

DARK DESIRES

UNMASKING



PROMETHEUS

DIANA BOLD

Dark Desires

Unmasking Prometheus – Book 6

By

Diana Bold

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dark Desires

By Diana Bold

Copyright November 2022

Cover Artist: Mandy Koehler Designs

Editor: Kurt Liebchen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

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](#)

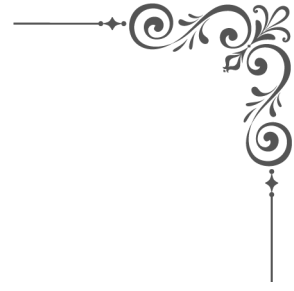
[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Epilogue](#)

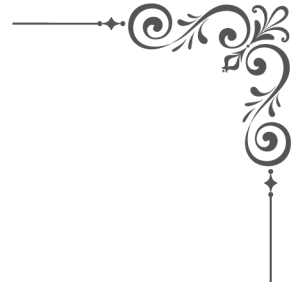
[Sign up for Diana Bold's Mailing List](#)



Dedication

For Heather Pacheco. My life is better with you in it.

I see your sparkle.



Chapter One

London – April 1902

“You’ve gone mad!” Heather Fields backed slowly away from Jacob Lindon, shaking her head in dismay at the preposterous idea he’d just proposed. “I can’t do that. Jacob... You know I can’t.”

She stood in the headquarters of the Citizens Committee, though *headquarters* was perhaps too grand a word to describe the rundown warehouse near the docks that had been all they could afford. Jacob had summoned her here this morning, then immediately taken her aside in an attempt to gain her assistance for his newest wild plan to take down the establishment.

When she’d first joined the Citizens Committee, she’d been completely enamored with the group’s rakish leader. Her interest in the Communist Party had been fueled by his passionate speeches and dark good looks. She’d previously participated in the Suffragist movement and had found that very fulfilling, and she’d expected her involvement with the Citizens Committee to be very similar.

However, in the past few months, she’d found herself in over her head. Jacob and the others had roped her into more and more dangerous and illegal activities—vandalism, trespassing, and intimidation—nothing like the pacifism and sign-holding she’d been used to. But now... What they wanted to do now was beyond stupid. It would get them all imprisoned or killed.

“He’ll never know you were in on it,” Jacob coaxed, his green eyes shining with reckless glee. “That’s the beauty of it. He’ll want to protect you, like the hero he thinks he is, and we can use that weakness to make him do whatever we want.”

“But... the assistant police commissioner? All of Scotland Yard will be looking for him! And I’ve met him before. He knows me!” In all honesty, she wasn’t at all certain that Mandrake Blackstone would remember her. Their meeting had been brief, only a few seconds, and he’d seemed as though he

had more pressing things on his mind than being introduced to a lady's maid. In fact, he'd seemed surprised that his friend Quinn O'Brien had bothered to introduce him to one of his servants at all.

Still, Commissioner Blackstone had made an impression on her. Tall and broad-shouldered, with inky black hair and dark, penetrating eyes, he'd definitely given off an air of power and capability.

She shivered at the thought of getting on his bad side. And what Jacob wanted her to do would definitely put her on his bad side.

"Well, that's even better. If he knows you, he'll be even more interested in keeping you safe." Jacob gave her a cold smile. "I'm starting to think you're losing your nerve, love."

"I don't understand what this has to do with the cause," she snapped back, the chill inside her intensifying.

Their last mission had finally made her see that she couldn't be a part of this any longer. Jacob had enlisted her to be a lookout, but she hadn't realized that their plan had been to blow up a business the Committee felt had been engaging in unfair labor practices. The moment she'd heard the explosion and seen the burst of flames down the alley, she'd known she'd been duped, that her desire to help the common man had been turned against her.

She'd found out later that the owner had just been someone Jacob had a grudge against, and it had nothing to do with the Communist movement at all.

By some miracle, no one had been killed, although several people had been seriously injured. She still found herself constantly looking over her shoulder, expecting the police to come knocking on her door. She'd been trying to break ties with the group ever since, but these were dangerous men, and she knew far too much about them.

She very much feared they would never let her go, and she'd be drawn into even more terrible things. This latest mad plan was the perfect example. Jacob planned to kidnap

Mandrake Blackstone and throw her into the man's prison with him, making her pretend she was also a captive. Jacob believed that Blackstone would either tell her what the police knew about their organization or they could threaten that they'd hurt her if he didn't give them what they wanted.

"You know they're closing in on us," Jacob said, his eyes darkening. "If anyone can tell us what they know, it will be that bastard."

"But what happens afterward?" she asked, though she was afraid she already knew. "He'll be able to identify us all after we do this. It will make matters far worse."

"He'll only be able to identify you," Jacob said coldly. "The rest of us will be masked when we talk to him. And that's why you'd better make him believe you're just an innocent victim too. If you give him any reason to doubt that you've also been taken captive, you'll be arrested for certain."

She shook her head, her unease growing. "So, you're just going to let him go in the end? After he's given you what you want?"

Jacob laughed uproariously, and she wondered why she hadn't seen that spark of madness in his beautiful green eyes from the beginning. How could she have ever believed that he wanted to help people? "Of course, love. What else would we do with him?"

"Kill him," she said daringly, her heart thundering in her chest as she finally voiced her deepest fear. "That's what you do to other people who get in your way, isn't it?"

He sobered, reaching out to grab her forearms, shaking her roughly as he looked into her eyes. "You'd better not get in my way, Heather. The lads have already been telling me that you can't be trusted, that you don't have what it takes to do what needs to be done. Have I made a mistake in letting you so far into the organization?"

No. I'm the one who's made a mistake.

She swallowed, finding it hard to believe that she'd once thought herself in love with this man. She'd let him into her

heart, into her *body*, only to realize that he was not the revolutionary hero she'd thought but a small, petty man who enjoyed violence and anarchy and didn't care about the body count he left in his wake.

"You haven't made a mistake," she said nervously, knowing she had no other choice. If she didn't do what he wanted, he'd make certain she never told anyone of the things he'd done, the atrocities he'd committed.

He squeezed her arms until tears stung her eyes, then flung her away from him with a laugh. "Good girl. I knew you'd come around." He let his gaze rake her from head to toe. "Blackstone won't be able to resist you, love. You're a gorgeous little tart, and I expect you to give him some of what you gave to me if it will get the results we need."

She gasped, nausea twisting her belly. "You want me to...?"

He smiled coldly. "What does it matter? Not as though you can get it back, is it?"

My virginity. He is talking about my virginity. A rush of stinging tears threatened to spill over, and she blinked rapidly, determined not to let him see how much his cruel words had affected her. That's what he wanted, after all.

When he'd set out to seduce her into both his cause and his bed, he'd been all sweet words and charm. But from the very night he'd first had her, he'd lost interest. She felt like a discarded plaything, and he hadn't bothered to try and make it any easier on her. In fact, he'd become intentionally vicious, teasing her about giving her to his men, telling her that she hadn't satisfied him, that he shouldn't have wasted his time on a virgin.

She'd been a fool to ever have believed he cared about her. She'd been so stupid about so many things.

"I can't do this," she said, shaking her head, looking across the room to where a dozen other Committee members were laughing and drinking toasts to their plan. Perhaps she was being even more foolish to defy him, but she couldn't continue

on this way. She had to escape this life before it caused her to lose more than her virginity. “You can find someone else. Someone who would be better at seducing Blackstone. You told me yourself that I’m lacking in that area. And perhaps I’m no longer a virgin, but I’m also not the kind of woman who would seduce a man just to get some information.”

What he’d originally asked—that she cozy up to the man and pretend to be a victim herself—had been bad enough. But this... Now he wanted her to prostitute herself for his cause. His threats terrified her, but she did have a little pride left, a few morals that he hadn’t destroyed.

He suddenly grabbed a hank of her dark hair, twisting it around his wrist until she felt as though he were going to pull it out by the roots. “You little bitch,” he hissed, dragging her out of the main room and toward the stairs that led to the dank, cavernous cellar. “Do you think I give a fuck what you want?”

She stumbled to keep up just so that he wouldn’t literally scalp her, but her terror intensified when he started shoving her down the stairs that led to the storage room where some of the men slept when they were hiding out. She was pretty sure that was where they meant to imprison Blackstone.

“Please, Jacob,” she begged, trying to appeal to some shred of goodness in him. “Please, don’t do this.”

He stopped in front of the thick, oak door at the bottom of the stairs. “You’re lucky I’m giving you this opportunity to redeem yourself, Heather. The rest of the boys think I should get rid of you.”

Opening the door, he shoved her inside, finally releasing her hair as she fell in a heap on the dirt floor. The room was deep and dark, a windowless cell with several cots, a table with two chairs, and a chamber pot behind a screen in the corner.

“If you tell him anything, anything at all, about our organization, I’ll kill you both,” he told her coldly. Then he shut the door, trapping her in the darkness.



MANDRAKE BLACKSTONE stepped out of the Metropolitan Police Headquarters, better known as Scotland Yard, and pulled his coat up around his ears as an icy blast of wintry air hit him. Spring seemed to be taking forever to arrive this year, but perhaps that had more to do with his mood than the actual weather.

With a sigh, he looked around for his carriage, surprised his driver hadn't already arrived. Drake was nothing if not punctual, and he expected those who worked for him to be the same. He thought longingly of the shiny red motorcar his friend Lucien Strathmore, the Earl of Hawkesmere, owned. Perhaps he should get one of his own. He couldn't imagine the freedom of being able to drive oneself at the precise moment one wanted to leave, instead of waiting endlessly for others.

Muttering under his breath, he turned around to head back inside, intending to phone home and demand to know why there'd been a delay. Before he'd taken more than a few steps, however, his carriage finally arrived, his coachman huddled on the box, covered head to toe to keep out the cold.

"You're late," Drake snapped, reaching for the door.

He'd swung halfway inside before he realized it was already occupied. Two hulking forms waited ominously in the dark interior. Confused and alarmed, wondering if he'd gotten into the wrong carriage, he tried to step back down, but the men inside lunged toward him, looping their arms around his shoulders and dragging him fully into the vehicle.

He sprawled across the coach floor as one of the men sat squarely on his back, knocking the breath out of him. The other wrenched his arms behind him, tying his wrists together. Before he could cry out, they shoved an acrid-smelling piece of cloth into his mouth.

The whole incident had lasted only a few seconds, but as the coach rocked into motion, he realized that he, the assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, was being

kidnapped from in front of Scotland Yard. How the hell could this be happening?

He stopped fighting, knowing that for the moment at least, he was well and truly caught. Whoever was behind this had planned it well, giving him no chance to fight back or raise an alarm. But a time would come when he had an opportunity to escape, and he had to be ready for it.

Taking a few deep breaths through his nose, he tried to focus his mind, clear the panic, and figure out who the hell had taken him.

He hated that his first thoughts went to his brother.

Mortimer, Viscount Danbury, definitely had the resources to hire someone to do this. And it was in his nature to take the coward's way out of every situation. Had he found out that Drake was investigating him? Would this carriage ride end with a bullet to Drake's head so that he could never expose Danbury for the murderous bastard he was?

The mere thought made him wild with impotent rage. Inspector Sebastian Ness and retired Inspector Quinn O'Brien also knew of his brother's foul deeds, and he knew they'd do their best to bring Danbury to justice, but without him, they wouldn't have a chance. Even from his lofty position, it was proving to be incredibly difficult to bring a case against a peer.

Truth be told, he still wasn't certain he could find a magistrate to sign off on a warrant. So much rested on which one was assigned to the case. Some were more easily influenced by a title than others. But either way, this couldn't have happened at a worse time.

Of course, there was always the possibility that Danbury had nothing to do with this. God knows Drake had plenty of other enemies out there. The men he could hear breathing heavily above him could belong to any of a dozen organizations who'd like to see him dead.

Craning his head, he tried to see the men who'd so handily immobilized him, but they'd planned well. The window shades inside the carriage had been pulled shut, so when he'd

entered it had been too dark to make out the men's features. They'd immediately planted him face-first on the floor, tying his hands and feet. Their positions on the seats above him made it impossible to see their faces, and the foot planted squarely in the small of his back kept him from moving.

Since there seemed to be no way to see them or escape, he tried to focus on figuring out where the carriage was headed. He was pretty sure they were still heading east, but it was impossible to say for certain. The driver, who was obviously not his man Edgar, could have made a turn while he was still struggling and not paying attention. He hoped that they hadn't harmed Edgar when they'd stolen his coach but feared the worst.

If only they hadn't gagged him. These men seemed to be hired thugs, and men like that were susceptible to bribes or leaking information. Drake had always been very good at using his quick wit and silver tongue to find out what he needed to know. So if he could just talk to them, ask some questions...

A huge pothole made his face leave the floor then slam against it again, and the men above him laughed uproariously.

Cheek stinging and ear ringing, he ignored them. He couldn't let bastards like these—nor his brother, for that matter—get the best of him.

Think. Think. How the hell do I get out of this?

His mind whirled with one idea after another, but there were simply too many variables to know which, if any, he'd actually be able to implement once the carriage stopped. He'd never felt so helpless.

