn't as though those activities required secrecy per se. She'd simply felt the need to protect them to ensure no one tried to impose any limitations upon them based on what society deemed proper and acceptable.

Bishop had already started to prove that his main concern had always been her safety. He'd never gone to Roderick with

tales of her various endeavors. And he'd never tried to force her to stop going out and about. The most annoying thing he'd done was ask why she was where she was and what she was doing and lecture her about various risks. In truth, she had no doubt that if Bishop discovered every one of her covert enterprises, he'd likely just want to ensure that she didn't put herself in any unnecessary danger.

But he had to go react so irrationally to one little note.

Caillie harrumphed.

So bloody frustrating.

As the carriage entered a part of London she rarely visited, Caillie gave a firm shake of her head and tried to put Bishop from her mind. She wasn't exactly sure what she'd soon be walking into, and she couldn't allow her focus to be distracted. The situation with Bishop would have to be addressed. But nothing could be resolved at the current moment.

Withdrawing the note from her pocket, she glanced over it once more. It was curt and precise.

Meet me this morning. 11 o'clock. V.

Caillie gave a soft snort. There was no request for a reply. No doubt, Vane couldn't imagine she wouldn't do exactly as he dictated.

He was right.

The address at the bottom of the note was only vaguely familiar but V obviously referenced Vane, and Caillie was fairly certain she knew which twin it was. If her brother was requesting a meeting, it could mean he was rethinking his very firm rejection. Hope blossomed almost violently in her chest.

Thomas was apparently familiar with the address as his brows had arched upward in surprise when she'd given him the direction.

"I know the place, miss, and it ain't exactly an establishment frequented by ladies."

She'd tilted her head. "When has that stopped me before?"

“Fair point,” he’d noted with a grin before handing her up into the carriage.

When the vehicle came to a stop again nearly twenty minutes later, Caillie remained seated as Thomas leapt down from his perch and walked off. She noted the sounds of the Wapping docks not far away and the stench of river and refuse that permeated the air. Several minutes later Thomas returned with a quick series of three knocks to let her know it was him before he opened the door and assisted Caillie from the vehicle. They were in a dank alley between two large brick buildings that stood at least four stories. Warped shipping crates were stacked in haphazard mountains, trash littered the ground, and something scurried into hiding nearby.

Caillie turned to her trusted man with an expectant look.

“The entrance is the second door around that corner,” Thomas advised with a nod.

“Anything I should be wary of?”

“Nothing more than usual,” the driver replied with a shrug. “I don’t reckon you’ll encounter much trouble. It’s one of Mason Hale’s places, but it’s not his typical training center. This is something different. Even so,” he added with a tip of his head, “stay alert.”

Mason Hale had once been a famous former bare-knuckle boxer who’d retired a number of years back and eventually opened a gym where he trained other retired fighters for new positions. Hale provided the majority of professional muscle for brothels and hells that needed men to keep the peace or guard their doors. Even though he was married to the sister of a duke, Hale was still well known for being a rough and temperamental character.

Why in hell did Vane want to meet her at one of Hale’s properties?

“Do you want me to go in with you?”

Caillie shook her head. “Nay. Do what you do best,” she replied with a smile.

Thomas gave a jaunty tip of his hat then turned and jogged down the alley to disappear around the rear of the building. No doubt he'd found a back entrance he could use to sneak in to manage any hidden threats and keep an eye on her undetected.

With a steadying breath and a firm straightening of her spine, Caillie walked toward the front of the building. There was no sign or anything to indicate what business the building contained, and from the outside, it appeared dark and quiet. But the front door opened rather abruptly just as she reached it. She was forced to quickly step aside or be bowled over by the young man who rushed out.

Considering the place was one of Hale's, she'd assumed she'd encounter large, muscled blokes with meaty fists and violent snarls. She certainly didn't expect this obvious gentleman in fine, tailored clothing, a cravat styled to perfection, and shiny black boots.

Was this what Thomas had meant when he'd said the place wasn't like Hale's other training centers?

Seeing her on the stoop, the rather elegant young man came to an abrupt stop, stiffening sharply as a faint blush colored his cheeks.

"Pardon me, miss," he uttered in a quiet but cultured tone before folding into a perfectly executed and graceful bow. "My apologies."

"It's perfectly all right," Caillie replied as a wiry lad of about fourteen with a messy shock of red hair rushed toward them from inside the building, carrying a glossy silk top hat. "Yer Grace. Yer Grace, ye nearly forgot yer hat again."

A duke?

Could this be Hale's reclusive brother-in-law, then? The Duke of Northmoor?

"Thank you, Felix," the young man replied with a faint smile and slight furrow above his dark, intelligent eyes. "My sister would box my ears if I'd lost another one."

Placing the hat on his head, the duke gave Caillie a respectful nod before hastening on his way.

Caillie stepped forward to address the lad named Felix. “Good morning, I’m supposed to be meeting someone here...a Mr. Vane.”

With a quick nod, Felix turned back into the building. “This way, then. He’s been waiting. And none too patiently,” he added in a grumble beneath his breath.

Caillie followed the lad into the darkened foyer, which was little more than a hallway that soon opened to a great, cavernous room. The lighting was a bit dusky and dim, but the open space was filled with a variety of equipment spaced here and there around a large boxing ring placed in the center. About half a dozen men were present. Their ages ranged from even younger than the elegant duke she’d nearly collided with to one who had to be nearing seventy at least. But none of them had the look of former boxers in training to be bruisers and bouncers. In fact, they looked a hell of a lot more like gentlemen and aristocrats. She even thought she recognized a couple of them.

This was what Thomas meant when he said the place was different from Hale’s other facilities. He was training gentlemen. How interesting. Was Vane one of his trainees, as well?

Felix rushed them through the main training room to a metal staircase at the back which ascended to an open loft and balcony above. But instead of taking them up the stairs, the lad ducked into another hallway. About midway down the hall, he paused in front of a closed door and gave a quick knock.

There was no answer, but Felix apparently wasn’t expecting one. He gave Caillie a quick tip of his head, indicating she was to enter, then he turned and headed back toward the main training area.

All right, then.

Caillie took a deep breath and reached for the doorknob before she had any time to ponder what might be waiting on the other side.

The door opened to reveal a minimal and somewhat crude sort of sitting room. A rug covered the center of the floor, and upon it, four leather armchairs were arranged around a round table, scarred and worn from use. A small woodburning stove in the corner warmed the room and a liquor service stood in another corner. Nicholas, the younger of the Villainous Vanes, sat at the table. If possible, his expression was even more tense and forbidding than usual.

Felix hadn't been lying about the man's impatience. When he didn't stand or speak upon her entrance, Caillie decided to counterbalance his deliberately rude and stormy manner with a wee bit of sunshine.

"Nicholas," she greeted with a wide smile as she swept toward the table. She was satisfied to note that her use of his given name was not at all expected. Or appreciated. Ignoring his deep glare, she lowered herself into the chair opposite his and leaned back in a posture of casual grace. "How lovely of you to invite me here today."

If her brother wished to create a scene of menace and oppression, she was going to encourage a tone of pleasant camaraderie.

"You came alone?" The question was curt and gruff.

Caillie tilted her head and leaned toward the table. "You asked me to meet you in a *boxing gym* in *Wapping*. Do you think I'm so foolish as to come to a place like this without some protection?"

There was a slight twitch at the corner of his eye. "And where is this protection of yours?"

She gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Somewhere about, I'm sure. As long as you dinnae have any dastardly intent, you willnae have to worry about it."

Vane's expression tensed. His thick, dark blond brows lowered surprisingly farther over his hard stare.

Uh-oh. *Did* the man have dastardly intent?

Narrowing her gaze, Caillie allowed herself a moment to truly study the man.

Was she being naïve to think she could trust him simply because he was her brother? There was clearly a wealth of anger contained within him. An air of suppressed violence seemed to vibrate in his large frame, giving the impression that he only barely had a handle on it and anything could set him off. And she was very obviously not his favorite person at the moment. But as she studied his glaring countenance, she couldn't help but feel a direct affinity toward him. Despite their undeniable conflict of purpose, she trusted her instincts, which meant she trusted him. She just couldn't believe he truly had any intention of harming her.

Taking a deep breath, she gave a small but genuine smile. "You asked me to come here, Nicholas, and here I am."

There was a long beat of silence before he asked, "How much will it take to pay you off?"

Caillie sighed and gave him a look heavy with disappointment. "Havenae we been over this already?"

He sneered. "You expect me to believe that nonsense about wanting to get to know us?"

"Aye," she answered curtly. "Because it's the bloody truth of it."

"Enough, Miss Claybourne," he barked. "You might have a chance at convincing my brother with that brazen friendliness and feigned innocence, but I'm no fool." His glare was nearly enough to make her shiver...if she'd been born with less will and determination. "How much will it cost to be rid of you?"

"Heaven save me from obstinate men," Caillie muttered under her breath. Frustration hardened her stare as she made a final attempt at breaking through his stony exterior. "Our sire was a wretched monster of a man. He willfully ruined lives. Not only those of his children and their mothers, but also the countless other women he seduced in his attempts to beget bastards. But he's gone. *We're* still here. We have the power to change his legacy."

“Legacy?” he scoffed. “It’s *my* family’s legacy you threaten with this disgusting pursuit.”

Callie shook her head. “You still dinnae understand,” she said sadly. “Whether you wish to admit it or not, you *are* my brother. Which makes your family *my* family. I’d never do anything to harm them.”

The man seated across from her slammed his fist on the table so abruptly Caillie flinched.