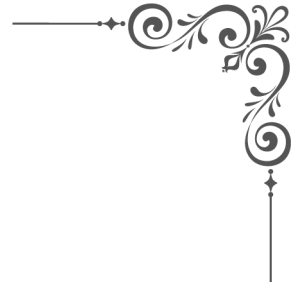
Other than their laughter, and an occasional cough or burp, the men who'd captured him weren't making any noise at all. Obviously, they'd been warned not to say anything that would give their identities away. As much as it chafed, Drake had to give them points for that. They were executing their plan flawlessly.

But whose plan was it?

By his calculations, they'd been traveling for about twenty minutes when the coach finally came to a stop. *Twenty minutes east. The docks, perhaps?*

To his horror, one of the men placed some sort of black bag over his head, taking away his sight along with his freedom. With the gag in his mouth, it had been difficult enough to breathe, but now the material clung to his nose, making it almost impossible. He fought to stay calm, even though he felt like he was suffocating.

The next few minutes could very well be the end of him. He had to wait for these men to make a mistake and then be instantly ready to capitalize on it if he was going to make it through this alive.



Chapter Two

When the door to her windowless cell finally opened, Heather had no idea how long she'd been imprisoned down there. At first, she'd been completely in the dark, but she'd fumbled around until she found some matches and managed to light a lantern, which had helped keep the terror somewhat at bay.

For the first few hours after Jacob had locked her in, she'd desperately looked for some way out, but they'd planned well. The only way out was through the impenetrable oak-planked door.

Thinking perhaps she could trick or bargain with whoever had opened it, she sprang to her feet, only to stumble back as three men entered. Oscar and Frank shoved a larger, third man, who had a black bag over his head, into the room, then slammed the door shut once more. She winced as she heard the lock engage on the other side.

The man stumbled a few steps, obviously disorientated and off balance. He couldn't see, and they'd tied his arms behind him. Though she'd only met him one time, his height and breadth assured her that this was indeed Mandrake Blackstone.

Dear God. They actually went through with it.

Given Jacob's unstable nature, she wasn't certain why she was so surprised, but for some reason she was. Her heart sank as she realized that there was no going back from this. Taking Blackstone had been beyond stupid. She very much feared it had been suicidal.

Staring at Blackstone warily, she contemplated her next move. Why hadn't they taken off his bonds before leaving him in here? It wasn't as though he could escape.

Jacob probably wanted her to be the one to free him, as a way to build trust.

Biting her lip in dismay, hating that she knew Jacob so well, she inched closer, and the man's head suddenly whipped in her direction.

Heart pounding, she closed the rest of the distance between them and stood on her tiptoes in an attempt to pull the bag from his head. He towered over her by nearly a foot, so it was easier said than done. He also seemed poised to strike, shying away from her when she lifted her hands.

Of course. He didn't know she was trying to help him. For all he knew, they'd brought him here to kill him.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she said softly, feeling as though she was attempting to soothe a wild beast. "I'm going to take the hood off, if that's all right. But you're much taller than me, so I need you to bend your head."

He froze, turning his head toward the sound of her voice, his big body riddled with tension.

"I'm not one of them," she lied, hating herself for doing so but feeling that she didn't have any other option. "I'm a prisoner here as well."

Slowly, he lowered his head.

Taking a deep breath, she grabbed the edges of the hood, slowly working it up, her fingers inadvertently tangling in his silky black hair. He smelled incredible, like leather and sandalwood. Everything about him screamed wealth and good breeding, all the things the men upstairs hated so passionately.

When the hood came off, she saw that he was gagged as well, and she hastened to untie the piece of cloth that kept the rag in place, her fingertips fumbling with the knot, which had tightened during his ordeal and proved difficult to unfasten. At last, it sprung free, and he broke into a coughing fit, his big body doubling over as he fought to get air.

She rushed to the pitcher of water on the table, poured him a glass with shaking hands, then hurried back, pressing it to his lips. "Here," she murmured. "Drink this."

He hesitated for a moment, then drank deeply, his strong throat moving as he drained the glass. She found her gaze riveted, swallowing herself as she realized how intimate this was. The thought of what Jacob wanted her to do with this man made her shiver convulsively.

He finally looked at her, his dark eyes narrowing. "I know you. You're Quinn O'Brien's servant. What are you doing here? And where's *here*?"

She forced down a surge of annoyance, even though his words were technically true. How terrible to be thought of as someone's possession. She'd remembered his name, but he obviously hadn't remembered hers. His attitude made her remember why she'd joined the Citizens Committee to begin with. She'd been so tired of being treated like she was nothing, like the circumstances of her birth must define her for the rest of her life.

"I'm Allison O'Brien's lady's maid," she replied carefully, knowing she had to tread very carefully. During the time she'd spent down here by herself, she'd thought long and hard about the story she should tell. She had to do this right, or he'd immediately figure out that she wasn't telling the truth. "I don't know where we are or why we're here. They took me off the street in front of the O'Briens' house this morning."

He cursed under his breath, turning to survey their surroundings. "Were you able to discern anything about where they took us? Did you see anything? Hear anything?"

She shook her head. "They put a hood over my head as well."

His dark eyes raked her from head to toe. "Why would they take a mere lady's maid along with someone like me?"

Did he even realize how condescending he was being? She honestly didn't think he did, but he had a point, and the answer came to her in a rush she wasn't at all proud of. "Perhaps they thought I was Lady Allison."

"You look nothing like her," he said dismissively.

"I'm a woman who came out the front door of the O'Briens' house," she snapped. "The men they sent for me didn't seem the brightest."

"Perhaps you're right." He turned his back to her. "Do you think you could undo my hands as well?"

She nodded even though he was facing away from her, hoping he didn't see through her lies. It didn't seem as though it would bother him one bit to hurt her if he sensed her deception. She was a mere lady's maid, after all. No one who mattered.

After she released him, he rubbed each wrist in turn, and she could see that the rope had left deep grooves in his skin and probably cut off his circulation painfully. His cheek was bruised, and one of his lips was bloody. They'd hurt him when they'd taken him. He must have put up a fight. She hated that she'd had anything to do with this fiasco, and she couldn't see a single way that this wasn't going to end badly for her.

And for him, for that matter.

Jacob would never let them out of this cellar alive. She'd known that the minute he'd thrown her down here. The mere thought of what their futures held made her shiver convulsively once again, and she wrapped her arms tightly around her.

"Are you cold?" The sudden concern in his voice surprised her.

"I'm afraid," she whispered, perhaps the first honest thing she'd said. "I don't know what they're going to do to us."

He frowned and walked over to the nearest cot, grabbing a scratchy wool blanket and returning to wrap it around her shoulders. "I'm afraid I've forgotten your name."

The gesture was so unexpectedly kind that she found herself blinking back tears, ashamed to the depths of her soul that such a small act of service could affect her so deeply. "Heather. Heather Fields."

"Hello, Miss Fields. I'm Drake."

His lack of formality startled her. A gentleman would never introduce himself to a lady that way, but she supposed that he didn't see her as a lady. Besides, these were hardly normal circumstances.

"Hello, Drake," she replied, liking the nickname far more than his proper name.

He laughed roughly. “Well, now that the introductions are over, let’s figure out how to get out of this place, shall we?”

She sighed and shook her head. “I was here for a few hours before you, and I’m afraid there’s no way out except through that door, which seems to be locked securely.”

“I hope you don’t mind if I have a look around myself,” he said tightly.

“Of course not,” she murmured, watching as he prowled the perimeter of the room, poking and prodding at things for a good while.

Then suddenly, he lunged against the door, beating on it and kicking at it with all his might. “Let us out!” he screamed. “Come and face me like a man, you son of a bitches!”

She cringed, his sudden violence terrifying her. But as he continued to beat at the door and yell, her heartbeat settled, and she realized he’d had to try.

However, no matter how much he pounded and screamed, there was no response from the other side of the door and even he, the giant of a man that he was, didn’t have the strength to break through it.

At last, he subsided, pressing his forehead to the door for a few minutes as though trying to compose himself before returning to her side with a huff. “I wish I knew who’d taken us and why,” he muttered, his voice hoarse from shouting, as he sat on the cot beside her. “I don’t know what we’re dealing with here.”

She just shrugged. Heather Fields, the lady’s maid, would know nothing about the people who’d taken them. How she wished she could go back, make different choices, and still be innocent of this whole mess. She’d been so angry with the hand fate had dealt her, so determined to change not just her own life but others as well. Now, she saw that being her best friend’s lady’s maid had not been so bad. At least then she hadn’t had blood on her hands.

“It doesn’t appear that they intend to starve us,” she said after a long while, shaking herself out of her dark thoughts and

waving at the table where a pitcher of water and some bread and cheese had been placed. “Would you like to eat something?”

He shook his head, seeming lost in thought, his dark eyes fixed on the wall. She imagined he was probably trying to figure a way out of the mess he’d found himself in, and she sincerely hoped he succeeded. She couldn’t very well seduce or cajole information out of him if he wasn’t here.

Cold dread ran through her, however, as she realized Jacob would have no further use for her once Drake was gone. Her usefulness to him had obviously run its course. Jacob had said the others wanted him to get rid of her, and she wasn’t foolish enough to believe that anything she did in this cellar would change their minds about her.

Biting her lip in worry, she poured herself a glass of water and sipped it, wishing she had any idea of how she could escape this nightmare. She darted a quick glance at her companion, wondering if her only way out might be to throw in with him. Could he protect her, or was he even more dangerous than Jacob?

After a long period of staring at the wall, he began to poke around in the drawers of a small desk and nightstand, under the cots, and in the blankets and pillows, bringing everything he found back to the table. It wasn’t much, just some candles, matches, a few books, and other odds and ends. Still, she admired his resourcefulness.

“At least they didn’t leave us in the dark,” he muttered, the first thing he’d said in quite some time.

“Thank goodness,” she said with a shudder, though she really didn’t think he’d been talking to her. “I’ve never been comfortable in complete darkness.” The thought of those first few moments, when darkness had surrounded her, haunted her. Jacob knew she was afraid of the dark. He’d obviously want to terrify her. Luckily, she’d been down here before and had remembered where they kept the matches.

He sighed and came to sit beside her again, a little closer than she thought necessary. “I’m sorry,” he said abruptly.

“This must be even more disconcerting for you than it is for me. And if you really were taken by mistake...”

His sudden kindness and concern left her reeling. She didn't think that he spent much time comforting women, as he really wasn't that good at it, but she appreciated the effort. Especially since she didn't deserve it.

“Yes,” she replied numbly. “It's quite... disconcerting.” That was putting it mildly.

He turned so that their knees were touching and took her hands earnestly in his. “I'll get you out of here safely. You needn't worry.”

His big hands were warm and surprisingly calloused. She hadn't thought he was the sort of man who'd ever done a day's hard labor in his life but perhaps she'd misjudged him. His dark eyes stared intently into hers, and she found herself believing him. If there was a way out of this mess, a man like Drake Blackstone could probably find it.

She just didn't think there was any way out.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “You're very kind.”

He scoffed and withdrew his hands, surging to his feet and once again starting to pace the length of the room in agitation. “I'm not certain anyone has ever said that to me before.”

She blinked. “Never?”

He shook his head. “I think I frighten people more than I soothe them. But I don't want to frighten you. I know you're terrified enough as it is.”

She could only nod because he wasn't wrong. She didn't think she'd ever been this frightened in her life. Trying to take both their minds off what might be happening outside the cellar door, she cast around for some neutral topic of conversation. “Are you and Quinn... err... Inspector O'Brien... friends?”

Pausing his obsessive pacing, he shoved his hands in his pockets. “I was his superior, so I don't think I'd consider us friends. But I do like and respect him.”

“Allison will realize I’m gone,” she said confidently. “She’ll send him out looking for me.” She doubted Quinn would make much headway though. She’d taken special care not to let either Allison or her husband know of her involvement with the Citizens Committee.

“You call your employers by their first names?” he asked, frowning in disapproval.

Irritation rose within her, and she did her best to tamp it down, knowing that he’d been trained all his life to believe that those who worked for him were barely worth his notice. “We’ve known each other since we were children. Whether it is socially acceptable or not, Allison treats me like a sister.”

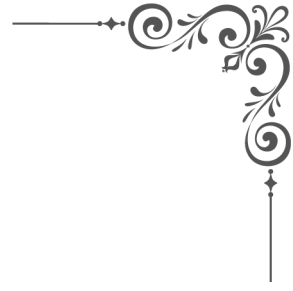
A sister who works for her, a nasty little voice whispered in her mind. A bastard sister who will never be her equal.

He gazed at her for a long moment, then nodded his head jerkily and resumed pacing. “I did not mean to offend. The relationship between you and Lady Allison is none of my business.”

Drake Blackstone would obviously never let one of his servants call him by his first name. But to be fair, Allison wasn’t the typical spoiled daughter of the *ton*. One of her older half-brothers, the Earl of Winters, had been a true villain, a purveyor of all kinds of vice, and when Allison had inherited the bulk of his unentailed property and fortune, she’d been determined to find a way to help people as a penance for all those he’d hurt.

Heather stared down at her lap, deciding that there really wasn’t anything she could say to that. Allison had always treated her with respect and even love, but she knew that wasn’t the way most of the aristocracy treated those of her class. This man would never be having a conversation with her at all if not for their unusual circumstances.

Somehow, she had to find a way to dance the dangerous line between what Jacob wanted from her and Drake Blackstone’s undeniable charisma. If she could accomplish this minor miracle then maybe, just maybe, she could make it out of here alive.