“Your very existence threatens to harm them,” he growled. “Everything you’ve said threatens to harm them.”

Caillie stiffened at the accusation, but as she stared back at him, she suddenly realized that his gaze wasn’t nearly as barren as she’d thought. It was filled with emotion. And it wasn’t fury she saw glimmering in the icy depths. It was fear. It was also very clear that he wasn’t on the verge of acceptance as she’d hoped. He was leagues away, in fact.

With a deep breath, she reached into the hidden pocket of her skirt and withdrew the slim journal that covered the dates during which the prior Earl of Wright pursued and seduced the young Miss Lillian Park, who was betrothed at the time to the Viscount Withersfield. Apparently, Withersfield had been some sort of adversary of their father’s and the earl took particular delight in cuckolding the man before his wedding. The handwritten entries were filled with the old earl’s menacing delusions and evil self-absorption. It wasn’t a pleasant read by any means.

She’d hoped Vane’s request to meet might be an indication that his willingness to accept and acknowledge their connection had shifted. She’d brought the journal in order to better answer any questions he might have about their sire and the circumstances of his conception.

But her optimism had obviously been misplaced.

Meeting her brother’s icy gaze, she set the slim volume on the table. “This is our sire’s journal. It is a complete documentation of his actions and intentions which led to you and your brother’s conceptions. Unfortunately, it will likely

create more questions than it answers since you will not have the benefit of context provided by his other journals which span most of the earl's adult life. The information you'll find within would be best accompanied by open conversation... with myself and our other brothers." She slid it across the table toward him. "But it's yours. To do with as you wish."

As soon as her fingertips lifted, he swiped the book up in his large hand and rose to his feet. He stalked to the iron stove in the corner and, without a moment of hesitation, where he might have considered opening the book to view its contents, he tossed it onto the smoldering grate. Flames billowed within the black iron as the old paper caught fire.

Instead of watching the destruction he'd wrought, Vane turned to face Caillie, as if daring her to try to save the journal from obliteration.

But she just remained where she was, a heavy sadness flowing through her veins.

"It doesnae matter," Caillie finally said as the fire died to small flickers of light. "Burning the journal doesnae change the truth."

Vane turned his head to glare at her. "It's a helluva lot harder to blackmail someone without proof of your claims."

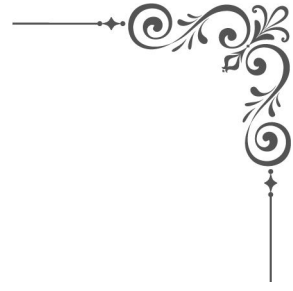
A huge, weighted sigh emptied from her lungs as she stood. She'd thought Beynon was bluidy stubborn, but this brother blew the Welshman away.

"And if that had ever been my intention, I'd verra likely be tempted to scurry away with my tail betwixt my legs." She smiled. "But it wasnae and I'm not. Someday, you're going to believe me, Nicholas. And when that day comes, you're going to feel like the verriest arse." Her grin widened. "You obviously cannae imagine it now, but I'm bluidy wonderful. You'd be lucky to claim me as a sister, but I promise I willnae forget how you doubted me. I've a great deal of experience managing temperamental older brothers and I reckon I'll have a lot of time to think up ways for you to make it up to me. You'd best start preparing yourself."

“Is that a threat, Miss Claybourne?”

Though the words were dark and heavy, as everything about this man seemed to be, Caillie swore she saw the tiniest flicker of...something else in his eyes.

“A verra...*verra* serious one,” she assured in her most intimidating voice. “You see, as stubborn as some of my brothers have proven to be...” She paused for effect, making it very clear that she included him in that group. “I can be infinitely more so. I dinnae give up easily when I’ve decided I want something.” Then she added in a low and earnest tone, “You *are* my brother. My *family*. And that means something to me.”



Chapter Thirty-two

When Cailleach's carriage had pulled away from Wright House, Bishop had tried to tell himself that her business was not his concern. But thoughts of all the dangerous places and frightening circumstances she could get herself into filtered swiftly through his mind. When a hackney cab passed by immediately after, it felt like fate and he hadn't hesitated to hop in and ask the driver to follow her.

That her destination had been the rough docks of Wapping shouldn't have surprised him. Nothing the woman did should truly surprise him anymore. But when she walked boldly into the large building—alone—Bishop knew he'd have to follow her. Not to interfere. Just to ensure her safety.

Inside the boxing gym, he lost sight of her and it took him an extra moment to decide if he should go up the metal stairs to the rooms on the upper level or take the back hallway. The reappearance of the red-haired boy who'd ushered Cailleach in at the door directed Bishop to the hallway. But he only made it a few steps along the passage before his way was quickly blocked as Thomas stepped from the shadows.

Flashing a grin, Cailleach's driver casually leaned a shoulder against the brick wall and began to use the tip of a large knife to clean his fingernails. "Far enough, mate."

Bishop glared at the young man who apparently saw nothing wrong in driving his mistress about to all manner of dangerous locations.

"Where is she?"

Thomas lifted his brows. "If she'd wanted you to know, you would."

Quickly growing infuriated by the man's attitude, Bishop growled, "You do realize how dangerous a place like this could be to a young lady alone."

"Who says she's alone?"

Bishop took a step forward and Thomas instantly shoved away from the wall to more squarely block the hallway.

“I need to make sure she’s safe.”

Thomas’s grin flashed again. “Well, that’s *my* job, innit?” He deftly tossed his knife to the other hand.

Bishop stared back at him with a narrowed gaze. “What do you know about who she’s meeting?”

The driver’s answer was an evasive shrug before he noted confidently, “The lady’ll be fine.” He gestured to Bishop with the point of his knife. “*You* might not.”

“I’m no bloody threat to her,” Bishop growled in response.

“Right.” Thomas chuckled. “She’ll obviously be pleased as punch to find out you followed her without invitation and spied on a private conversation.” He shook his head. “Haven’t you learned by now that she knows what she’s about? She doesn’t do anything without thinking through all the risks and usually manages to stay two steps ahead of anyone who’d challenge her.” He tipped his head again. “You included, mate.”

Bishop tensed at the tone of near reverence in the other man’s voice. “You’re in love with her.” It wasn’t a question.

“Of course,” the man readily admitted before he gave another low chuckle. “But then, I’ve got an established weakness for cocksure women who like to break the rules.” He gave Bishop a casual glance from beneath a thick lock of hair that half hid his gaze. “Believe me, mate. This ain’t the way. You want her to trust you, you’ve gotta be someone she can trust.”

“Fuck.” The man was right.

Thomas laughed at the rough curse, then gave a jerk of his chin. “If you don’t want to take my advice, go after her. See what happens. Otherwise, you’d best get gone before she comes out.”

Though everything in him was desperate to reach her side—to be with her, support her, protect her—no matter what she

was doing or who she was facing, he knew he couldn't. Something thick lodged in Bishop's throat and his stomach twisted violently.

"Keep her safe."

There was a flicker in the driver's eyes as he tipped his red cap. "Always."

Then Bishop turned and walked away, forcing himself to keep going—to leave Cailleach behind—until he climbed back into the waiting hack and drove away.



BEFORE RETURNING TO Mayfair, Caillie decided to make one additional stop. On the way there, she considered the unfortunately disheartening encounter with Nicholas. She twisted her mind in and out of their conversation, trying to find a loophole or a chink in the armor he'd donned against her. But she kept coming back to that stark flash of fear she'd seen in his eyes.

What was he so afraid of?

She thought through their conversation again and again, then replayed every word from the balcony last night at the ball. When the answer finally occurred to her, she had to chastise herself for being so obtuse as to not understand right from the start. It was so obvious.

And it explained why he was so fixated on paying her off.

As long as her goal was blackmail, he could counter it. He could take control over the situation...manage it...force it into the shape he could most easily contain. He could toss money her way—indefinitely, if need be—and continually ensure that the people he cared for would be safe from the consequences of the truth.

He was desperate to protect his parents and Reginald, no doubt, since his brother was the elder twin and set to inherit the viscountcy. Nicholas's fear and anger were rooted in his inability to manage and direct Caillie's actions. He couldn't control the situation and that infuriated him.

A sound that was half sob, half laugh bubbled up from her chest. The two of them were far more alike than she'd imagined. But that could also mean his stubbornness was a match to hers as well.

There was a very good chance she'd never convince him to accept her or their other brothers.

Bluidy hell.

By the time Thomas brought the carriage to a stop in front of a nondescript warehouse in the middle of St. Giles, Caillie had worked herself into a wee dither. But she reckoned it wasn't something Elle couldn't properly help her out of.

The woman was one of Caillie's most trusted friends and confidantes, in part because she possessed one of the rarest of rare traits...she never judged Caillie for any of her choices or actions. Whenever Caillie was upset or confused about something, Elle simply allowed her to rattle off for a while, offering occasional comments, until Caillie talked herself around to the solution she needed. And the woman was phenomenal at keeping secrets. Not from Max, of course. But Caillie knew Max would never go tattling to their brothers either. He was much more likely to confront her directly if he became concerned with her exploits. And it had been a long time since he'd felt the need to do even that.

The door to the warehouse—which wasn't a warehouse at all but had been remodeled into a lovely home—was opened by Langworth, as expected. After greeting her with a genuine smile, the giant-sized butler led her up the main staircase to Elle and Max's private room, which served as bedroom, sitting room, and personal dining room at once, where her sister-in-law was enjoying her tea.

“Caillie, what a surprise,” the gorgeous blonde exclaimed as she came forward to give Caillie a quick hug. “Come have tea with me.”