Chapter Three

How long had he been down here?

Drake continued to pace the large, dank, low-ceilinged room that had become his prison, his thoughts in utter turmoil, his skin crawling with the need to break free. He'd expected that once he was safely caged, his brother would come to rub it in his face, and that was when he'd planned to strike. But as the hours stretched on, his consternation grew. What if Danbury wasn't behind this?

His gaze fell upon his lovely companion.

Heather Fields.

He'd been lying when he'd said he didn't remember her name. And he wasn't certain why he'd felt the need for such artifice. She was a lady's maid, for heaven's sake. Yet, he'd been struck by her the moment Quinn O'Brien had introduced them, and then, as now, he really hadn't understood why.

Of course, her breathtaking beauty would be enough to catch the attention of any man. She reminded him of a porcelain doll his sister Amelia had when they were children. Wide, bottomless blue eyes fringed by dark lashes, her black hair pinned up neatly but with tendrils escaping to frame her face. Her features were lovely—high cheekbones, rosy cheeks, and full, bow-shaped lips. When she'd taken off his hood, he'd towered over her, but her voluptuous curves were obvious even in the modest, serviceable gown she wore.

Yes, she was a beauty, but he'd known many beautiful women.

He studied her now as he paced, glad for the momentary distraction from his untenable predicament. She sat in profile to him, her lovely face downcast as she picked at a loose thread near the elbow of the sleeve of her dark blue dress. Her even white teeth worried her lush bottom lip, and a sinking feeling settled in the pit of his stomach as he suddenly had an idea of why his brother might have taken her.

“Do you know my brother, Viscount Danbury?” he asked, more sharply than he’d intended.

She startled, then turned those luminous blue eyes his way. “Do I seem like someone who would know a viscount?” Her tone was soft, but he knew he’d offended her earlier with his dismissal of her low station, and he felt a pang of regret. She was his only ally in this mess, and he didn’t want to upset her when she was already frightened out of her mind.

“Think carefully,” he said, crossing to her side and kneeling before her. “He might not have identified himself as such. But have you recently turned down a man’s affections? A man who dresses like a dandy and looks somewhat like me?”

Drake had only recently admitted to himself that Mortimer was the notorious murderer known as The Viper, although he’d suspected it for some time. The thought that this lovely girl had been brought here to be Danbury’s next victim brought bile rising to the back of his throat.

He’d seen the women that The Viper had brutalized. His childhood friend Lady Evelyn Lindsay had been the last, only a few months ago. He couldn’t bear to think of such a thing happening to Miss Fields, and he made a promise to himself that he wouldn’t allow it. He’d guard her with his life.

Unfortunately, he very much feared that might be what it came down to.

She shook her head, gazing at him as though he’d lost his mind. “I think I’d remember it if a man like that had shown an interest in me,” she said slowly. “It’s not as though I have dozens of suitors hounding me day and night. I’m a spinster by anyone’s reckoning.”

He stared at her a moment longer, wondering about the shadows in her eyes. He sensed that she was telling the truth about Mortimer but was hiding something else.

With a relieved sigh, he pushed to his feet, turning away to pace once more. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.” Of course, that didn’t mean that Mortimer hadn’t picked her to play his

twisted games with for some other reason. Perhaps he'd chosen her simply because of her connection to O'Brien. If Danbury knew that Drake was on to him, he had to know that O'Brien and Sebastian Ness, the current head inspector of J Division, were as well.

"What time do you think it is?" he asked in frustration. "I feel as though whoever took us should have come in to tell us what they want with us by now, don't you?"

"I have no idea," she answered tiredly. "I've never been kidnapped before so I'm not certain of the rules. But it seems like I've been here forever."

He smiled slightly, appreciating her attempt at levity. "It was dusk when they grabbed me, so I'm guessing it must be near midnight by now." He paused and took in the weary set of her shoulders and the dark shadows under her eyes. "Why don't you try to get some sleep? I'll wake you if anything happens."

She frowned and bit her lip. "Shouldn't you get some sleep as well?"

The mere thought of lying down and closing his eyes, of being weak and vulnerable when their captors returned, made his skin crawl. "I need to stay awake. I might only get one chance to overpower whoever comes down here. I need to be awake and alert when that happens."

"How long do you think you can stay awake?" she asked hesitantly. "Perhaps we can take turns standing watch?"

A wave of unexpected tenderness swept over him at her suggestion. Most of the women he knew would be quivering masses of hysteria if they'd been through what had happened to her today. But she seemed remarkably composed, and he found her offer misguided but very brave. "I don't think that's necessary. I'll be fine all night, I believe, but if I feel myself dozing off, I'll wake you."

She seemed satisfied with that and kicked off her shoes, stretching out on the narrow cot with a sigh, but lying so stiffly she reminded him of a mummy.

Still feeling strangely protective, he walked over and grabbed the blanket he'd put around her shoulders earlier, spreading it over her from chin to toes. He'd undressed enough women to know how many layers of clothing she still wore, how very tight and constricting it must be, but he didn't feel comfortable telling her that she should take a few layers off.

He leaned down and squeezed her shoulder. "Rest now. I'll keep you safe."

"I believe you," she said softly. "Thank you."

He nodded abruptly, turning away to stare balefully at the door once more, still somewhat surprised that no one had come to talk to him yet. What did they want? Was this Danbury's way of torturing him? It seemed likely. His brother was like a cat playing with a mouse, wanting to see it run this way and that, trying to get away, when he had the power to pounce at any moment.

He couldn't believe how solid that door was. All he'd managed to accomplish with his frenzy of fury earlier was bruise his knuckles. They obviously weren't going to be able to break through it, but strangely, there didn't seem to be anyone on the other side. If there *was* some sort of guard, they were being extremely quiet.

With a sigh, he scrubbed his hand over his tired eyes. He wasn't thinking clearly. Why would they need a guard when the door was strong as iron?

He'd never been a patient man. He was used to barking orders, used to getting things done. Having to sit here and wait for the whim of another was excruciating. He wanted to scream and break things, but he doubted his cellmate would appreciate that. He feared he'd already terrified her when he'd tried to break the door down earlier.

His gaze strayed once more to the dark corner where she lay rigidly on the cot. He was certain she wasn't sleeping, but then again, he'd be surprised if she could, with their future up in the air and unknown terrors waiting for them outside that door.

He wished he were the sort of man who knew how to offer her some sort of comfort but he'd never been good at that sort of thing. He had no experience with it, after all. His mother had died when he was seven, and though his older sister had tried to give him love and affection, his father hadn't thought that necessary and had soon sent Amelia to live with their aunt, preferring to raise his sons with an iron hand.

No wonder Danbury had become such a monster.

Miss Fields' breathing seemed to have nearly stopped altogether, and he realized she must feel his stare. Cursing himself, he turned his gaze toward the door. He didn't want to make her even more frightened while he contemplated how to comfort her.

When was the last time he'd been alone in such close quarters with a woman he wasn't having sex with? He couldn't remember if such a thing had *ever* happened. The rules of the *ton* were specifically designed so that its fragile flowers avoided compromising situations. However, that meant most young women had never been alone with a man until their wedding night, when they were expected to allow one into their bodies.

It all seemed faintly ridiculous to him. And since, as a younger son, he had no obligation to provide an heir, he'd been mostly spared the vapid entertainments of the Season and the quest for a rich, pedigreed bride.

As a result, the only young women he ever spent time with were spoiled young wives looking for a bit of fun, vivacious actresses, and the occasional high-class courtesan, none of whom ever expected him to make conversation.

Heather Fields, as neither a lady nor a woman of loose morals, was a complete anomaly to him. He had no idea what to say or do to make this easier on her.

With no way to tell what time it was, the seconds seemed to tick by like hours. He got up and paced in front of the door sporadically, stretching his legs and willing it to open, only to eventually sit back down at the table.

Nerves frayed to the breaking point, he felt himself growing closer and closer to some sort of internal explosion, when suddenly, Heather gave the daintiest little snore. He turned toward her, some of the fury and fear within him abating and a reluctant smile stretching his lips.

Dear God, she was adorable.

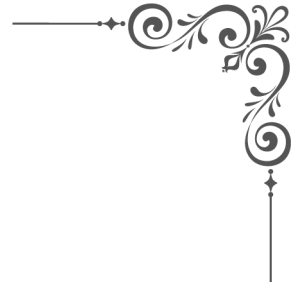
Drawn like a moth to a flame, he stood and walked toward her, pausing only feet away. She lay curled up on her side, one arm beneath the flat, lumpy pillow, the other hand beneath her chin. Her inky hair spread out in all directions, having come undone as she tossed and turned. Her face was even lovelier in repose, so innocent, and the strange tenderness he'd felt earlier returned.

Whatever the bastards who'd taken them had planned for her, he was determined to protect her.

The urge to crawl into that small bed and pull her against him, sheltering her against his body, was nearly impossible to resist. He wanted to press his cheek against her hair and fall asleep with her in his arms.

Had he ever felt the desire to simply sleep with a woman before? He didn't think so.

Shaking his head, he forced himself to turn away. Morning would come soon, and with it, they'd certainly finally meet their captors. He had to be ready.



Chapter Four

The creaking of the heavy oak door brought Heather abruptly out of a restless sleep. She blinked sleepily, scrambling to a sitting position, still a bit stunned that she'd managed to fall asleep at all between her own fear and Blackstone's uneasy pacing.

Shoving a hank of unruly hair out of her eyes, she looked toward the door and found Blackstone poised behind it, waiting as a masked man entered with a tray of food and another pitcher of water. The moment he put the tray down on the table, Blackstone lunged forward, wrapping his arm around the man's windpipe and half-lifting him off the floor.

"Who are you? What do you want with us?" Blackstone snarled, whirling around toward the door as if to force the man through it, only to pause when three more masked men stepped into the room. She recognized the one in the middle as Jacob, simply because of his cocky stance and distinctive leather vest.

One of Jacob's henchmen lazily raised a pistol as Jacob clapped slowly, a sardonic smile curving his lips beneath his mask. "Bravo, Blackstone. If he'd been alone, you just might have made it. But I'd be pretty stupid to let him come in here alone, don't you think?" The smile disappeared as though it had never been there. "Let him go."

His big body tense with fury, Blackstone held the first man suspended for a few long, tense seconds, but at last, he let him go and shoved him away. The man hurried back to Jacob's side, gasping, and Blackstone drew himself to his full height, which towered over any of the other men.

"Who the hell are you?" Drake snarled.

"I don't think you need to know that," Jacob answered. "You don't make the rules here, Blackstone. I do."

"At least let the girl go," Blackstone said stiffly. "I don't know why you took her, but she has no part in all this."

“She has a part in it if I say she does,” Jacob said, backing out of the room and beckoning the others to do the same.

“Wait,” Blackstone yelled, as they started to close the door. “What do you want? Did my brother send you?”

The only response he received was the door slamming shut. He let out an explosive groan, and Heather eyed him warily, wondering both why he’d tried to help her and why he kept asking about his brother. There certainly weren’t any viscounts in the Citizens Committee.

Silence stretched between them as Blackstone remained by the door, his big body fairly vibrating with anger and frustration. She wanted to reach out to him, to put her hand on his back and somehow soothe him, but she wasn’t at all certain how he’d react to such a thing or even why she wanted to.

With a sigh, she finally pushed off the cot and crossed the room to the table, investigating the tray of food. Two pieces of freshly baked bread, two apples, a hunk of cheese and a few pieces of ham, along with two slices of chocolate cake. Her stomach growled loudly at the sumptuous fare, which was far better than she’d expected, and she realized how long it had been since she’d eaten. She’d been too nervous yesterday. Not that her nerves were any better this morning, but there was no point in starving herself. She would need her strength for whatever was to come.

“The food looks quite good,” she told Blackstone, grabbing an empty plate and taking her share. “You should really try to eat something.”

He turned to face her, his handsome face still flushed with anger. “How can you be so calm?”

She poured herself a glass of water and sat down with her plate. “You seem like a man who has rarely been in a situation where there is nothing you can do to change things. As a woman, and a servant, my entire life has been spent in situations I have absolutely no control over. I suppose I’ve learned to simply bide my time and try to be as comfortable as possible.”

Her words were only half true. Her life *had* been spent that way, which was why she'd stopped being so patient and started fighting so hard to change things, to try and make a better world. But look where that had gotten her. The world seemed determined to prove that she would never be anything more than the bastard daughter of a disgraced servant.

A long beat of silence passed between them, but then he gave a huff of something that wasn't quite laughter and came toward the table. "Are they fattening us up for the slaughter? I wasn't expecting this sort of spread."

Heather made herself a sandwich and took a bite, moaning softly in delight at the crusty soft bread, salty ham, and sharp cheese. "It's really good."

He stared at her with an arrested look, and she suddenly became self-conscious. "Do I have something on my face?"

"No." He cleared his throat and sat down. "You just looked like you were enjoying it."

Flushing, she dropped her gaze to her plate, realizing the sound she'd made had been decidedly sexual. She continued to eat in silence, very aware of the attraction simmering between them. Although she'd been attracted to him from the beginning, she hadn't expected him to reciprocate. Should she try to capitalize upon it? Get the information that Jacob wanted in the hopes that he'd actually let her out of here alive?

Sadly, she trusted Blackstone, though he was practically a stranger, more than she trusted the man she'd once thought she loved. No, she would not prostitute herself to Blackstone for information. Instead, she'd just have to believe that somehow he'd manage to get them out of this. If Jacob's goon *had* come alone, she was quite certain they'd be on their way out of here by now. Jacob was not as smart as he thought he was. Perhaps he'd eventually make a mistake.

"It's a good sign that they're wearing masks," he said after a long while. "It means that they're going to let us go and don't want us to know who they are. If they didn't plan to let us out of here, there would be no reason to hide their identities."

It's a good sign for you, but I already know who they are.

She put down her sandwich and tried to smile. "Thank you. I didn't think of that."

He reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "Don't give up hope. We still don't even know what they want with us."

"Well, I don't think it's good," she replied with a rusty laugh. "Do you?"

"No," he said with a frustrated sigh. "But I don't understand why they didn't tell us just now. Why leave us wondering?"

"I don't know," she muttered, and at least that was the truth. She really didn't have any idea of what game Jacob was playing at. She couldn't imagine how he thought any of this was going to make things better for him.

Drake made a sandwich of his own and took a few bites, seeming lost in thought, but then he lifted his gaze to hers. "How did you come to work for Allison?"

His own use of Allison's first name showed that he had more than a passing acquaintance with her, but she supposed that made sense. The *ton* wasn't that big. He'd probably grown up with Allison. She also sensed that he was just trying to make conversation, but for the first time, she actually had the urge to tell him the truth, not the watered-down version she'd been spouting for years. If she didn't come out of this thing alive, it would be nice to know that at least one person had known her real story. And if she didn't survive, he probably wouldn't either, so what was the harm in it?

She took a deep breath, then let it out again, holding his dark gaze. "Do you really want to know? Or are you just trying to make small talk?"

"I never make small talk," he said with a hint of a smile. "I wouldn't ask if I didn't honestly want to know."

Biting her lip, she made the quick decision to take him at his word. "My mother was the Countess of Winters' lady's maid."

He blinked, obviously having expected something more than that. “Oh. I suppose that makes sense. So she taught you from a young age then?”

“She did,” Heather agreed. “But it wasn’t that easy. You see, the Earl of Winters apparently had his eye on my mother. Pursued her relentlessly. When she refused to give in to him, he... took her by force.”

Drake’s face paled. “He raped his wife’s lady’s maid? That’s despicable.”

Heather swallowed convulsively, wondering if the next part was going to make him look down his nose at her even more than he already did. “Even worse, she soon realized she was with child. She was pregnant with me.”

“Oh.” He put down his sandwich, still holding her gaze, his dark eyes soft with understanding instead of judgment. “I’m so sorry. Knowing that you were conceived in that way must be a terrible burden to bear.”

She nodded, blinking back a sudden wash of stinging tears. “He kicked her out when it became impossible to hide. Let her go without reference. She had a little bit of savings set aside, enough to get her through my birth, but then she found herself penniless with a bastard child. No decent family would hire her as a lady’s maid, but she had to make a living somehow.”

He said nothing, but once again, he reached across the table to squeeze her hand.

Taking courage from this show of support, she forced herself to go on. “She became a prostitute. She had no other choice. But when she was home, in the cheap flat where I grew up, she’d teach me all the skills I needed to become a good lady’s maid myself. She wanted more for me than what she’d sunk to.”

“It wasn’t her fault,” he said hoarsely, surprising her. “Any man who takes advantage of someone in his employ, then turns her out for it, is no man at all.”

“I wish more people, especially of your class, thought as you do,” she said, shaking her head. “Unfortunately, too many

women of my class are used as playthings. And once you're let go without a reference, there isn't much you can do as a woman to put food on the table."

"Too many men of my class are entitled pricks," he agreed, making her unexpectedly release a snort of laughter, which made him smile as well.

"In any event, when I turned thirteen, my mother sent me to speak with the Countess of Winters. She'd written a letter for me to give the woman and told me I was to ask to be Allison's lady's maid." She shook her head, still a little surprised at her mother's daring. "It shouldn't have worked, and I fully expected to be turned away, but once the countess read that letter.... I don't know what was in it, but as I've gotten older, I've come to the conclusion that my mother must have known some terrible secret. Something she must have threatened to tell if the woman didn't give me the job."

"That was very brave of her," Drake said, a note of approval in his voice. "Does Allison know that you're her sister?"

"No," Heather hastened to reassure him. "At least... I don't think so."

"Have you ever thought about telling her? I'm certain that if she knew, she wouldn't make you keep working as her servant. She'd take care of you. You're the daughter of an earl, for God's sake."

"The bastard daughter of a rapist," Heather pointed out. "And no, I probably won't ever tell her. I have no proof. Nothing other than my mother's word. And while that is good enough for me, I don't know if anyone else would believe it."

"I believe it," Drake said simply. "And I'm certain Allison would as well."

"Thank you." She pulled her hand out of his and scrubbed her face tiredly. "Perhaps you're right, but so much time has passed now... Besides, it's not as though I hate what I do. I get quite a lot of freedom, am paid very well, and I love Allison. None of this was her fault."

“What happened to your mother?” he asked gently.

“She was already sick when she sent me to the countess, though I didn’t know it at the time. She died of consumption about six months after I started working for Allison.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his dark eyes filled with unexpected empathy. “My own mother died in childbirth when I was seven. It’s a loss you never get over.”

As she met his dark gaze, she could see how tired he was. He’d stayed up all night, watching over her, and though it had felt uncomfortable at first, in time it had soothed her quite a lot to know he was here with her.

“You look exhausted,” she told him quietly. “I doubt they plan to come back right away. Why don’t you try to sleep for a while once you’re done eating and let me stand watch? If I hear them unlocking the door, I’ll wake you up.”

He rubbed his eyes tiredly with the back of his hand and then gave a short nod. “All right. But just for an hour or so.”

She could tell he was reluctant to let his guard down, but he also seemed to realize that he couldn’t do anything to get them out of this mess if he was so tired he couldn’t see straight.

She tried not to watch him as he went to the basin of water and splashed some on his face, then unbuttoned his coat and vest, folding them neatly and putting them on one of the chairs. Kicking off his boots, he stretched out on the same cot she’d slept on in just his shirt, breeches, and socks.

She shifted uncomfortably, jealous that he’d been able to make himself a bit more comfortable. She’d been miserable in her starched petticoats, stays, and tight jacket, but had known she could never shed them and still keep even a hint of respectability.

And that wasn’t the only thing making her uncomfortable. Squeezing her legs together tightly, she glanced toward the screen in the corner. It hid the chamber pot, giving some sort of privacy, but she couldn’t imagine actually using it with Drake Blackstone just a few feet away. He’d definitely hear

her. All her life, she'd been taught that men shouldn't have any idea that women actually had to relieve themselves at all.

Somehow, she just had to hang on until he fell asleep. But the situation was growing dire.

Luckily, only about ten minutes passed before he began to snore deeply, his arms at his sides, his broad chest rising and falling in a soft rhythm. For several more minutes, she watched him out of the corner of her eye, but at last, she couldn't bear it anymore. She surged to her feet, scurrying behind the screen and lifting her skirts with a grimace.

After what seemed like an eternity, she finally finished her business and tidied herself up, praying that Blackstone had slept through that. She didn't know how she'd ever look him in the eyes again either way. But when she poked her head out from behind the screen, he still appeared to be sleeping and she breathed a sigh of relief. Crisis averted for the moment at least. Unfortunately, she feared that the next time she wouldn't be so lucky, and she couldn't imagine doing this while he was awake.

Back at the table, she pulled the basin of water toward her and worked on making herself presentable, not questioning too deeply why she felt the need. She finger-combed her hair and put it back up, rubbed her teeth with a twig of mint from the tray, and scrubbed her face until it felt rosy. But when all that was done, she could only sit back in her chair and gaze across the room at her handsome, sleeping companion.

She was a bit surprised he'd fallen asleep so easily, that he'd trusted her to watch over him, but she supposed that just spoke to how exhausted he'd been. The longest, inky black lashes lay across his high cheekbones, giving him the incongruous look of a child in a man's body, though she knew he was anything but.

It seemed strange to her that she'd never seen Jacob sleeping, yet she was sharing that intimacy with this man, whom she barely knew.

Tears stung her eyes as she realized she'd never truly known Jacob either.

She'd wanted to. She'd certainly tried. But he wasn't the man she'd thought he was. And now she might die for her stupidity.

Dashing away the tears, she cursed herself for giving in to such maudlin thoughts. She'd already grieved the hopes and dreams she'd built around Jacob. They hadn't ever really been about him anyway. She'd just longed so deeply to have someone. To start a family and begin her life instead of spending the rest of it curling Allison's hair and laying out her clothes.

She'd watched jealously as her friends Allison and Jocelyn had fallen in love with their handsome police inspectors, heard their breathless whispers as they'd giggled about how wonderful the sex act could be with someone you truly loved and who loved you in return.

She'd seen the joy on Quinn's face when Allison had told him she was with child just a few weeks ago.

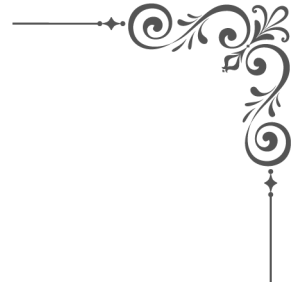
Heather's twenty-seventh birthday had been looming, and her chances of ever being a wife and mother were dwindling, so when Jacob had entered her life, she'd been all too eager to place a suit of armor on a villain who could never be the white knight she'd been looking for.

She'd wanted to know the pleasure her friends had spoken of before it was too late, but all she'd gotten was an embarrassing, painful tumble that hadn't given her any of the things she'd been searching for. She'd quickly realized that Jacob would never love her, never father her own children. She'd chosen poorly.

Blackstone snorted and rolled onto his side, turning away from her, and she buried her face in her hands. She had to stop looking at him as though he could somehow be that knight. He was a member of the aristocracy and the supervisor of her friends' husbands. Both Jocelyn and Allison had married down. A man like Drake Blackstone would never do the same. He'd made it obvious that he found her beneath him in every way.

Still, she couldn't help but think about how sweet he'd been as she'd told him her sad tale, how he hadn't seemed to judge her or her mother in the slightest. If anything, he'd been angry on their behalf.

Pushing to her feet, she crossed the room to a side table where she'd left a book she'd found earlier. It was a terribly dry treatise on Communism, but at least it might help keep her mind off Jacob and what he expected her to do to save herself.



Chapter Five

Drake woke with a start, pushing up to his elbows and looking around wildly, confused and disorientated. It wasn't until he caught sight of Miss Fields, her lovely face bent over a book, that he remembered where he was and sank back with a sigh.

She glanced up, meeting his gaze and putting the book aside. "It hasn't been very long. Only an hour or two. You can go back to sleep."

He shook his head, blinking up at the low ceiling, trying to get the grit out of his eyes and the fog out of his brain. "No. I'm all right. I just needed to shut my eyes for a bit."

"Nothing has happened," she said quietly. "I would have woken you."

"I know," he said briskly. "I'd just feel better if I was awake. We might only get one shot at this." It felt strange to include her, to use the word *we*. He'd been an island of one for as long as he could remember. But it felt good in a way as well. Having her here gave him even more to fight for. No one was going to get to her without going through him first.

For a while longer, he just laid on his back, trying to find the energy to get up. He was very aware of her intense regard but couldn't fault it since he'd stared at her while she was sleeping too. He wondered if she was as fascinated by him as he was by her. Because he wanted nothing more than to pretend that this wasn't happening, that they'd met under better circumstances, that he could just talk to her some more, kiss those lush lips...

To his immense surprise, blood surged to his groin, making him hurriedly sit up so she wouldn't see the effect she had on him. What the hell was wrong with him? How could he feel even a hint of arousal when his life was at stake?

Irritated by his weakness, he stood and strode behind the screen in the corner, taking a few moments to get himself under control and relieve himself. When he came back out, she

was looking at her book again, her face flaming. He doubted she had any idea what she was reading though, and that gave him some comfort. He imagined she was embarrassed to have heard him urinate, and he wondered suddenly if she'd used the chamber pot while he was sleeping. He hoped so, since he didn't want her to be miserable and she seemed so embarrassed by it.

He strode over to the table and poured himself a cup of water, drinking deeply before taking the chair across from hers. "I don't know what to do now," he admitted.

Frowning, she put her book aside once again, and he grimaced when he saw what it was about. *Communist drivel*.

"You seem like the sort of man who always has a plan," she said, her blue eyes piercing into his. "Should I be alarmed?"

He scrubbed his hand over his face. "I wish I knew who had taken us. If I did, if I knew what they wanted, maybe I'd have more of an idea..."

A long moment of silence fell between them, but then she cleared her throat and tapped the book she'd been reading. "There are three books down here, and all of them are tracts on communism. It makes me think that perhaps whoever took us might be part of this movement?"

He stared at the book, stunned that he hadn't put that together himself. He'd noticed the books while he was searching for something he could use as a weapon, but he hadn't even read the titles. "Let me see that."

Dragging the book forward, he opened it to the front page, then leafed through, looking for some sort of notation, something that would give him any hint of who owned it. "The Citizens Committee," he mused softly. "They bombed a small factory a few weeks ago. We've been investigating them."