Smiling a bit wryly, Caillie asked, “I dinnae suppose you're in the mood for something a wee bit more bracing?”

A quick lift of her brows was Elle's only indication of surprise before she turned to Langworth, who'd remained hovering by the door. "Two mugs of my preferred ale, if you please, Langworth."

"Aye, m'lady," he replied before leaving the room.

Not many minutes later, the two women were curled up on the sofa, their shoeless feet tucked up beneath them, pewter tankards in hand.

Elle allowed a companionable silence to reign for only a few deep sips of the rich ale before she gave Caillie an expectant look. "All right. What is it?"

Caillie sighed. Sipped her ale. Then sighed again.

Elle chuckled. "That bad?"

Setting her tankard on her knee, Caillie gazed at the flames in the low-burning hearth. "Have you ever been in a situation where you kent exactly what needed to happen, but the other people involved were stubbornly determined to resist the inevitable at every bluidy turn?"

"I can think of at least one time," Elle replied with a smile.

"Right." Caillie grinned, thinking of Elle's early struggle with Max. "Of course. Then you ken the frustration."

"And the worry...and the intrusion of doubt."

"Aye," she agreed softly. "Guiding people to their fated destinies can be so fecking exhausting."

"But if their fates are destined," Elle asked thoughtfully, "is guidance truly needed?"

Caillie frowned. "Of course it is."

Her friend tilted her head. "Why?"

"Because most people are bluidy idiots when it comes to what's really important in their own lives."

The other woman's response was a gentle smile as she lifted her tankard.

Awareness rushed through Caillie's center, catching her by surprise. "Och! Am I being a bluidy idiot about my own life?"

Elle lifted her brows and gave an elegant shrug.

Caillie cringed.

"I just think that perhaps some things simply must occur in their own time, in their own fashion," Elle suggested. "You can't manipulate everything, Caillie."

"Why not?"

Though her tone was stubborn, Caillie recognized the truth in her friend's words. Perhaps the advice could be applied to both Bishop and the Villainous Vanes. Was she trying to force something that needed to take its own course?

It might warrant some thought.

"Do you ever wonder *why* you're compelled to intervene in...*everything*?" Elle asked.

Caillie might have been insulted by the question if it had come from anyone else. But her friend's compassionate, no-nonsense approach had always forced Caillie to look at herself differently.

"Nay...I reckon I havenae." She shrugged. "At least not beyond having a certainty I ken what should be done even if no one else does."

"Yes, but aside from that."

Caillie heaved a sigh. "I dinnae ken, exactly," she admitted, shifting position on the sofa to extend her feet toward the low-banked fire. Staring into the flickering flames, she drank from her mug. After another moment, as Elle waited patiently, she said, "I reckon I just cannae stand to see things out of order and...disconnected. Whenever they are, I mun set them right. Bring the broken pieces together."

"But *why*?" Elle prodded gently.

Caillie shifted again and scowled. "Because if I don't, opportunities could be missed, love could be lost, someone could be hurt. Human beings are stubborn creatures. Selfish

and single-minded,” she argued, her voice rising as she thought of Bishop’s angry words that morning. “They prefer to see things from their perspective only, and when something comes up that they dinnae ken how to handle, they disregard it. They reject it. Throw it away like rubbish.”

Her friend’s voice lowered with compassion. “Who did that?”

“My grandfather did it to my mother,” Caillie said, her throat thickening and a burning prickle forming behind her eyes. “She was young and inexperienced and thought herself in love with a man who cared less than nothing for her or the child he’d planted in her belly. And when she needed help and love and support, her own father turned on her. My mother died hours after giving birth to me. Rejected by her lover, forsaken by her own father. If not for Worthy, her cousin, who—at sixteen—had been little more than a child herself, my mother would have been utterly alone.” Caillie’s voice turned suddenly harsh with anger. “My father was a wretched, disgusting human being. So was my grandfather. My mother deserved so much more. She deserved to have people in her life—her own bloody family—who would care for her and be there for her no matter what. Everybody deserves that.”

“So, that’s why you fight so hard,” Elle noted softly, drawing Caillie’s attention away from the fire.

Her friend was staring at her with a glint in her eyes.

Caillie was surprised by the emotion until she felt her own tears slipping down her cheeks. She hastily brushed them away with the back of her hand. “I dinnae understand.”

“You desperately want the people you care about to have the love and support and family your mother didn’t have.”

Caillie blinked. Then blinked again. Then drew in a deep, ragged breath.

It was true. Despite her mother’s tragic fate, as soon as Worthy had had the means, she’d taken Caillie away to raise her in a house filled with everything her mother hadn’t received. Though Caillie was too young to remember much of

those early years in her grandfather's home, she recalled the overall feeling of oppression and her grandfather's ugly sneer. The love and light that had filled the home she'd shared with Worthy had been all the more beautiful in contrast. They'd lived in a world all their own, insulated from anything ugly or unaccepting. And then Colin had arrived and Caillie had discovered that she had brothers. More family! And though Worthy had been resistant at first, Caillie had only been thrilled at the opportunity to have more people to love. She simply hadn't been able to understand why anyone would take for granted the presence of true family, whether it existed via shared blood or any other means. And it physically pained her to see people without that kind of support and unconditional acceptance. And it utterly confounded her if they *could* have it but chose to reject it.

It had been the same when Beynon and Max had each struggled to accept what was happening with the women they loved so desperately. Caillie had luckily been present in both instances and had managed to give them each a wee bit of a shove in the right direction when it had been so vitally needed.

That's all she wanted to do for Reginald and Nicholas... show them an alternative path to an expanded and loving family.

"Is that so verra terrible, then?" she asked her friend.

Elle laughed and reached forward to take Caillie's hand. "Of course not, but I think you need to have a little more faith in people and trust that they'll come around in their own time and in their own way."

Caillie's heart clenched with a sudden fear, her thoughts shifting sharply away from her family. "And if they dinnae?"

Her friend's brows dipped over her gaze as she considered the question for a moment. "If you've allowed them ample opportunity to come to their own realization..." She paused, releasing a breath and staring intently back at Caillie, as though she knew *exactly* who Caillie was thinking of in that moment.

Bishop. Everything came back to him.

“And they still can’t accept what they’re being given...?” Elle continued. Then she shrugged and lifted her mug in a salute, “Then I say you should do whatever it takes to ensure your *own* happiness.”

Caillie gave a firm nod, agreeing with that plan wholeheartedly as she tapped her mug to Elle’s and they both downed the last of their ale. Though the weight of sadness that had been conjured by thoughts of her mother was slowly dispersing, she realized she’d have to think a bit more on her motivations in regard to Bishop *and* the Vanes.

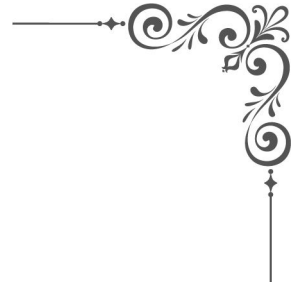
Was she expecting too much from them? Pushing them toward an end *she* wanted but that might not be right for them?

Giving a shake of her head, she looked into her empty mug and mused, “Would it be inappropriate to request another pour?”

Elle arched a brow and glanced down at her own empty mug. “They are rather small tankards, aren’t they?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Caillie exclaimed.

With a hearty laugh, Elle rose mostly gracefully to her feet and went to pull the bell rope that would bring Langworth.



Chapter Thirty-three

An hour later, Caillie climbed a bit unsteadily into the carriage while also turning to wave to Elle, who leaned against the open doorway, Langworth an imposing shadow behind her.

On the entire drive back to Mayfair, Elle's advice continued to ring in her head.

You should do whatever it takes to ensure your own happiness.

But wasn't that what she'd always done? Despite the many limitations imposed upon her sex, Caillie had found ways to go about doing exactly as she wished.

She had a wonderful array of friends and had managed to cultivate various opportunities to gather with women of all sorts, women with varied histories and diverse opinions and perspectives who never failed to provide Caillie with new things to consider about the world around her. She loved learning from women who'd lived lives so very different from her own.

But was it enough?

Was she truly happy with the life of secret meetings and covert activities?

If she could have whatever she wanted, what would she create? What would her ideal world look like? And how could she go about making it a reality?

And if she couldn't have Bishop in the way she wanted—without limits or reservations—then what exactly was she willing to accept as an alternative? And how could she make *that* come to be?

In addition to her allowance, she also had the dowry Colin had set aside for her in trust. Money that would have little purpose since she'd already begun to believe she'd never marry. But her eldest brother was notoriously reasonable. Perhaps if she talked to him...explained herself...perhaps he'd

release the dowry into her keeping. An investment into a different type of future.

A strange shot of awareness angled through her.

Why exactly had she never just sat down and talked to Colin—or Worthy, for that matter—about what she wanted for herself? They were protective of her to be sure, but they only wanted her to be happy. Worthy trusted her judgement more than anyone, having instilled it in her herself. And hadn't Caillie always extolled Colin's superior ability to be reasonable?

She considered Roderick and Beynon and Max. Would a single one of her brothers truly ever want to stand in the way of her dreams?

Had she been the one limiting herself all along?

Of course, there was the inevitable opinion of greater society, but she'd endured their censure and judgement for years. Why should she care what they thought of her true ambitions?

She didn't. She never really had, to be honest. Most of her concern had been more for how her behavior might reflect on the people she loved so dearly. That she might disappoint them somehow if she didn't live up to certain expectations.

But were they *their* expectations or her own?