She swallowed visibly. "Do you think they are the ones behind this?"

"I don't know. It's possible." He groaned in frustration. Was it that simple? Could it be that his brother had nothing to

do with this? It didn't feel right to him. But the man who'd spoken to him this morning had seemed to be the one in charge, and he definitely wasn't Danbury.

"If you already know who they are, why are they wearing masks?" she asked.

"We don't know who all is involved," he said. "We've been trying to figure out who the ringleaders are so we can bring them to justice for the deaths they caused."

Something flickered in her eyes... Was it fear? Guilt? Whatever it was, she quickly masked it, leaving him to wonder if he'd imagined the whole thing.

"They caused deaths?" she asked in a small voice, sounding shocked.

He nodded grimly. "Two people were gravely injured in the explosion. They didn't die immediately. They suffered in the hospital for days before finally succumbing to their wounds."

She gasped and buried her face in her hands. "That's horrible."

"Damn right it's horrible," he replied, the anger he'd felt upon hearing of the tragedy returning. "They pretend to be helping the common man, but I don't think this particular group really cares about anything except causing damage and getting their names in the papers."

"I don't understand any of this," she said quietly, her voice choked with emotion. "I don't know how I got wrapped up in it."

"I don't either. I'm afraid you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time." He sighed and pushed the book away. "We can't be sure that's who's taken us, not from just a few books."

"You seem like you wish it was someone else." She paused and bit her lip. "Why do you keep mentioning your brother? Do you think he is behind this?"

"It's complicated," he said, uncertain whether he should say anything about Danbury to her. Then he sighed. Perhaps

he owed it to her to tell her at least some of it. Especially if Danbury was the one who had taken them. Besides, she'd opened up to him earlier, something he suspected she rarely did.

“My brother is a monster,” he admitted, the words coming from somewhere deep inside. It had been hard enough to admit the truth to O'Brien and Ness, who were used to the very worst things that humans did to each other. How could he expect this sweet woman to understand? “I have reason to believe that he's done horrible things to women... for years. And I've been trying to stop him. When I was taken, I thought maybe he was on to me and that you were taken because he meant to hurt you as well.”

She took a deep breath. “What do you mean, horrible things...?”

He sank back in his chair. “It's not something I could possibly tell a lady.”

“Well, we've already established the fact that I am not a lady,” she said biting, reminding him once again that he'd hurt her feelings with his careless statements in the beginning.

“Horrible things. Unspeakable things.” He shook his head. “Trust me. You don't want to know the details.”

To his surprise, she reached across the table and covered his hand with hers, squeezing gently as he'd done for her earlier. “I won't pry any further. But that must be very difficult for you. To have spent your life fighting against those who would do harm, only to find out that your brother is one of them.”

The warmth of her bare hand on his was more comforting than he'd ever imagined a woman's touch could be. The fact that she'd offered him this comfort without any ulterior motive struck him deeply. He suddenly realized that he'd had far too many experiences with women who were after something—wealth, prestige, social standing.

“O'Brien is so suspicious of me,” he admitted, forgetting for just a moment his need to hold his secrets tightly. “He

doesn't believe that in the end, I'll have the courage to turn Danbury in. He thinks that blood will be stronger than my honor. But I swear it won't. I was working on this even before O'Brien and Ness came to me."

"You're working on this with Quinn?" she whispered, her face growing pale. "But... Quinn is only working on one case."

Cursing himself inwardly, he tried to think of something to say, but she was already withdrawing her hand. He hadn't realized she'd be that familiar with O'Brien's work.

"Is your brother The Viper?" she whispered in horror, but they both knew that she was right. Quinn O'Brien had retired from the police department when he'd been badly injured in pursuit of The Viper. However, he still consulted with Ness and Drake on the matter, since he was the one who'd begun the investigation.

"I never should have said anything," he said stiffly, withdrawing his hand from the table and placing it in his lap where it felt strangely cold without her touch. "Forget I said anything."

"How can I forget?" she asked, her eyes brimming with tears. "Evelyn Lindsay was one of my best friends. In fact, I was one of the last to see her alive. Her death haunts me!"

Damn it. It hadn't occurred to him that Miss Fields might have been friends with Evelyn, but why hadn't it? Evelyn had dedicated her life to helping those less fortunate. She'd been very active in the women's suffrage movement, and Allison had briefly lived with Evelyn and her sister Jocelyn before she wed O'Brien, so it stood to reason that Miss Fields had lived there as well. There also seemed to be an entirely inappropriate relationship between her and the O'Briens, but he supposed that made sense, considering what she'd confessed to him about her parentage. His own servants had no idea what he worked on... or at least he hoped they didn't. Then again, none of his servants was actually his sister. At least... as far as he knew.

“Evelyn was a friend of mine as well,” he told her, the sting of Evelyn’s death, the guilt of knowing his brother had been the one to cause it, burning within him. “We grew up on adjoining estates. Jocelyn and Evelyn ran wild with Mortimer and me as children.”

“Why would he kill Evelyn?” Miss Fields cried, her slim body trembling with emotion. “She was the sweetest woman I’ve ever known. I can’t imagine why he’d go after her, given what I know of his other victims. She wasn’t a bad woman. She wasn’t a... whore.”

“That’s what led me to Danbury,” Drake said grimly. “He’d planned to marry Evelyn since childhood, but she never wanted anything to do with him. In fact, she obviously decided she’d rather be a spinster than Danbury’s viscountess. Ness figured out that all the women The Viper has killed were those who’d rejected him in some way, and I knew Evelyn had rejected him.”

“But it must have been nearly a decade since Evelyn rejected your brother. She’d been on the shelf for ages. Why would he decide to kill her now?” she asked numbly, tears now streaking down her lovely face.

He sighed. “Evelyn was a lady, someone who’d be missed, so I think he was afraid to do anything to her before. But all the publicity he’s getting as The Viper, all the newspaper articles, has obviously emboldened him. He is thriving on the attention.”

She simply stared at him for a long time, those tears still tracking down her cheeks, her blue eyes luminous in the candlelight. He was certain she must be blaming him as much as he blamed himself. He bowed his head, staring at the scarred tabletop, wishing the conversation had never turned down this path. Then, to his utter surprise, she stood and rounded the table, bending over to wrap her arms around his shoulders and hug him tightly.

“I’m so sorry. What a terrible burden to bear,” she whispered, her breath warm against his ear.

The scent of lavender filled his senses, wonderful after the stale air of the cellar, and her lovely black hair tickled his cheek.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, his own eyes burned with unshed tears. Had anyone ever given him such unconditional comfort? He'd expected her to hate him, not hug him.

For a few moments, he just remained passive in her embrace, but then he turned and lifted his arms, tentatively wrapping them around her in return. The attraction that had been simmering between them ever since he'd first been thrown down here flared to life again, and he was suddenly very aware that he was holding a beautiful, voluptuous woman.

Slowly, she drew away, her face mere inches from his own. Their gazes caught and held, and he swore he saw an answering attraction in her eyes. Her breathing quickened, and he lifted a hand to gently cup her cheek. "Miss Fields..."

"Call me Heather," she said quickly, and he couldn't help but smile.

"You are so lovely, Heather," he breathed. "I've been wanting to kiss you all day."

She reared back a bit, as though in surprise, but then bit her lip. "I've been wanting that too," she admitted softly.

"Thank God." He surged to his feet, kicking the chair away and pulling her flush against him. She stared up at him, her expression a strange combination of desire and trepidation that he wasn't certain how to interpret. But she'd said she wanted him too, and right now that's all that mattered. Their days—hell, hours—could very well be numbered. Why not spend them engaged in the only pleasurable activity available to them?

Wrapping one arm around her waist, he lifted her onto her tiptoes and lowered his head to hers, catching her luscious lips in a searching kiss that she returned with equal enthusiasm. She still tasted faintly of chocolate cake, a thought that made

him smile as his tongue danced with hers. She was every bit as sweet as he'd thought she'd be, and she responded beautifully with soft breathy sounds that went straight to his cock, making him painfully aroused in a matter of seconds.

Lifting her completely off the floor, he walked backward until the back of his calves hit the cot, then sat down, angling her across his lap. As he continued to kiss her, he slid his fingertips over the top of her bodice, glorying in the silky feel of her breast, the hardness of her nipple.

She gasped into his mouth, stiffening a bit, and he broke the kiss, trailing his lips down her throat. "I want to touch you," he whispered, cupping her breast and lifting it from the restraining fabric. "You're so damn sweet, Heather."

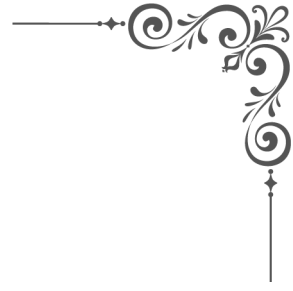
As he said her name, he closed his lips over her nipple, biting her ever so gently and then immediately soothing her with his tongue.

"Drake." She grabbed his hair in her hands, holding on tight, her head falling back as she offered herself up to him.

He loved the sound of his name on her lips. Heart thundering in his chest, he worked on freeing her other breast, then drew back just slightly to look at them, the alabaster skin of her lovely curves so stark against her dark nipples.

Bending her backward over his arm, he laid her back on the cot, her chest heaving, her blue eyes hooded with desire as her black hair fanned out across the shabby white sheets. If he'd ever seen anything so lovely, he couldn't remember it. He knelt on the floor beside her and bent his head to the lush mounds of her breasts, tonguing one and then the other, giving them the full attention of both his mouth and his hands.

He wasn't certain how far he would have gone had a rattle at the door not pulled him out of his reverie like a bucket of cold water thrown over his head.



Chapter Six

“They’re coming,” Drake said as he surged away from Heather. “Make yourself decent.”

For a moment, she just laid there, her breath coming in short gasps as she tried to understand what was going on. One moment, she’d been experiencing the most amazing desire she’d ever known. Drake’s hands and mouth had been all over her, and passion had surged through her in waves. The next, she was alone, her breasts hanging out of her dress as she stared up at the ceiling in confusion. Why had he stopped?

Drake stood above her, sheltering her protectively, his entire body vibrating with tension.

Then she heard it, the door unlocking. Gasping, she pushed to a sitting position and turned her back to the door, trying to shove her breasts back into her bodice. “*Make yourself decent,*” he’d said, and she felt anything but decent at the moment.

How had she let things get so out of hand? She’d meant to share one kiss with him, nothing more. But the moment their lips had touched, a fire had erupted between them.

If their captors hadn’t chosen that moment to enter the cellar, who knows what she might have let him do? Maybe she truly was the whore Jacob had accused her of being, though she’d certainly never felt anything like this for him.

The door swung open, and she heard heavy footsteps and then something being set down on the table. Taking a deep breath, she turned around and saw a masked man she believed to be Oscar setting another tray down and picking up the one they’d left earlier. In the doorway stood Jacob and another of his men.

“What the bloody hell do you want with us?” Drake asked, looming over Oscar as he turned back toward the door. “We’ve been down here for an entire day. When are you going to tell me why?”

Oscar shrugged. "It's not my place to talk to you. I'm just supposed to see that you're fed."

Drake's frustration was palpable as he slammed his hands down on the table, making the new tray shake. "Tell whoever you work for that I want to speak to them immediately."

Oscar just laughed. "He'll talk to you when he's good and ready. Ain't nothing you can do till then."

Backing up, the old tray in his hands, Oscar exited, but then Jacob stepped forward.

"You have two members of the Citizens Committee in your stinking jail," Jacob said at last, finally getting to the heart of the matter. "Have either of them given up the rest of the group?"

Drake stalked toward Jacob, his large body vibrating with menace. "That's why you took me? Because you're afraid some of your men have ratted you out? Don't you realize what you've done? You condemned yourselves all to jail or worse!"

Jacob gave some sort of signal to the man beside him, and he lifted a gun and pointed it squarely at Drake's chest. Drake froze, and Jacob laughed, moving around him and crossing the room toward Heather. Still on the bed, she tried to scramble away from him, but he grabbed her arm painfully and jerked her to her feet, crushing her against him, her back to his front.

Wrapping his arm around her neck, he squeezed until she thought she'd lose consciousness. Gasping, she tried to claw his arm away but he was far too strong. He held fast, and bright lights flashed before her eyes as she fought for breath. "If you don't tell me what I need to know, I'll kill her," he snarled.

Drake lifted his arms in submission, frustration in every line of his body. "Do you know how many cases the Metropolitan Police are working on at any given time? I don't investigate these things myself. Why would you think I'd know any details about some low-level communist group?"

If the situation wasn't so dire, Heather might have laughed. She didn't think Jacob had any idea how completely

insignificant he was to the man in front of them. Why would the assistant commissioner of the whole department concern himself with something so trivial in the grand scheme of things?

But as Jacob's arm tightened even more around her throat, she really wished that either she or Drake could give him *something*. Anything that would keep them alive.

"If you let me go, I can check into it for you," Drake said tightly. "But let the girl go. She can't tell you anything. I don't even know why you took her."

Jacob only laughed though his arm loosened enough so that she could finally draw a breath. Apparently, he didn't plan to kill her. Yet. "Do you think I'm a fool? If I let you go, you'll bring the entire police department down on my head."

"Your only hope is to keep me alive." Drake gave Jacob a look of utter condescension, the sort of look only a man born to the nobility could give. "The entire department is probably looking for me as we speak. If they manage to track me down, you're going to need me as a bargaining tool."

"I told you this was a bad idea," Oscar said from the other side of the room, the gun wavering in his grasp. "We should let them go."

Sensing the weak link, Drake began to edge toward Oscar, seeming oblivious of the gun in the other man's hand.

"Stop right there!" Oscar cried, steadying the gun and trying to act as though he wasn't frightened out of his mind.

With a growl, Jacob suddenly threw Heather back to the cot, striding past Drake and joining Oscar and the others at the door. "I'm going to give you one more day," he said, his voice vibrating with fury. "When I come back, you better have some information for me. If you don't, I won't kill you, I'll kill the girl."

He stepped back, and they locked the door behind them.

Drake bent over the table, his hands braced on the surface, his big body vibrating with tension. "I don't have the answers

he wants, Heather. I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to tell him when he returns."

Swallowing, she crossed the room to his side, placing one hand tentatively on his back and rubbing gently, trying to ease a little of his anger and frustration.

"I don't understand it," he said at last. "What kind of an idiot would kidnap me to find out something like that? Why would he expect me to know whether someone in one of our cells had given him up?"

"I don't know," she agreed. "You're right. It doesn't make sense. He must be an idiot."

That at least was true. Nothing Jacob had done lately had made any sense. His entire plan had been foolish beyond measure.

"We have to get out of here," he growled. "I don't want anything to happen to you because I can't tell them what they want to know."

She shivered, tears stinging her eyes as she rubbed at her sore throat. She'd have bruises tomorrow. "It won't be your fault," she whispered. "No matter what happens... I don't ever want you to think that."

He turned and pulled her into his arms again, but this time there was no passion in it. This time, it was a comfort to both of them. In his arms, she could almost pretend that Jacob hadn't issued an ultimatum that ended with her dying tomorrow. She could almost believe that Drake would actually find some way to save her from this mess she'd gotten herself in.

If she didn't believe it, she'd go mad.

His hands stroked tenderly up and down her back, but then he paused. "I don't know how you ladies wear all these layers upon layers of clothes. Would you like me to help you get rid of some of them?"

She frowned up at him, but he just smiled and held his hands up as if to show that he had no ulterior motives. "Please, just let me help you get more comfortable. I have a feeling it's

afternoon now, and he said he was giving me until tomorrow. I don't think anybody's coming back tonight."

Biting her lip, she finally nodded. She was completely miserable, and it seemed the time for false modesty had passed. He'd already seen far more of her than he would if she loosened her stays a bit.

She turned her back to him, and he helped her shrug out of her tightly fitted jacket. Then he unfastened the back of her gown and loosened her stays with far more familiarity with women's clothing than was probably decent.

"Why don't you just strip down to your chemise and then get in bed?" he suggested. "I'll turn my back if you like. You should really try to get a little more sleep."

The temptation was too strong. The day had been mentally taxing, and the thought of taking some unfettered breaths and getting some much-needed sleep decided her. She was too exhausted to think about all this at the moment. When tomorrow came, they would both need to be ready. As he said, they might only get one chance to save themselves.

"All right. Thank you. That would be lovely."

As soon as his back was turned, she slithered out of her stiff dress like a snake shedding its skin, removed the stays entirely, and then slid beneath the scratchy sheets in just her chemise, sighing in bliss at the freedom of movement she hadn't had in days.

"Can I turn around yet?" he asked, a faint teasing tone in his voice.

"Yes," she said, making sure the blankets were covering her from toes to chin, however silly that might be given the intimacies they'd just shared.

He crossed toward her and sat on the edge of her cot, a smile on his lips. "I don't know why it gives me such pleasure to see you comfortable, but it does. May I take the pins out of your hair?"

She shivered and wordlessly lifted up on one elbow, bending her head toward him.

Humming some tune under his breath, he started picking out the pins, laying them on the bed by her hip, his hands surprisingly gentle as he worked his way through the heavy dark strands until it hung loose around her shoulders. He then ran his fingertips through it, working out the tangles gently. This was what she did for Allison every night. But no one had ever done it for her.

“That feels very nice,” she whispered, almost afraid that if she spoke she would ruin the moment, that he’d stop. She wasn’t used to being pampered, to feeling as though her comfort mattered in the slightest.

“I’m glad,” he murmured.

Silence fell between them once again for a while as he continued to play with her hair, but then he cleared his throat. “Has anyone ever told you that you have beautiful hair? It’s just as silky and soft as I imagined it would be. Like a river at midnight.”

Had Jacob ever told her that? She didn’t think so. In fact, she was hard-pressed to remember a single sweet word he’d ever given her and wondered once again what she’d ever seen in him. She shook her head. “No. You’re definitely the first.”

“That’s a shame,” he said softly. “You were made to be cherished, Heather.”

She swallowed. “You don’t have to bother with sweet words. I don’t expect anything from you, Drake. I was grateful to taste a little passion before... whatever happens.”

His eyes sparked with something she couldn’t decipher. “I want to give you sweet words. I want to give you all the good things I can tonight.”

While we’re still alive.

He didn’t say the words, but they hung between them, heavy with foreboding. Neither of them knew for sure what tomorrow would bring, but there didn’t seem to be any way out of their prison that didn’t end with Jacob getting rid of them for good.

Leaning down, he pressed his lips tenderly to her forehead then gently touched her throat, which surely must be bruised from Jacob's arm. "Get some sleep. I'll be just over there if you need anything."

She caught his hand as he pushed to his feet. "What about you? You've slept even less than I have."

"I'll be all right," he said, his tone brooking no argument. "After you've rested, we can trade places again for a while."

Still, she didn't let him go. "Can you lay here with me a while? Can you kiss me again?" She swallowed convulsively. "I'm so afraid, Drake. I'm afraid that tonight might be my last, and I don't want to spend it alone."

Where had that come from? She hadn't even known she was going to ask that of him until the words had exited her mouth. But now that she'd said it, she didn't want to take it back. The kiss they'd shared had been unlike anything she'd ever imagined. She knew that making love to this man would be completely different than it had been with Jacob. This was the kind of passion her friends had found, and it seemed wildly unfair to her that she'd only had a taste of it now, when it was too late.

"Heather..." His dark gaze met hers, and what she saw there took her breath away. "I know you're afraid, but I'll keep you safe. I promise. I just don't want you to do something you'll regret once we're safely away from here."

"But what if that doesn't happen?" She tugged harder on his hand, and he sat wordlessly back down beside her. "What if he really kills me tomorrow? I've had so few beautiful moments in my life. But what we shared earlier... it was so beautiful."

He groaned and gathered her up against him, crushing her against his chest as his lips hungrily found hers, kissing her with all the passion and intensity he'd shown her before. She straddled his hips, wrapping herself around him as though he was the only port in the storm that had become her life.

His kisses, his touches, they made all the terror and guilt go away. Tomorrow was an eternity away. All that mattered in this moment was now. Tonight. Because tonight, he wasn't the son of a marquess and she wasn't the bastard daughter of a lady's maid. They were just two people who cared about each other. Two people who wanted for this brief moment in time to be one.

He skimmed his hands up her bare thighs, never breaking the kiss, and she moaned into his mouth as his fingertips brushed the soft curls guarding her sex.

"Tell me if I do anything you don't want," he whispered roughly as his finger delved within her, a sweet pressure that she'd never expected to enjoy. "I don't want to hurt you, Heather, but the first time can be a little painful."

Heat stung her face, but this didn't seem to be the right time to tell him that she was not a virgin. For right now, for tonight, she just wanted to pretend that she deserved a man like this, that she'd waited, that this was their wedding night.

As he moved his finger gently in and out of her, his thumb circled the little bud at the apex of her thighs, making her squirm and press against him, wanting more but also embarrassed that she seemed so... damp down there. Was she bleeding?

Before she could break away, he lifted his dark gaze to hers. "You're so damp, Heather. So wet."

"I'm sorry," she gasped, trying to close her thighs, flushed with embarrassment that he'd noticed. She should have known that she couldn't even do *this* right.

"No," he breathed, taking her lips in a long, lingering kiss. "You're supposed to be. This is how your body prepares itself to take mine. It's a good thing. It means you want me. I can't wait to slide through your wet heat and bury myself deep inside you."

Jacob hadn't said a word when he'd taken her virginity. He'd just pushed himself brutally inside her. She was nearly certain that she hadn't been damp then. But now she could see

how it would have helped. Oh, how she wished she'd had someone to tell her what to expect.

“Thank you for telling me,” she whispered, gasping as his thumb once more swiped across the spot where all the delightful sensations seemed to be centered. “I don't know what to do.”

“Just enjoy it,” he told her. “I plan to make you feel so good, Heather. So good that the whole world falls away.”

As he spoke, he put another finger inside her, his thumb still working its magic, making her moan softly and grind against him, feeling on the verge of something she couldn't name but instinctively knew was the reason her friends had been willing to risk everything for it.

“Relax,” he whispered. “Let yourself go, beautiful girl.”

She had no idea what he was trying to do, what he wanted from her. Why wasn't he putting himself inside her?

But she pushed those thoughts away and focused on nothing but the pleasure, the feeling of being... cherished. His tenderness made her almost believe that he truly cared for her.

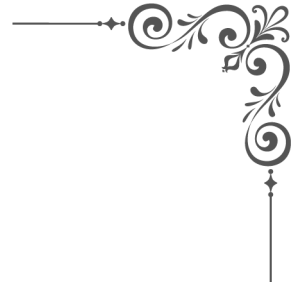
And then he swiped his thumb over her one more time, curling his fingers inward, and the combined sensation made her bite on her lip to keep from screaming as a wave of pleasure unlike anything she'd ever known rocked through her, radiating out through her fingers and toes.

“Dear God,” she gasped afterward, little shocks of awareness still curling her toes. “What was that?”

“Pleasure,” he said with a cocksure grin. “That's how a man should always make a woman feel when he makes love to her.”

“I've never felt anything like that,” she breathed, tingling all over. “But that's not what I thought lovemaking was. I thought you put your...” She trailed off, having absolutely no idea what one was supposed to call it. “...in me,” she finished weakly.

“Oh, darling,” he murmured, cradling her against his chest.
“We’re not done yet. We’re just getting started.”



Chapter Seven

Drake stared down into Heather's trusting eyes, wanting to make this good for her more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. He was thrilled to have given her the first orgasm, but he was aching with need and didn't know how much longer he could hold back.

Easing slightly back, his hands went to the falls of his breeches. "Are you sure you still want this?" he asked, praying she didn't turn him away now. "I don't want you to regret it."

"Oh, Drake," she whispered. "I could never regret you."

Needing no further encouragement, he stripped out of his clothes as quickly as he could, then covered her once again with his body, this time skin to skin, and he groaned at the exquisite feel of it. He knew he shouldn't be doing this, feared it made him no better than her father, but the need to wrench one moment of beauty out of what could be his last hours was too strong to ignore.

"No matter what happens, I will never abandon you," he vowed, meaning it. If they somehow did manage to make it out of here, he would never leave her to deal with the consequences. He'd take care of her, make certain she never ended up raising a child alone.

She kissed him deeply, and then no more words were needed as he rubbed himself in her wet heat, then slid inside her, glorying in her tight, silky sheath. Sweat broke out on his brow as he tried to go slow, tried to keep from falling over her in a frenzy of lust.

Her eyes were closed, her expression one of deep concentration as she took him in, shifting uncomfortably at first, but then opening up for him like a flower blossoming in the sun.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, having no idea how this would be for a virgin but having heard it was painful. "Is it too much?"

She shook her head, finally gazing up at him with those luminous blue eyes. “It feels good,” she said, sounding surprised. “It doesn’t hurt.”

Smiling tightly, he thrust gently a few times, giving her body a little time to become adjusted to his. He didn’t want to hurt her, but he didn’t know how much longer he could hold back.

At last, she started to move with him, her arms and legs wrapping around him, giving the sign he needed to let go, to unleash the full measure of his desire. Perhaps it was the danger, the taste of mortality, or simply that this woman appealed to him as no other ever had, but he’d never felt such intense sensations, never been so hard pressed to not spend his seed immediately.

Angling his hips, he did his best to provide the friction she needed to find her own pleasure, desperately wanting her to climax as he did. She mewled beneath him, her tiny, sensual sounds intensifying everything. He hadn’t realized how much he enjoyed hearing that the woman was enjoying herself as well.

To his immense relief, she cried out and clenched around him, and that was all it took. He followed her over the edge, giving a low, guttural groan as he spilled himself within her,

For several moments he sprawled across her, gasping, but then he realized he must be crushing her and collapsed awkwardly on the small cot next to her, pulling her against his chest as his breathing returned to normal. His body still tingled from the amazing orgasm he’d just had, and his mind was aw whirl with conflicting emotions.

What the hell was that?

He couldn’t remember ever having been so eager for a woman, so full of desire that his brain had completely turned off for a while and let his body have free rein.

Heather was... fantastic. He liked her on so many levels it frightened him. But she was also not of his class, not someone he could ever take as his wife.

But if she were of his class... what they'd just done would ensure that he had to marry her. If he were any sort of gentleman at all.