And though there might have been valid reasons for her brothers to take issue with some of her riskier activities when she was younger, she was a grown woman now. And she knew quite well how to take care of herself. Surely, they'd acknowledge and respect that. If she truly trusted her family as much as she believed she did, perhaps she needed to be honest with them. About everything.

She flinched sharply as another stark realization sliced through her.

She'd been so critical of Bishop's regard for Roderick, but had she been any more willing to let her brother see the truth of who she really was?

Dammit. She was a bluidy hypocrite.



THE NEXT MORNING, WHEN Caillie returned to the house after taking Bramble on a lovely walk that gave him a bit of exercise and her a chance to think through the plots and plans tumbling through her mind, she was surprised to find Roderick waiting to speak with her.

Handing Bramble over to Shaw, the Wright butler who would ensure the collie received a proper treat after his outing, Caillie joined Roderick in the front parlor.

“Brother,” she greeted with a smile, “what brings you by so early in the day?”

Roderick turned from where he’d been staring out the window. Instead of his usual ready grin, there was an appearance of slight concern shadowing his features.

No. Not concern, exactly. More like curiosity tinged with a hint of wariness.

How interesting.

“Good morning, poppet,” he said as she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I took the liberty of requesting some tea. I thought you might like the refreshment after your walk.” He gestured toward the tea service set before the sofa.

Verra interesting.

Her wily brother was setting her up for something. She was certain of it. But she’d play along.

Flashing a smile, she led the way to the sofa. Once they were seated, each with a cup of steaming brew balanced on their knees, she waited for Roderick to state his purpose in visiting.

But instead of speaking right away, her brother gave her a long and steady look. His *assessing* look.

She tilted her head and smiled wider.

After another long moment, she lifted her teacup for a sip then said gently, “You may as well just ask whatever it is you

came here to ascertain, brother.”

Roderick sighed. “You look well.”

“Shouldnae I?” Caillie countered with arched brows.

“Did you enjoy yourself at the ball the other night?”

Caillie narrowed her gaze. “Of course.”

“I noticed that you left far earlier than you usually do. You’re typically one of the last people still spinning about the dance floor at the end of the night.”

Caillie did her best to hide the flicker of alarm that arose at his comment. Did he somehow know that Bishop had followed her upstairs?

No. Surely, he’d be far more outraged if he thought she’d been compromised by the man he’d trusted for so many years.

With a sigh and a steady gaze, Caillie set her teacup and saucer onto the table and leaned forward. “Cannae we speak plainly, brother?”

Roderick shifted position, also setting his tea aside. He rested his elbows on his knees and gazed at her with an uncharacteristically serious expression. “An excellent suggestion, poppet. I saw you come in from the balcony shortly after that infamous scoundrel, Reginald Vane. You left the ballroom immediately after and didn’t return.”

Maintaining her outward composure, Caillie experienced a burst of relief that he said nothing about Nicholas or Bishop.

Unfortunately, she noted a flicker of suspicion in her brother’s gaze. Damn it. He’d noticed her relief. It was just too bluidy hard to hide much of anything from this man.

She spoke quickly to distract him. “You’re quite right. I did have a few private words with Mr. Vane.”

Roderick scowled. “About what? The man cares for nothing but parties and wh—”

“Brother!” Caillie interrupted swiftly before he could finish. “I ken you’re not about to suggest Mr. Vane couldnae have any other interest in me than of a wicked nature. Surely,

I've a wee bit more to offer than that. Even to a rake such as he."

There was a pause as Roderick narrowed his gaze and stared hard at her across the table. "You're very good, Cailleach. You almost managed to put me on the defensive." Then he sighed. "I just worry about you, poppet."

"Why?" she asked sharply.

The question surprised him. His brows arched as he looked back at her. "Because your well-being matters to me," he replied as if it should be obvious.

But Caillie waved it away. "Would you worry as much if I were a man?"

His frown was heavy as he answered in earnest gravity, "The world is a different place for women than for men."

"Agreed. But maybe, instead of thinking only of how that fact makes us more vulnerable and in need of protection, you should consider the possibility that it also makes us cleverer and more resourceful and prepared for the many risks and challenges we must face."

When Roderick just scowled back at her, she continued, her voice becoming impassioned with the frustration she'd carried for so long. "I'm twenty-three years old and I'm still not allowed to leave the house without a chaperone of some sort. I'm treated like a child while men even younger than I are carousing through brothels and gambling hells and taking grand tours about Europe or sailing off to parts unknown on wild adventures." She huffed. "I cannot even have a simple conversation with a man in private within a few steps of a house full of people because it puts my bluidy reputation at risk. I am a woman, Roderick, not a child or a total fool. I can assess my own risk and make my own choices regarding my behavior and who I socialize with without having some man following me about to jump in and save me from imagined threats."

Though her breath was fast and her blood hot as she finished her impassioned monologue, she did feel some relief

having said it.

Roderick's expression was a bit stunned, then he shook his head and chuckled. "Damn me, poppet, you certainly know how to make a point."

"Thank you," she replied a bit stiffly, wary of his sudden shift in manner.

"I reckon Bishop got a similar earful when he followed you from the ballroom."

She tensed even more. "Bishop?"

"After I saw you leave, I was going to go after you to make sure you were all right, but Bishop beat me to it."

"What do you mean?" Caillie asked tentatively, her heart sinking with a wary trepidation.

Her brother shrugged. "I realized he must have seen what I had and went after you to ensure you were all right."

Caillie's voice rose a bit. "Why one earth would he do that?"

Roderick arched a brow. "I should think it's obvious."

Gritting her teeth, Caillie muttered, "What's bloody obvious?"

"The man's in love with you, poppet. I'd hazard a fortune that he has been for years."

Her heart leapt back up into her chest as though propelled by a swift punch to the gut, leaving her breathless in shock. "What?"

Roderick chuckled. "He's not that good at hiding it."

"He hid it from me," she exclaimed, her tone only slightly hysterical.

Now, her brother tossed her a look of pure skepticism. "Did he, though?"

She'd known for long enough that the man desired her. Rather intensely. But love?

In a rapid flow of memories, Caillie thought back over every interaction and every conversation she and Bishop had ever had, colored now by Roderick's bold assertion. It simply couldn't be true.

She gave a harsh shake of her head. "You're wrong. He cannae love me."

"Why not?" he asked.

"If he did—" She stopped abruptly. If he loved her, he'd trust her. Wouldn't he?

This time Roderick sighed—full and long—then leaned back to eye her intently. "If he loved you, he'd want only the best for you. He'd do everything in his power to ensure your happiness and protect you from anything he thinks might bring you harm or distress." He paused pointedly. "Even if it meant protecting you from himself. *Especially* himself, I'd wager."

Bluidy feckin' hell.

Bishop *had* tried to protect her from himself. He'd said more than once that he wasn't for her. Wasn't good enough for her. But that night of the ball, he'd finally seemed to accept that they could be together. And then she'd gotten a secret note that she'd refused to share with him.

She suddenly recalled very distinctly the look in his eyes before he'd left.

It had been anger, yes. But there had also been a harsh shadow of betrayal and hurt.

Shite. So much suddenly made sense.

"But you don't need protecting, do you, poppet?" Roderick suggested, his tone oddly casual.

Caillie eye him carefully. "Nay. I dinnae."

"Bishop is a good man. One of the best. And though I know my opinion is irrelevant, I'd like you to know that should you decide to consider him...I've no objections."

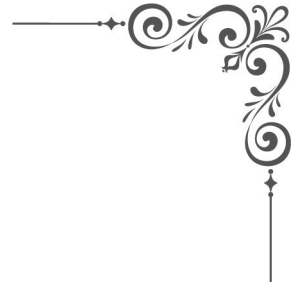
Caillie arched her brows in a sharp expression, causing Roderick to hold up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

“Not that it matters,” he added quickly. “Your choice entirely. I’m staying completely out of it. Far, far away.”

Caillie snorted. “Of course you are.”

When another moment passed and she said nothing else, Roderick asked, “So, are you? Considering Bishop?”

Caillie smiled. “None of your business, brother.”



Chapter Thirty-four

“*In love, my arse,*” Caillie cursed beneath her breath as she slammed the carriage door shut and slumped back into the cushioned seat.

She’d arrived at Mrs. Beaumont’s early that morning, long before she was due, with the hope and expectation of accidentally running into Bishop. It had turned out to be a wasted hour as she saw no sign of him anywhere she’d wandered about in the halls and public rooms of the west wing. And when she ventured boldly into Bentley’s club, the place was almost eerily quiet. With the exception of a couple maids and a footman, she saw no one about. Certainly not a rakish figure with long strides and a rogue’s grin.

She managed to forget about the man briefly during the salon, but as soon as it ended, her anticipation returned. Perhaps she’d see Bishop as she left.

That possibility was soon discarded as Mrs. Beaumont ever so casually mentioned in their farewells how quiet things had gotten since Bishop’s departure.

Caillie had no idea if she’d managed to keep her reaction concealed as her entire being was flooded with a sudden rush of panic.

He’d left? When? To where?

Luckily, she didn’t have to ask as Selena pouted, “I wish he hadn’t to dashed off like that. It was so nice having him about again.”

“He just moved to his own place, Selena,” Frannie chided. “I reckon he’ll still show his face now and then.”

His own place?

“The last few days have just been so tedious knowing he won’t be popping in to say a quick hello.”

A few days? That meant he’d left...the day after the ball?

Had he left Bentley’s because of their argument?

A fine chill coursed through Caillie at the possibility that Bishop had left in order to avoid her. And that chill remained in her bones as she finished her goodbyes and stepped outside.

Caillie had never known Roderick to be wrong before when it came to intuiting people's intentions or motivations, but her brother's famously unerring intuition had obviously been incorrect about Bishop.

She turned her head to gaze hard out the window at the passing city streets.

And what if he was avoiding her?

She hadn't done anything wrong. His attitude toward her had been utterly unjustified.

So why did she feel the urge to track him down and make amends?

"Och," she exclaimed in frustrated disgust.

Then she sighed and her shoulders slumped.

Recalling her conversation with Worthy after Bentley's masquerade, Caillie acknowledged that, in trusting her own judgement and intuition, she'd also have to trust that she wasn't wrong in believing there was something powerful and wonderful between them. She bludily loved the man.

She *wanted* to share her secrets with him. She wanted him as her companion in revelry, her passionate lover, a confidant, a partner, and even an occasional escort. She wanted his trust and faith and devotion.

If she wanted those things from him, she'd have to give them in return.

Closing her eyes, she let her head fall back against the wall of the carriage.

Perhaps it was time to take Elle's advice as well and allow things to happen in their own way and in their own time. Bishop must have had some reason for leaving the club. And if it had something to do with her—even though she desperately wanted to fix whatever had been broken between them—it

might be best to allow him the time and distance he'd claimed for himself.

She told herself that this was different from the last time when she'd avoided him after their first night together. This time, she was focused on practicing patience rather than obstinance.

If he was meant to be hers, he'd come back to her.

She chuckled. It was nearly exactly the advice she'd given Elle years ago when Max had sent her away even though he'd loved her so desperately.

And the truth was, she didn't want to have to *convince* Bishop to be with her.

It was a good thing she had some important things of her own to take care of which would likely keep her busy and distracted for at least a wee bit.

For the next few days, she pushed Bishop from her mind (as best she could, anyway) and directed her focus and energy toward her future. A future that no longer conceded to the many social limitations and expectations she'd tried to exist within for so long. It was time for her to start living the life she desired.

She spoke to Worthy first. And after answering the other woman's many questions and supposes and carefully worded concerns, Caillie won her to her cause.

Next, she spoke with Colin, who was surprised at first but ultimately quite reasonable, as Caillie should have expected. He agreed to have his solicitor immediately start rewriting the terms of the dowry he'd set up for her to receive upon her marriage so she could have access to the funds directly.

Though Beynon and Anne were busy packing themselves and their brood for their return trip to Wales, they generously sat down with Caillie and listened to her plans. Beynon scowled and huffed through her explanation while Anne listened intently, but they both expressed support in her decision. Roderick and Emma were annoyingly unsurprised. Her brother even gave her a quick wink, as if they shared some

sort of private joke. Max and Elle were also less than shocked by her announcement. Max even offered up a few helpful suggestions and Elle hadn't been able to stop smiling in her excitement.

Although there was no requirement for Caillie to receive her family's blessing before moving forward with her plans, she wanted to be upfront with them from the start. If she was going to create the life she wanted, it had to include everybody she cared about. No more sneaking about and no more bloody secrets.

Well...perhaps just one secret.

But she was justified in that since it was a secret that didn't completely belong to her.

After her meeting with Nicholas, Caillie had hoped against hope that she might hear from him again. That he'd have thought through what she said and decided he'd been an idiot and that he totally trusted her and absolutely, he wanted to meet the other Wright bastards and their families. And once Nicholas was won over to her side, she didn't think Reginald would be long to follow.

But she heard nothing from either Vane.

She tried not to wallow in her disappointment and continued trying to think of ways to sway them to her way of thinking while eventually—reluctantly—concluding that there might not be anything more for her to do. The decision was theirs alone to make.

She managed to find a modest townhouse located about halfway between Wright House on Park and Max and Elle's place in St. Giles, which also kept her in close proximity to her friends at Mrs. Beaumont's and her favorite coffee house in Covent Garden.

The townhouse was clearly intended to be a bachelor's residence. For a very reasonable price, it boasted a combination library and study, a master suite, two guest rooms, a smallish dining room, and a rather cozy parlor.

It was perfect.

One of Worthy's concerns had been that Caillie would be vulnerable in a house all by herself and that she'd become lonely or bored. Caillie had laughed at the idea of boredom since she intended to be very busy with everything she hoped to do. She outright ignored the suggestion that she might become lonely. Though she would miss certain people intensely, she knew all it would take to see most of them was a short carriage ride. And as for being vulnerable as a woman alone...Caillie knew well how to mitigate such worries.

Neda would be moving with her and had already enlisted two of her brothers—trained as footmen—to come with her. Thomas, of course, would be ever at hand. And if one good thing had come of Caillie's meeting with Nicholas, it was the reminder that Mason Hale was known to train a butler or two. Max's own butler, Langworth, had been trained by the famed boxer. With that kind of skilled muscle manning her front door, she doubted she'd have anything at all to worry about.

She was going to be just fine on her own. In fact, she was going to be wonderful.

Especially once Bishop finally got around to making an appearance.

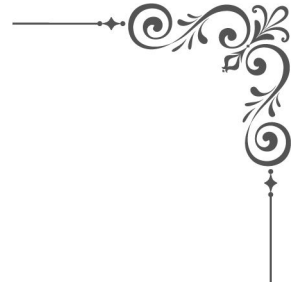
She missed him terribly. Only her stubborn Scottish pride kept her from asking Thomas to find out where he was staying. If she knew where he was, she'd never be able to keep herself from going to him.

For once, she intended to allow things to happen without forcing them along the path she knew to be best. She trusted Bishop and she believed in what they had and *could* have together.

But that didn't make it easy.

In fact, it caused a shadowed thread of loneliness and doubt to twist through what would otherwise be an extremely exciting and fulfilling time in her life.

Then, more than a week after the ball, she received a curious invitation.



Chapter Thirty-five

Bishop was nervous.

After leaving Cailleach at the boxing gym in Wapping, Bishop had gone straight to the property on the Strand and called a meeting with the foreman in charge of the renovations. There were just a few significant changes he needed to make to the plans and the schedule. Urgent changes.

The man had thought he was joking.

Bishop had made it clear that he was not. Then he promised to give everyone a few days' holiday once the new and more pressing tasks were completed.

Certain, less urgent, projects were suddenly abandoned in order to focus on the new more pertinent areas such as the main common areas, which still needed some minor updating, and the southeast apartment, which Bishop had ignored up until now for lack of a solid plan on how to make use of it. Now that he did have an idea for the separate space, he wanted it completed as quickly as possible.

The three alternating crews managed to complete the work with surprising efficiency. And before leaving for their brief holiday, they even managed to remove all evidence of their tools and building materials back to the upper levels of the building they'd briefly abandoned and which still required some significant work.

Then a cleaning crew came in and spruced up the main common rooms.

After that, Bishop enlisted the aid of Mrs. Potter, Bentley's housekeeper and a woman with endless energy. She swept through the space with an expert eye and started a list of the items he'd need for the evening he was planning. Then she gave him contacts for finding serving maids and footmen as well as the name of a renowned chef who just might be seeking a new permanent position.

He managed to hire several servants who agreed to come on short notice in exchange for an exorbitant wage while the chef indicated she'd be willing to use the evening as a sort of audition to determine if she'd be interested in something more long-term.

And now, finally, everything was in readiness.

The floors had been waxed, candles were lit throughout the grand mansion and fireplaces glowed with warmth, savory scents filled the kitchens, the champagne was properly chilled, and every footman was in place.

Bishop glanced at his pocket watch for the hundredth time.

Soon.

He quickly made his way toward the main hall and the front entrance of the club. Once there, he paced. Back and forth. An odd trembling in his stomach.

His entire future happiness rested on whether he'd be successful in impressing his very discerning guest.

Hearing a carriage rolling up outside, he froze in place. He'd intentionally not bothered to hire a butler and hadn't placed a footman at the door because *he* wanted to be one to welcome Cailleach to this place.

Fuck.

What if she hated it? What if she didn't understand?

What if she said no?

A knock sounded on the door. A confident, curious, Cailleach-like knock.

Not knowing what else to do, Bishop found himself relying on the cocksure irreverence which had always carried him through the most uncertain moments. His lips curled with careless arrogance and he strode forward to open the door.



CAILLIE ALIGHTED FROM the carriage then paused to smooth the wrinkles from her gown and take a few deep and steadying breaths. Taking in the sight of the grand mansion

before her, she wondered if she had somehow gotten the address wrong.

The building was magnificent. Constructed of light-colored brick trimmed with white and lit from within, it seemed to glow welcomingly in the moonlight.

Located on a stretch of road that ran from London to Westminster, it was in an area which had once housed some of the most elite and fashionable families of London. Now, with the many theaters, restaurants, and coffee houses sprinkled about, it had become a haven for artists, poets, and modern thinkers.

Many of the former aristocratic homes had been refashioned for various purposes. Perhaps the one in front of her contained a restaurant of some sort.

Bishop's invitation to join him for dinner hadn't given much detail on what to expect, but she'd assumed the address he'd given was to his new residence. As her gaze followed the grand lines of the mansion, which was easily the size of Wright House plus another half, she suspected it was far more than it appeared.

"Thomas?" she asked, still eyeing the building curiously.

"Aye?" her driver responded from his perch.

"Are you certain this is the place?"

"Aye."

"It doesnae look much like a private residence, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," the man agreed.

"Nor a public restaurant," she mused, searching again for a sign of some sort which might declare the building's purpose.

"No, it doesn't," Thomas replied.

Caillie harrumphed and gave him a sideways glance. "You're so verra helpful."

The driver chuckled and tipped his cap.