He groaned inwardly. If she had been a virgin, he'd just ruined her. And if she wasn't... Well, there was no reason to think that she wasn't. She'd been eager but awkward, obviously unschooled in the ways of lovemaking.

A shiver ran through him at the memory of how sweet and warm she'd been. Never had making love to a woman given him such a sense of... homecoming? For a moment there, he would have killed to spend the rest of his life with her.

"Are you cold?" she asked softly, her voice so rough he wondered if she was crying.

"No," he murmured, hugging her tighter and trying to stop his brain from overanalyzing this too much. They were in a dire situation with no promise of tomorrow. Joining together for a little companionship and pleasure was perfectly natural. Who wanted to spend what might be the last night of their lives alone? "I was just remembering what it felt like to be inside you."

She gave a nervous laugh but burrowed a little closer to him. "I thought it was wonderful. I never dreamed it could be like that."

"Nor did I," he murmured truthfully.

"I wish this moment could last forever," she breathed, her warm breath stirring the hair on his chest. "I'm so afraid of what tomorrow might bring, but lying here with you... I feel utterly safe. Maybe for the first time in my life."

Her words humbled and thrilled him. He didn't think any woman had ever felt this way about him. He'd never been the sort of man who engendered strong feelings in the opposite sex. Desire, yes. But the women he slept with rarely lingered in his bed. He was too serious, too taciturn and committed to his work to be the good-time lover they were looking for.

Pressing his lips tenderly against her brow, he tried to put into words what he was feeling. "I meant it when I said I'd

never abandon you, Heather. What we've found together... I've never felt anything like it before."

She snuggled a little closer, her body fitting with his as though they were puzzle pieces. "Don't make promises you can't keep," she whispered. "Don't say things you'll regret later. Just hold me for a while. Right now, I just need you to keep tomorrow at bay for a little longer."

It stung him a bit, that she didn't believe him, but he supposed he couldn't blame her, and he didn't want to argue the point right now. So he just hugged her tighter, his mind drifting to all the things that these bastards might rob them of. And for the first time, he found himself hoping that his seed would take root. He wanted to be a father, he realized. Before, he'd always seen a family as a duty, an anchor, but now he could imagine a little boy with Heather's eyes.

"Tell me a little more about yourself," she said quietly, when the silence in the room became nearly crushing. "I feel as though I've told you nearly everything about myself, but I know very little about you."

He gave a humorless laugh. "I rarely talk about myself. I suppose I assume most people don't really want to know. And as I've told you before, I can't abide small talk."

She pressed her lips against his chest, and he could feel her smile. "I really want to know, Drake. I want to know everything about you."

This sort of intimacy was far more difficult for him than sex could ever be. He'd been hiding so much of himself for so long, he wasn't even sure where to begin.

"My father is the Marquess of Stonebridge," he began slowly. "I have fond memories of my early childhood, but when I was seven, my mother died in childbirth. The child—a girl—didn't make it either. My father didn't take it well. I remember the roar of pain he gave when he heard... it sounded like a dying animal."

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "He must have loved her very much."

“I suppose he must have,” he agreed, though there had been plenty of times in the past when he’d doubted that his father was capable of loving anything. “But after she died, he abandoned the three of us... my older sister Amelia, Mortimer, and myself... at our country estate to be raised by an assortment of nannies and maids, and he returned to London. I’ve heard that he tried to drink his grief away, that he gambled excessively and took mistresses, anything to try and stop the pain.”

He paused, thinking of those dark lonely days. Amelia had tried to fill his mother’s shoes, but she’d just been a child of eleven herself. He’d always felt that Mortimer should have shown him some attention, but his older brother had probably been broken even then. His cruel streak had grown with no one there to keep it in check.

“It was years before my father returned or took any interest in us whatsoever,” he said at last. “But when he did, he immediately sent Amelia away to live with our aunt. He had no use for a girl, you see. Or perhaps she reminded him too much of Mother by then. All he seemed to care about was training Mortimer for the title.”

She ran her hand soothingly over his chest. “You must have been so lonely.”

He swallowed. “Yes. My only friend was my dog, Milo. The two of us roamed the estate like wild animals, having adventures and getting into trouble.” A stabbing pain hit his heart when he mentioned Milo. He hadn’t thought about that sweet boy in years. When the old dog had died, he truly had felt all alone.

“Are you close to your father or sister now?” she asked softly.

“I see Amelia quite often. She’s married to the younger son of a duke and has two young boys. But my father spends most of his time at Stonebridge Manor in Sussex so I rarely see him,” he admitted. “He doesn’t want to see me though. He thinks I’m an embarrassment for having chosen to work for a living. He’s in poor health, hardly ever leaves Stonebridge. I

try to make it down there every six months or so, but he barely acknowledges me. All his hopes lie with Mortimer.”

The thought of what he had to do, the necessary crushing of all his father’s dreams, weighed heavily on him. But he could not let Mortimer take the marquessate. Not after what he’d done. Of course, that meant taking it on himself eventually, something he had no desire whatsoever to do.

“Your sister sounds nice,” she said softly, obviously looking for something positive in the tragic tale he’d told her.

“She is. You’d like her.” But would Amelia like Heather? Would she even consent to having a lady’s maid in her drawing room? He’d like to think so, but he really didn’t know.

Silence fell between them once again, and he realized that he’d probably never talked that much about himself in a single setting before. Surprisingly, he hadn’t minded. It had actually felt good to talk about his past with someone he cared about.

He hugged her one more time before giving a reluctant sigh. “I’d love to stay here with you in my arms all night. But I can’t very well keep you safe when I’m lying here naked. Though I doubt they’ll return before tomorrow, I need to be ready in case they do. I want to be able to protect you.”

She sighed as well, but then nodded and pushed herself to a sitting position so he could get up. He got to his feet and stared down at her, enchanted all over again by the sight of her, cheeks rosy from their lovemaking, her wild black hair tousled about her slim shoulders, her full breasts still bare.

“You’re beautiful,” he told her, wishing he was more of a poet, better with words because those seemed so completely inadequate for what he wanted to express to her. It wasn’t just her physical beauty that drew him, but her sweetness as well, the tenderness and passion she’d given him so selflessly.

She blushed, her cheeks getting even rosier, but she met his gaze, a myriad of emotions in her wide blue eyes. “You’re beautiful too.”

He grinned, leaning down to pick up the clothes he'd strewn across the floor in his haste to press his skin against hers. "Thank you. I suppose a man needs to hear that too, every once in a while."

Laughing softly, she pulled the scratchy wool blanket up over her nakedness. He suddenly wished he could see her in his own bed, surrounded by satin sheets. She deserved so much more than these rough accommodations.

After he'd finished dressing, he leaned down and pressed a lingering kiss upon her cherry-red lips. "Why don't you try and sleep now, darling? I'll keep watch."

She bit her lip, then nodded. "I don't know if I can sleep after that, but I'll try."

"I'd like you to at least put your chemise back on," he said softly. "Not that I don't enjoy the thought of you laying there naked, but I just don't want to worry about that in case they burst in on us again."

"Oh, of course." She scrambled up and pulled her chemise over her head in one swift motion, making him groan inwardly even though he knew she had to do it.

She fussed around for a moment, neatly folding her clothes and putting them within easy reach in case she did have to get dressed quickly, then climbed back under the lone blanket.

"Thank you for being so good to me tonight," she whispered. "I don't know how I could have made it through this night without you."

He swallowed past a lump of emotion he couldn't even name. "You're very welcome."



HEATHER SNUGGLED DEEPER into the cot, trying to get as comfortable as possible as her gaze tracked Drake, still stunned by the earth-shattering lovemaking they'd shared. She watched as he sat down and began picking at the food Oscar had left, which looked just as tempting as the first tray had been. It surprised her a little bit that Jacob had bothered to feed

them at all, and she figured someone else, Oscar apparently, must have organized the food.

The single night she'd shared with Jacob had been nothing like what had just happened between her and Drake. There had been no tenderness between her and Jacob, and he certainly hadn't made certain she was ready, that she enjoyed it. While Drake... She shivered, still lost in the memories of the moments they'd spent in each other's arms.

This must have been what Allison and Jocelyn had found with their husbands. This sense of complete rightness and belonging.

A sudden wash of tears filled her eyes at the thought that she had found this too late. That even if Drake felt the same way and wanted to see her again, they might not ever have that opportunity. She blinked them away, determined not to give into the panic that was beckoning in the back of her mind, wanting to drag her down into complete terror and despair.

No. She would not let the unknown future interfere with what had been the best night of her life so far. It was pointless, in any event. As she'd told Drake earlier, there wasn't a damn thing she could do to change things. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen. All she could do was pray that Drake was clever enough to get them out of this.

With a sigh, she curled onto her side, closing her eyes, safe in the knowledge that her own personal policeman was watching over her.



DRAKE SPENT THE NEXT hour staring sightlessly at the door, all of his senses attuned not to the untenable position in which he found himself but to the lovely woman who slept peacefully on the other side of the room. Occasionally, she'd make a soft sound, or there would be a rustle of the bedclothes, and it was all he could do to keep from crossing to her side and sliding into that bed next to her.

The lovemaking they'd shared earlier had ignited a passion within him that demanded to be satiated. She'd tasted so sweet

and had melted at his touch so responsively. It had taken every ounce of willpower he had to walk away from her, to go back to guarding her against those bastards who'd taken them instead of holding her throughout the night.

Besides, he was letting his attraction to her completely derail him from the issue at hand. His concern for her had already made him weak, and their leader had sensed that and meant to use her against him. He had no idea if they'd actually hurt her come the morning, but he didn't know the answers to the questions they'd asked, and he was terrified to find out just how far those bastards meant to take this. They'd already taken lives, so there was no reason to think they wouldn't do so again if they felt threatened enough.

Somehow, he had to protect Heather and get back to his own life so he could keep an eye on Mortimer and keep trying to bring him to justice. God knew what the perverted devil was doing at this very moment. He'd never forgive himself if someone else died at his brother's hands.

He'd tear that door off its hinges if he could in order to get out of here.

He frowned, his gaze sharpening on the hinges on the great oak doorway.

They appeared to be hung from this side.

It can't possibly be that easy.

Excitement surging through him, he picked up the lantern and strode over to the door, holding the light up to the ancient, rusty hinges, which seemed as though they could be loosened. This door had probably been here for hundreds of years. It had definitely been built in a different era, an assembly of thick oak planks held together by iron bands. Could he simply take the door off the hinges? It was locked on the other side, but he ought to be able to pull it this way despite the lock if he could get it off the hinges.

Casting about the room, his gaze fell on the butter knife on the tray. Picking it up, he went back to the door and slowly went to work turning the first bolt, straining with all his might

until it turned half a rotation. Elated, he kept working at it, and eventually, it was hanging on by the barest thread.

Before taking it out, he frowned. He was pretty sure it was the dead of the night, and he really didn't think whoever had taken them had left anyone watching over them, given the solidness of the door. Still, there could very well be a dozen men out there. Was it worth risking it?

This might be the only chance they had.

Mind made up, he went back to Heather's side and sat down on the cot by her hip.

"Heather," he said softly, not wanting to jar her awake.

When she slept on, he placed his hand on her slim shoulder and shook her gently. "Heather. Wake up."

Despite his efforts not to scare her, she shot straight up, looking around wildly. "What is it? What's happening?"

"It's all right," he soothed. "I didn't mean to scare you, but I think I might have found a way out of here, and I need you to be awake in case it works so we can make a run for it."

"A way out?" She blinked, putting a hand to her chest as she met his gaze, obviously still frightened out of her mind and half asleep.

He nodded and pointed to the door. "I think I can take the door off its hinges."

She frowned. "What if there is someone on the other side?"

He shrugged. "If there is, I think I can take him. But it's the middle of the night, and I believe there will only be one guard, if any."

"But won't it make a lot of noise? He'll be ready for you even if you get it off." She looked doubtful, to say the least, and it hurt him even though he knew she had absolutely no reason to trust him.

He pinned her with a look. "I've got to try. Whatever their intentions for us are, they aren't good. Would you rather wait

around and see what they plan to do with us or take a chance?”

She bit her lip. “I’d rather take the chance.”

With a grin, he pushed off the cot and went back to the door. “I don’t think there’s anyone out there,” he assured her as he worked. “I’ve been sitting here for hours, and I haven’t heard a peep from the other side of this door. Surely, if there was someone there, they’d cough or move around or something.”

Still looking unconvinced, she got up and started to struggle back into her clothes. He paused for just a second, admiring a slim leg as she pulled back on her stockings, then shook himself and kept working on the hinges. He started with the bottom one, which was just as stubborn as the other one, but eventually broke free. Though somewhat surprised that their captors hadn’t thought he might try this, it wasn’t completely illogical either. There was undoubtedly a lock on the other side of the door, and his captors had thought that, and the door’s incredible thickness, would suffice. Hell, they probably hadn’t even looked to see which side it was hinged on. He didn’t think this room had been used as a cell before, though it had definitely been used as *something*.

This whole kidnapping scheme seemed to have been put together in the spur of the moment, and whoever had orchestrated it likely hadn’t really thought things through.

The top one was much harder, as all the weight of the door was now pulling down on the hinge. As he worked, he was aware of her getting dressed and putting her shoes back on, then slipping behind the screen in the corner, obviously so desperate for relief that she didn’t care if he heard her. Good. He didn’t need her to be miserable as they made their escape.