With a purposeful stride, Caillie started toward the front door, which had been painted a rich gold that looked like honey under the light of the nearby lantern.

Something felt off. Not necessarily in a bad way. But she got a distinct feeling that tonight was going to be about far more than dinner. And it was about bloody time.

After more than a week of silence, Bishop had boldly requested her company this evening.

He was going to get far more than that.

Anticipation waltzed recklessly with her nerves but determination and confidence placed a smile on her lips as she set her knuckles to the smooth golden door.

It opened immediately.

And there he stood.

Dressed in the finest evening wear with polished boots and a navy-blue waistcoat embroidered with dark green. His hair was neatly secured at his nape, his beard was trimmed to show the hard angle of his jaw, and his sensual, teasing mouth was tilted in his signature smile.

“Bishop,” she breathed on a heavy exhale, forgetting every bit of her resolve to appear stern and unmoved. Her heart fluttered madly as she tried not to reveal all the ways her body responded to the sight and nearness of him.

His cocky curl of his lips twitched and something flashed in the dark of his eyes. Something possessive and fierce and powerful.

But then he gave a quick bow and stepped to the side as he gestured for her to enter. “Welcome, Miss Claybourne.”

Though his words were formal, his tone was low and beautifully textured. The rich quality of it warmed her skin in an instant before swirling wildly through her bloodstream.

She’d have to get herself under control if she hoped to accomplish what she’d come here to do. If he was going to play at formalities, then so could she.

Shifting her attention away from the man, she stepped past him with what she hoped was a proud and regal gait. An affect that was likely ruined as her focus swept about the gleaming entry hall she'd just entered. A chandelier overhead cast a sparkling light over a polished parquet floor designed in a simple repeating pattern and walls covered in sage-green silk. The walls were devoid of artwork but a lovely pair of antique tables stood against the far wall. They each held an enormous vase of overblown roses and bracketed a pair of double doors which were thrown open to the room beyond.

Without waiting for an invitation to proceed, Caillie continued through those doors and found herself in an even grander hall. Here, the parquet expanded into a far more complex design and the walls were a darker shade of green but were also devoid of artwork. A grand staircase rose up straight and formidable to the left before reaching a broad landing halfway up and turning to continue to the level above, where an open landing allowed for a full view of the entryway below. A carved stone fireplace grounded the far end of the hall and several doors across from the stairs had been opened to the rooms beyond, where more warm candlelight welcomed. And all around, Caillie detected the quiet yet unmistakable scent of roses.

The effect was gently welcoming and oddly familiar. Like returning to a home she'd never been to.

Standing in the center of this grand hall, she turned back to Bishop, who stood barely a step past the threshold of the double doors. His posture was uncharacteristically stiff and his head was tilted forward in a way that shielded his gaze from the dancing lights of the candles overhead.

“What is this place?” Caillie asked.

She half expected him to give an answer that suggested some magical origin. But he gave a careless shrug and noted simply. “It’s mine.”

Confused, Caillie shook her head. But before she could ask any of the thousand questions flying through her mind, he stepped forward and nodded toward the first open doorway.

“Would you like a small tour before dinner?”

She answered quickly, “Aye.”

He led her through parlors, sitting rooms, and a grand drawing room—all devoid of any furniture or décor, a library with bare shelves, an empty conservatory, and a portrait gallery with no portraits, then finally a ballroom which would require at least three chandeliers to fully illuminate the place but which was currently lit by only one, casting the expansive room in a contrast of shadow and light.

Each room was a new discovery. Each space a different blend of the mansion’s original design and modern style and convenience.

Beyond a few comments here and there on certain changes he made to the design or function of the spaces, Bishop said very little. He also kept an exasperatingly proper distance, that strange stiffness in his form, and an annoying formality in his manner.

Caillie allowed it. For now.

Only because she got a strong sense that this place was extremely important to him. She also knew almost immediately that it was far more than a residence. His evasiveness was slightly frustrating when she found herself growing more and more excited at the many prospects of the property but had to hold her tongue, forcing herself to practice patience so he could reveal all to her in his own time.

After crossing to the center of the ballroom, where she turned about in gentle awe, Caillie spotted a row of doors left open to the night air. She paused and glanced to where Bishop stood—still too bluidy far away.

At her questioning glance, his mouth curved and he gave a nod toward the open doors.

Stepping out onto the broad stone balcony, Caillie was delighted to see a walled garden below. Though a few pieces of statuary could be seen here and there, the place was almost totally overrun by a wild sea of roses. All colors, sizes, and varieties grew in haphazard fashion—here and there and

everywhere. As if to say, This garden is ours and we shan't relinquish it easily.

“It's beautiful, isn't it?”

Bishop's words, spoken just behind her, sent a delicious chill down Caillie's spine. Not only because he'd finally gotten close enough for her to feel his warmth and scent his spicy skin, but also because his tone had finally fallen back into his natural cadence.

So many sensations erupted inside her. Thoughts and emotions churned with sudden intensity and a total lack of direction, casting Caillie about in a storm of feelings.

She couldn't speak. Couldn't turn around. Could barely breathe.

Would he finally address the reason for his invitation?

“Every time I look at it, I think of you.”

His words surprised her enough that she half turned to glance back at him.

He was so close.

And his eyes were so dark as he met her gaze. Dark and deep and mysterious.

She took a breath, and when she exhaled, it came out in a sigh that said his name. “Bishop.”

She couldn't help it. He was her breath. Her heart. *Hers.*

Something weighted and fierce flashed in his gaze. Lifting his chin to that slightly cocky angle that she absolutely adored, he said, “Cailleach.”

She wanted to reach for him so badly. Or step forward until his arms came up around her and her breasts flattened to his chest.

But she didn't.

Tipping her head back, she said, “It's a wonderful place, Bishop. I can already see it filled with people—talking,

laughing, dancing,” she added with a glance back into the ballroom.

He smiled. Not a smirk this time but a genuine expression of true pleasure and happiness.

Despite her many intentions to stay aloof, Caillie couldn't help but smile in return. But as soon as she did, his eyes flickered and his attention fell to her mouth. The muscles in his jaw bunched and released before he forced his gaze back to hers.

For a second, she thought he'd lift his hand to her face or curl it around her nape to bring her mouth to his. When he didn't, her disappointment was too sharp and quick for her to hide.

Seeing it, the man chuckled and gave a gentle shake of his head before whispering beneath his breath in a tone so low she barely heard it, “Not yet, sweetheart.”

The endearment—one he'd used only rarely—swept straight to her aching heart.

“There is still a great deal of work that needs to be done before it will be ready, but I intend it to be a club that welcomes everyone. A place that promotes social discourse and entertainment that will bring together people from different backgrounds and social class,” he explained. His smirk returned for a brief moment. “This will not be a haven for the elite members of society, I'm afraid. Not unless they're willing to start seeing the world from new perspectives.”

Caillie released a puff of breath she'd been holding. Excitement bubbled up from her core. “I love it. Imagine the discussions that will be possible when so many different viewpoints are able to engage. Imagine the innovations of thought, the bluidy shifts in social consciousness.”

Bishop chuckled as her voice rose in excitement. “Don't forget the gambling and dancing.”

“Of course,” she replied readily, her eyes wide with excitement. “It'll all be part and parcel, willnae it?”

“That's my hope.”

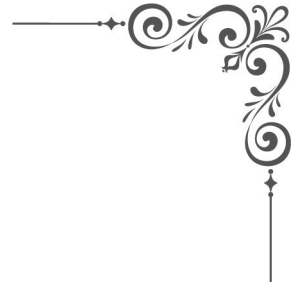
Caillie sighed. "I cannae wait to see it all happen."

"I was also hoping you'd say that."

Caillie tilted her head at the sudden weight in his voice. Once again, his features were tense and serious.

It made her nervous despite the inspiration still dancing through her veins at the thought of what a club like this could mean.

Holding her gaze with his, he spoke with deliberate intention. "I'd like you to help me create it."



Chapter Thirty-six

Caillie blinked.

“I dinnae ken—” she began softly, but he interrupted her.

“Yes, you do. After just a brief tour of the place and an utterly inadequate explanation, you already see it, don’t you?” He gestured back toward the ballroom and the building as a whole. “You can see exactly what this place could be, what it could do, how it would feel to be a part of it.”

She couldn’t deny it. She was practically humming with excitement at the potential.

Bishop stepped toward her and dipped his chin to look intently into her eyes. “I need you to help me make it happen. I need your insight and your ideas. I need you to challenge me when I inadvertently try to do things the way they’ve always been done.” His voice deepened. “I need you to help me ensure that this club will be as welcoming and supportive of the women in its membership as the men.”

Caillie’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “You intend to allow women as members?”

“It can’t really be a place for bold new ideas if half the population isn’t allowed access,” Bishop replied.

A strange and wonderful bubble of warmth and excitement tumbled through Caillie.

“You bluidy beautiful man, are you serious?”

He chuckled, but then he suddenly took her hand in his. “Come, there’s something else I still need to show you.”

Stunned and more in love than she’d ever thought possible, Caillie allowed him to tug her along beside him as he led them back through the ballroom, then to the grand staircase and down to the main level. Once in the large hall, he turned toward a narrow passage tucked beneath the stairs. She would

have assumed it led to the servants' area of the house, but after a couple turns, they reached a door.

Pausing there, Bishop flashed a quick grin then opened it and indicated she should pass through.

Still reeling from his revelation about creating a club that welcomed both men and women, it took a moment for Caillie to register the fact that she'd entered a separate suite of rooms.

Surrounding a small central foyer, she discovered a quaint sitting room with a long window seat and a wealth of natural light. Next to it, a smaller room featuring a large fireplace with a raised hearth projected a cozy, more intimate atmosphere. The largest of the three rooms had bookshelves lining the entire back wall and window views of the garden.

The whole place smelled of fresh wax and paint and wood polish.

She turned back to Bishop, who'd trailed her silently through each room, but when she took a breath to ask about this separate space, he said, "There's more."

"More?" she breathed.

His smile practically melted her bones.

"Upstairs."

He opened what she'd thought were large cupboard doors concealing a closet of some sort to reveal a concealed staircase of polished mahogany. The stairs led to a narrow landing with a row of doors which were folded back to reveal a narrow, wood-paneled dining room, and beside that, a drawing room which had its own garden balcony very similar to the one in the ballroom.

"It's lovely," she breathed as she turned back to Bishop.

Obviously pleased at her appreciation, his voice was thick as he replied, "It's yours, Cailleach. If you want it."

She shook her head, confusion warring with an exhilarated thrum of inspiration and anticipation.

Coming toward her, Bishop explained, “No doubt, there will be growing pains in regard to the club. Big changes such as I hope to see and achieve will require some time and patience.” He stopped in front of her and finally—*finally*—lifted a hand to brush his knuckles along the curve of her cheek. “Though the club as a whole will be open to men and women alike, this area will be for women alone. A sanctuary where you can hold sewing circles and teas and coffees and dinners and whatever else your heart desires. In a safe place, all your own. Free from interference or judgement of any kind. *Especially* from me.” A smile tilted his beloved mouth as his fingers drifted down the side of her throat. “This will be yours and yours alone. There is even a separate entrance to allow guests to come and go without having to cross through the main part of the club, if that is their preference.”

Caillie could barely speak. So many thoughts and feelings rushed through her.

The best she could manage was a barely audible, “Why?”

Trailing his fingers along her collarbone, he paused to gently rest his fingertip in the hollow at the base of her throat. Then he looked deeply into her eyes. So deeply, she felt him in the darkest part of her.

“I love you, Cailleach. I love your ferocity and conviction. I love your intense loyalty to your family and your compassion for all people. I love your focus and determination and unending self-assurance.” His mouth curved into a wry grin. “I love that you refused to let me bully you when I *thought* I was protecting you. I love that you don’t bloody need my protection or anything else from me because you can damn well take care of anything you might need yourself. Which is why I so badly want to give you this. A place of your own to gather with your many, many friends.” His voice lowered. “A place that will shelter your secrets and the secrets you hold for others. I swear to you, I won’t interfere in any way. I won’t show up uninvited. I won’t disrupt your activities or ask questions. I’ll...”

His voice caught as his jaw tensed and his eyes darkened. As though, after having said so much—*confessed* so much—

he suddenly ran out of words.

But not for long. When he spoke again, his tone was harsh with emotion. “I love you, Cailleach Claybourne,” he repeated. “So much it fucking hurts. I’m sorry for the mistakes I’ve made. I never should have tried to resist my feelings for you. But I was afraid to want something I couldn’t bear to lose and I just couldn’t...” His chin lowered as he dropped his hand back to his side. “I couldn’t imagine any world in which I could ever be worthy of you. I still can’t,” he added with a flicker of a smile. “But I’m selfish, I suppose. I want you. I want to be with you anyway. In whatever way you see fit.”

It took more strength than she’d known she had for Caillie to clear the thunderous pounding of her heart from her thoughts enough to react. But if his words had failed him for a moment, hers had utterly abandoned her. So, she spoke with her actions instead.

Taking his face in her hands, she leaned against him and lifted her lips to his.

The taste of him was like coming home. The warmth of his breath as he moaned roughly into her mouth sent a hot spear of desire through her center. And when their tongues tangled in passionate play, she sighed with the kind of relief and surrender she’d never thought to experience.

He was hers. She felt it in her bones.

He loved her and— *Damnit, she hadn’t said it back yet!*

Tearing herself away from the kiss, she met his fierce and questioning stare.

“I love you, Bishop.”

He flashed his characteristic cocksure grin and doubled his arms around her, drawing her into him as though he wished to make them one being.

She was utterly fine with that idea.

“You are everything, Cailleach.” A heavy scowl marred his brow. “I’m sorry for what I said to you—the morning after the ball. My jealousy and fear made me see myself as the man I

used to be. A man who'd believed he had nothing to give but a good time."

Caillie's heart ached for what she heard in his voice.

"But I'm not that man anymore," Bishop continued. "And I want to give you so much more."

"All I want is you," she sighed.

He cocked a brow and swept a glance around them. "So, you don't want to partner with me in all this? I can find another use for these rooms, I suppose."

"Dinnae you dare!" she retorted sharply. "I've already got too many ideas running through my head. You willnae be able to keep me away from this place."

"That's my greatest hope," he replied reverently. Then he frowned. "Though I regret that this will likely be one more secret you have to keep from your family."

She was shaking her head before he even finished speaking. "Och, I'm done with secrets. I've decided to live a bold life. No more sneaking about. If people dinnae like who I am or what I do, they can bluidy feck off."

Laughter vibrated through his chest and the look in his eyes then was pure adoration.

Caillie smiled and looped her arms around his neck. Her voice softened as she gazed into his eyes. "I willnae let you take it back, you ken?" she murmured warmly. "You've said you love me and those words are mine now."

"I won't take it back. The words and my heart and everything else I possess are yours. Freely given. Now and forever." Something flickered in his eyes and his mouth twisted ruefully. "Even if you eventually come to your senses and realize how much better you could do."

Giving him a fierce scowl, Caillie shook her head. "Not a chance. You're mine, Bishop Black. I've never wanted any man but you and I never will."

"I'm yours, pet," he admitted with a grin. "Now...there's one room I still need to show you."

“Does it have a bed?” she asked with sultry intent.

His eyes blazed with sudden, fierce desire as a low sound rolled through his chest. “I was talking about the club’s main dining room,” he answered gruffly. “We’re to have dinner, remember?”

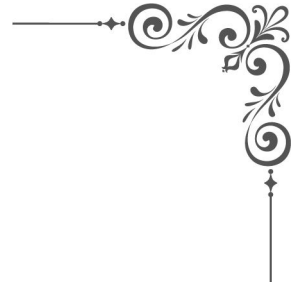
“Right,” she breathed. “Dinner. And after?”

He cleared his throat. “After...I’ll show you more of the rooms on the upper levels if you wish. But many of them are still unfinished.”

Caillie tilted her head. “But does one of them have a bed?”

Bishop laughed then took her mouth in a heated kiss. Once she was breathless with passion and yearning, he released her lips just enough to murmur gently, “You’re relentless.”

“Part of my undeniable charm,” she admitted as she curled her fingers against his nape to bring his mouth back to hers.



Epilogue

Four months later

The newest and most controversial social club in London opened rather quietly with minimal fanfare. It was the owner's belief and intention that the right patrons would find the place in their own way and in their own time.

He was not wrong.

Word of mouth spread quickly. Up and down the Strand, through Covent Garden, then Soho and beyond.

In no time at all, Bishop's Club became the place to go if one was seeking a night of entertainment, a sumptuous meal, or an afternoon of comradery in an open-minded atmosphere.

That wasn't to say the club didn't receive more than its share of backlash and criticism. Anything that broke from accepted traditions tended to do so, and Bishop was more than prepared for the less than favorable reviews. Obviously, those who disagreed with what he and Cailleach were doing were not their clientele, anyway.

His partner, however, was not so forgiving. The bad reviews and snide comments often infuriated her. Especially when it was clear that what some people took most issue with was the fact that the club did not enforce any class or gender restrictions. Men and women from all walks of life were welcome and encouraged to take part in the many benefits provided by the club.

Already, several groups from the surrounding neighborhoods were calling the place home with almost nightly dinners and games and rousing discussions. The portrait gallery was currently housing a selection of paintings by a local artist who had his first showing a week earlier. And a famous Italian opera singer had agreed to give a private performance for the club members in just a couple days.

The only area off-limits to general patrons was the rooms in the southeast corner, accessible from the outside via a

private entrance framed by a trellis of climbing roses. This more exclusive part of the club was not known by many to exist. It wasn't exactly a secret, but those who knew of it tended to discuss it within certain limited company. Women of all sorts, from all manners of profession or background or expression, were welcome. Men were not. It was the only way some women felt free and safe to say and think and behave in whatever way they wished. Women who'd been too long under rules created and enforced by men needed a place which eliminated that factor. Cailleach's salons provided exactly that.

On any given day, a variety of women might gather in any of the available rooms to discuss the latest popular novel or analyze one of the classic tomes from history. They might debate various laws under review in the House and decide how best to support those they felt most strongly about. On occasion, a new social justice pamphlet might be drafted for future distribution. Sometimes, the members simply wished to relax with a bit of claret or ale or whisky and laugh through the endless, day-to-day struggles so many of them shared. Other times, they warmed themselves with hot coffee and even hotter gossip.

Cailleach's only requirement of her guests was that her salons be only and always whatever the women who gathered there needed them to be. For her part, she engaged in most of the salons and scheduled activities which took place in the southeast apartment. Other times, she might be found strolling about the place, greeting old friends and introducing herself to new ones. But in the evenings, she was more likely to be found in the main part of club, as were many other women.

With her insight and input, Bishop's Club had become far more than he ever could've imagined. And it was just the beginning. In the late hours of the night, after they'd either retired to his suite or rooms above the club or had escaped to enjoy the peace and privacy of Cailleach's townhouse, they shared ideas and made plans for the future.

The first time he'd asked her to become his wife, she'd smiled sweetly then kissed him, which led quickly to activities

that sufficiently distracted him from realizing she hadn't answered.

The second time, he'd made sure to ask her at a time and place—walking through St. James Park—when she couldn't employ the same evasive tactic. That was when she'd confessed that although she loved him with every bit of herself and always would, she wasn't sure she wished to marry.

He didn't press the issue after that. He suspected her reasons for taking such a position and he understood. She valued her independence and would have no desire to give it up easily. He could wait for her to become comfortable with the idea. And if she never did, he could live with that.

The woman had already given him so much. Her loyalty and support and faith and love and infinitely more. He'd never believed the depth of happiness he experienced every day could be his. Once he managed to finally trust that love could be enough—that love was *everything*—nothing else really mattered.

And then, on a brisk autumn night late in October, Bishop and Cailleach were enjoying an after-dinner drink in the club's main drawing room when the one secret she still hadn't shared with him walked through the doors.

Mr. Reginald Vane strode into Bishop's Club as though he were already a member when Bishop knew for a fact the man hadn't submitted an application. The arrogant bastard.

Unease rolled through the pit of Bishop's stomach as he looked to the woman he loved beyond belief. She hadn't noticed Vane's arrival yet. Her sparkling hazel gaze was focused rather intently on him, a smile he knew well curving her lovely lips.

A blast of love and desire—deep and pure—shot through him.

“Bishop,” she whispered, her voice a throaty sigh.

“Cailleach.”

Her gaze softened. “I love you.”

“And I love you.” As soon as he said the words, the unease inside him dissipated. He reached across the table and took her hand to bring it to his lips.

Her smile turned sultry. “Shall we go upstairs?” Suggestion was clear in her eyes.

Though his heart thundered and his cock stretched the seams of his breeches, he gave a small shake of his head. “Not yet, I’m afraid. I have a feeling you might want to greet our new arrival.”

Curiosity lit her features as she turned to glance toward the door. Bishop noted the moment she saw Vane as her expression shifted swiftly from curiosity to surprise to hope and her hand tightened around his fingers.

Whoever Vane was to her, the man was important.

Bishop followed her gaze to see that Vane had noticed her as well. He’d stopped his advance into the room and stared back at her with a look that was equal parts aloof and inquisitive. Certainly no cause for outright concern.

“Shall I step away?” he asked simply.

Cailleach’s gaze swept back to his. Her answer was swift. “Nay.” Then she smiled. “No more secrets.”

Bishop glanced back to Vane and a smirk curled his lips. “*He* might not like that idea so much.”

The man’s attention had shifted to Bishop and his stare was now undeniably annoyed.

Cailleach tossed her head in an irreverent gesture. “That’s too bluidy bad, isnae it? He’s here. Now, he’ll have to decide what comes next.”

Bishop would’ve loved to know the context and pertinence of Vane’s sudden appearance, but the information would have to wait as someone else entered the room.

It was Vane but not Vane. The infamous twin brother, Nicholas, who preferred to keep to himself and had a reputation for being an unsavory sort.

Cailleach gasped softly at the sight of the second man stepping up beside his brother. But when Nicholas Vane turned his scowling gaze in her direction, it was Bishop whose hand tightened on hers as he rose smoothly to his feet.

It wasn't that the second Vane looked threatening, exactly. His expression was more that of a man who really didn't want to be where he was at the moment and somehow decided to blame Cailleach for that fact.

"Bishop," she whispered in a tone that begged patience and understanding as she also stood, keeping her hand in his.

With their arrival obviously noted, the Vanes cut a path through the other guests milling about the common room—many of whom paused to glance in curiosity and no small amount of fascination at the two gentlemen known to most for their exceptional handsomeness as well as their wicked reputations.

Cailleach smiled in welcome though Bishop felt her increasing tension with each step that brought the brothers closer.

"Good evening, Mr. Vane and Mr. Vane," she said with graceful nods to each man. "I'm pleased and surprised that you've both decided to join us tonight."

Reginald, the rakish and slightly more charming brother, shrugged and glanced about the room. "It's a bit difficult these days to go anywhere without hearing something about the new club on the Strand." He flicked a glance to Bishop, who lifted a brow before he glanced back to Cailleach. "Not to mention its female proprietress."

Cailleach grinned widely and pride flashed brightly in her eyes. "*Part* proprietress," she corrected. "Allow me to introduce Mr. Bishop Black, the owner and visionary of Bishop's Club." Turning to him, she continued, "Bishop, the Honorable Reginald Vane and the Honorable Nicholas Vane."

Bishop gave a short nod followed by a decidedly discourteous curl of his lips. "I've heard of you."

Reginald arched a brow. "Not *all* good things, I hope."

But Nicholas muttered something dark and heavy beneath his breath before turning a forbidding gaze to Cailleach. “So much for not telling anyone,” he accused angrily.

But the glorious woman simply tilted her head to a regal angle. “Don’t make assumptions, Nic. He’s referencing your reputations as the Villainous Vanes, nothing more.”

The man gave a rough huff as Reginald inclined his head. “Then perhaps we can retire to a more private location to discuss our...” He cleared his throat and suddenly appeared a bit uncertain.

“Association?” Cailleach offered helpfully.

“Indeed,” the more amiable twin acknowledged though with obvious reluctance.

“We can certainly do so,” Cailleach agreed as she took a step closer to Bishop, “but Mr. Black will be joining us.”

“Changing the rules already, Miss Claybourne?” Nicholas asked in a lowered tone.

She shrugged in response. “If you’ve finally decided to trust me, then you’ll have to trust my judgement, as well. Bishop is my partner in *everything*. I won’t keep secrets from him.”

Warmth flooded Bishop’s chest, making his throat tight, at the strength and conviction in her voice. But the Vanes were not nearly as pleased by her declaration. For a second, it appeared Nicholas wished to turn and walk away, but then his brother gave a short nod.

Cailleach’s smile was blinding and a great deal of the tension she’d been harboring seemed to flow right out of her as she gestured toward a door which led to a smaller parlor often used for private card games. “This way, gentlemen,” she noted.

A few minutes later, she and Bishop were seated on the sofa in front of the fireplace. Reginald Vane had claimed a leather armchair, while Nicholas Vane remained standing with his back to the wall. Snifters of brandy had been offered and

accepted and they all sipped for a moment as silence fell uncomfortably around them.

Bishop could feel Cailleach's anticipation rising along with a barely disguised hopeful excitement. He couldn't imagine what the presence of these two men signified to her, but it was clearly something she desperately wanted.

Just as it seemed she might not be able to tolerate another second of the weighted silence, she didn't have to.

After flicking a glance at Bishop, who flashed a responding grin, Reginald cleared his throat and spoke to Cailleach in a stiff and halting tone. "As I'm sure you've already surmised"—he paused to glance to his brother, who gave a sharp, abbreviated nod—"Nic and I have decided to accept your...offer."

Watching her carefully, Bishop didn't miss the flicker of relief and delight in her eyes but she did an amazing job of hiding just how pleased she was. Taking a deep breath, she slid her gaze swiftly from one brother to the other and back again. "My offer to get to know each other?"

Reginald nodded.

Cailleach stared back, her gaze unrelenting. "Why?"

The brothers shared a glance. Whatever they said to each other in that silent moment, it was clear to Bishop that it was fraught with complexity and emotion.

"I suppose you could say curiosity got the better of us," Reginald finally replied.

Glancing to Nicholas, Cailleach asked, "You're both certain?"

"No," Nicholas answered gruffly, but Reginald waved off his denial.

"We've decided to accept the risks of beginning an *association*, but this will be handled *our* way. We insist on discretion." He looked pointedly to Bishop. "No one outside the...*family* can know the truth."

The man said the word *family* with an odd and challenged emphasis, but Cailleach didn't seem to notice or care. She gave a vigorous nod. "As I always promised would be the case."

"Then why in hell is he here?" Nicholas challenged with a glare toward Bishop.

Utterly unconcerned by the man's animosity, Cailleach suddenly rose to her feet, bringing Reginald and Bishop out of their chairs, as well. Sliding her arm through Bishop's, she tucked herself against his side. Her eyes sparkled with love as she gazed up at him and his throat tightened with emotion.

"He is my family," she declared softly before widening her lips in a grin of pure happiness. "And I couldnae be more bluidy thrilled to finally introduce him to my twin brothers."

Bishop tensed then turned a sharp glance toward the Vanes, who both stood stiff and unmoving but didn't make any effort to deny her declaration.

Then he glanced back to the woman at his side. "Holy fucking hell," he muttered in astonishment.

She bounced on her toes in her excitement then gave a delighted laugh. "I ken! Isnae it fecking wonderful?"

He glanced back to the brothers, who didn't quite share her level of enthusiasm. Not even close. One looked distinctly uncomfortable though he allowed a slight curling of his lips while the other still looked downright irritated. Or perhaps it was terrified.

Bishop flashed a grin.

The poor bastards had no idea what they were in for.

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About the Author

Amy grew up in a small dairy town in northern Wisconsin and after earning a Liberal Arts degree from the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, she eventually made her way back to Wisconsin (though to a slightly larger town) and lives there with her husband and three children.

She writes Regency and Western Historical Romance about dashing and sometimes dangerous men who know just how to get what they want and women who may be reckless, bold, and unconventional, but who always have the courage to embrace all that life and love have to offer. The rest of her time is spent trying to keep up with the kids and squeeze in some stolen moments with her husband.

Read more at [Amy Sandas's site](#).