“Come here,” he said softly, beckoning her over after she reemerged.

She moved to his side, face flaming, and he explained what he was trying to do softly, just in case there was someone out there. “I’m going to hold the weight of the door. Can you finish unscrewing this?”

“I’ll try,” she murmured. As she strained to loosen it, she stood on her tiptoes and stuck her tongue out slightly in concentration, something he found absolutely adorable, even though so much adrenaline was flowing through him he felt ready to pop out of his skin.

Finally, the hinge slipped off, and she had the presence of mind to catch it before it hit the floor. A look of victory crossed her lovely face, and he bent forward to press a passionate kiss upon her lips. “You’re amazing,” he assured her, easing away from the door. “No matter what happens, I want you to know how proud I am of you. And also that making love to you was perhaps the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Her face flushed with obvious pleasure, and he realized she’d had far too compliments in her life. If they made it out of here alive, he intended to rectify that.

The lock on the other side held the door mostly shut, but it had opened just a crack. Holding his finger to his lips, he pressed his eye to the opening, finding that whatever lay beyond was pitch black.

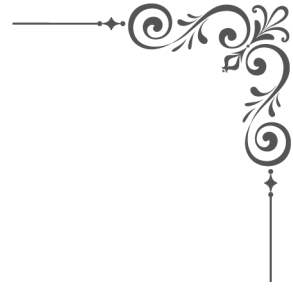
“There’s no guard,” he whispered, elated. “Help me pull this open.”

The lock kept it from opening very far, but they were able to pull it toward them far enough to slip through. Their cell cast just enough light behind them so that they could see a shadowy staircase not too far in front of them.

He took a deep breath, his heartbeat accelerating, and it suddenly became very clear to him that it wasn’t just his life he was risking but Heather’s as well. For a moment, doubts assailed him, but then he squared his shoulders, knowing that no matter what happened, it was better than just sitting here waiting to die. At least if they left the cellar they had a chance, and an hour ago, he’d been certain their luck had run out.

“What if there are people upstairs?” Heather asked, her voice trembling as she pressed behind him.

“Just stay behind me,” he instructed, reaching back to squeeze her hand. “I’ll keep you safe.”



Chapter Eight

As Heather and Drake stole up the stairs of the Citizens Committee headquarters, her heart pounded so loudly she was surprised he couldn't hear it. Was it possible that Jacob and the others had been stupid enough to leave them unguarded in a room they could easily escape, or was this all part of Jacob's master plan, herding them through a maze like mice, knowing they could be caught again to torture some more?

She had no idea, but she feared the worst. Nothing had gone right in her life for months, and even if they did manage to escape, Jacob could easily find her again. He knew far too much about her.

To her surprise and relief, once they got to the top of the stairs, they found the main meeting room dark and silent as well. She wanted to direct Drake straight to the back door but had to bite her tongue. It wouldn't do to let him know how intimately she knew this building. So far, she'd managed to keep her role in this a secret, and she wanted it to stay that way.

As kind as he'd been so far, he was a man of justice, and she had no doubt he'd deal some out to her if he knew how much she deserved it. She still hadn't had time to process that people had died in that explosion. If she really let herself think about it, she'd completely lose whatever calm she'd managed to maintain. How could she have been a part of something so terrible?

Drake reached back and grabbed her hand again, giving it a silent squeeze of reassurance. Tears stung her eyes at his attempt to comfort her. She wished with all her heart that she'd given her innocence to someone like this man, someone who knew how to show affection, even to someone he just barely knew, even though it seemed he'd received very little of it himself throughout his life.

Stumbling along behind him in the dark, she realized that the time she'd spent locked in the cellar with him had made

her feel as though she knew Drake Blackstone more than she'd even known Jacob. It almost made her sad to be returning to a world he wouldn't be a part of. But she certainly couldn't think of a scenario where they'd ever cross paths again, unless it involved her sitting in a jail cell.

Squeezing her eyes shut at the pain of that, she stumbled hard into his back as he came to an abrupt stop. A small sliver of light came from under a closed door at the end of a long hallway.

Jacob's office.

Drake froze for a long moment, and intuitively, she knew he was contemplating knocking that door down to see who had done this to him. She also knew that if she wasn't with him, that would be exactly what he'd do.

But he thought she was innocent in all this. And he didn't want her to get hurt.

She held her breath, wondering what he'd decide, not really certain what decision she *wanted* him to make. Jacob's death would be the answer to all her prayers, but one careless word from him would ensure she ended up in jail for a very long time.

Before she could come to a decision of her own, Drake spun around and hauled her in the opposite direction, toward the back door of the building.

Clinging to his hand, she trailed in his wake, trying hard to be as quiet as he was. The last thing they needed was for Jacob to hear them and come investigate.

When they finally reached the door, he fumbled with the lock, for the first time making enough noise to be heard. Heart pounding, she brushed his hands away, silently maneuvering the tricky lock she'd opened so many times before.

At last, it sprang open, and they spilled out into the alley behind the Citizens Committee building.

He took a moment to pull her to him and hug her tight. "You're doing great," he breathed. "There's no one I'd rather break out of jail with."

A hysterical laugh rose in her throat, and she struggled to keep it at bay. “Likewise.”

Pressing a kiss to her temple, he grabbed her hand again, pulling her down the alley.

They’d done it. They were actually free.

“We’re near the docks,” he said once they got to the street. “Let’s try to flag down a hack. I still have money. Those bastards were so sure we couldn’t escape that they didn’t bother to take it.”

She nodded and kept her head down, hoping they didn’t run into anyone she knew, especially a member of the Citizens Committee. Luck seemed to be on her side for once though, because they swiftly covered five or six blocks before Drake let out an ear-piercing whistle and raised his arm, signaling a hack coming down the street.

“We’re lucky we found one at this hour,” he said, turning to her with a grin that melted her heart.

“I’m lucky to be with you,” she told him as the hack started toward them. “I never would have gotten out of there without you.”

His gaze dropped to her lips, and for a moment, she was certain he was going to kiss her right there in the middle of the street, but then the hack pulled up beside them and the moment passed.

He helped her up into the vehicle, then directed the hack driver to take them to an address she knew was the O’Briens’ house in Belgravia. She swallowed convulsively as she sank back in the seat, wondering how soon it would be before Jacob and his men found her there and what they would do to her once they did.

But where else could she go? She had no one in the world other than Allison.

He sank into the backward-facing seat across from her and met her gaze in the lantern light. “We’re going to head to the O’Briens first,” he said, his expression grim. “I want them to know that you’re all right, and I also know that O’Brien can

help me figure out what to do next. But I'm not leaving you there. If they found you there once, they can find you there again."

Relief swept through her with the force of a hurricane. "Oh, thank God. I had the same thought, but I didn't want to presume upon your kindness any more than I already have."

"Nonsense," he said sharply. "We're in this together, Heather. I won't let you out of my sight until I know for sure that you're safe."

Tears filled her eyes. She didn't deserve this, but she was so very glad that he wasn't going to leave her to fend for herself. Look what a terrible job she'd done of that so far.

His dark eyes softened, and he leaned across the aisle to wipe a tear from her cheek. "Don't cry, my brave girl. Everything will be all right."

Of course, that just made the tears fall harder. She bent forward, burying her face in her hands as tremors rocked her body. Although she'd managed not to give in to her fear too much while they were in the cellar, she'd been pretty certain she was going to die. She was very aware that she wasn't quite out of the woods yet, but her relief was soul deep. She'd been given a second chance at life, and she couldn't continue to make such stupid mistakes.

He shifted across from her, and then suddenly he was on the seat beside her, pulling her against him and whispering sweet words as he held her and stroked her hair, occasionally pressing his lips against her temple. She buried her face against his broad chest, allowing herself to be comforted as her fear poured out of her in the form of her tears.

She'd felt so alone for so long, and in his arms, she felt cherished and cared for. Overwhelmed, she simply held on to his shirt and let the terror crash through her until it finally subsided, and she lay against him, hollowed out from the storm.

"My beautiful, brave girl," he murmured, still softly stroking her hair. "I've got you, darling. I'm here."

She didn't know if she'd ever heard words so sweet. And for now, just for tonight, she chose to believe them.



A STRANGE TENDERNESS filled Drake as he held Heather against his chest, soothing her as she finally gave in to the fear that must have haunted her the entire time they'd been locked in that cellar. He couldn't believe how brave she'd been to have remained calm as long as she had, and his mind raced as he tried to figure out how he was going to keep her as safe as he'd promised.

Whether their captors had taken her on purpose or if they'd meant to grab Allison, Drake had no doubt that they'd return to the O'Briens' house the moment they realized that Drake and Heather had escaped.

He couldn't return to his own house either, because even if his brother hadn't been behind this, his captors would know where he lived.

Before he could fully formulate a plan, the hack slowed, and he looked out the window to find they'd already arrived in Belgravia. "We're here, darling," he whispered, pressing a kiss to Heather's temple, glad her tears seemed to have abated. "Let's go inside."

She nodded, seeming incapable of words, and he got out of the hack, looking around the quiet street to make sure no one was around before handing her down as well. The O'Briens' house was dark, not a light on anywhere, but why wouldn't it be? It was the middle of the night.

He hated to wake them up, but there was still a good chance that Allison had been the target. They were undoubtedly worried about what had happened to Heather, and they weren't safe here either.

As the hack pulled away, he tugged Heather up the front steps of the imposing white stone house, and he began to rap loudly on the door. When several minutes of that didn't yield any results, he began to yell, until finally, a light came on in an upstairs window.

“That’s Quinn and Allison’s room,” Heather said, the first words she’d spoken since they’d gotten in the hack.

The upstairs window slid open, and Quinn stuck his head out, obviously furious. “What the bloody....? Blackstone, is that you?”

“Let me in,” Drake shouted. “I have Miss Fields with me, and there’s been a... situation.”

“I’ll be right down,” O’Brien said and slammed the window shut.

Drake wrapped his arm around Heather as they waited, hoping to provide some moral support, warmth, and protection.

A few minutes later, O’Brien threw the door open, a look of consternation on his face. He wore a heavy satin robe belted around his waist but seemed as though he was quite bare beneath it, and even more alarming, Allison, who hovered behind him, wore only a robe as well. He hoped he hadn’t interrupted them in the middle of... marital relations.

O’Brien’s gaze went directly to the arm Drake had wrapped around Heather, and he forced himself to release her. “Let us in,” he demanded. “I have much to tell you, but it isn’t safe for us out here.”

Without another word, O’Brien ushered them inside, slamming the door behind them.

“Heather!” Allison cried, rushing forward and gathering her lady’s maid—sister?—in a fierce hug. “What happened to you? We’ve been so worried. We thought something terrible had happened to you! Quinn and Sebastian have been looking everywhere for you.”

“We were kidnapped,” Heather managed, her voice hoarse from the emotional breakdown she’d had in the hack.

“Go take care of her,” Drake urged his friend’s wife. “See that she has a hot bath and something to eat. She’s had a rough time of it.”

Heather met his gaze, as though she didn't want to be separated from him, but Allison was already pulling her toward the stairs. "Of course," she called over her shoulder. "Thank you for bringing her back to us."

He watched Heather until she got to the top of the stairs and then turned to O'Brien. "I'm sorry I woke you, but this couldn't wait."

"Come with me," O'Brien murmured. "I have a feeling you could use a drink and that I might need one as well by the time you're done."

"I'm afraid you're right," Drake agreed, following his former colleague down the hall toward a room he knew was his office. Once they'd entered, Drake's gaze was drawn, as always, to the entire wall of research, photos, theories, and notes about The Viper. O'Brien had been forced to quit the police after he'd been injured in pursuit of the bastard, but he'd continued to consult on the matter with Sebastian Ness, who'd taken over his job as Chief Inspector of J Division.

They'd come to the same conclusion as he had—that The Viper was Drake's brother.

Drake accepted the glass of fine Irish whisky that O'Brien handed him and took several large swigs, shivering a bit as the powerful liquid burned its way down the back of his throat. He saluted O'Brien with his glass. "Thanks. I needed that."

O'Brien nodded and sank into the chair behind his desk. "Why don't you start from the beginning?"

Drake nodded, forcing himself to concentrate on his story and not the woman who'd disappeared with Allison. "Two... or maybe three?... days ago, I was kidnapped from in front of Scotland Yard."

"What?" The blond-haired man sat forward, his green eyes wide with shock. "We knew you were missing, but I had no idea that you'd been taken or where it happened."

Drake nodded grimly. "They were completely brazen about it. My coachman was late, and when he arrived, I was so angry I just got in. It was my coach, but there were men inside

waiting for me. They subdued me before I even knew what was going on.” His pride stung to admit that. He still felt like he should have known it wasn’t Edgar, that he never should have gotten into the coach to begin with.

But then Heather would have been all by herself in that hellhole and when he thought of it that way, he was glad that he’d been there.

“Neither your coach nor driver have turned up. We assumed you’d gone somewhere, but it seemed very unlike you to just not show up for work without telling anyone that you wouldn’t be in. We were worried that Danbury had found out you were investigating him and done something to you.”

Drake frowned, hoping Edgar was all right but fearing the worst. He’d have to put someone on that right away.

“I thought Danbury was behind it at first too. I was blindfolded and bound and taken somewhere down by the dock. Kenner Street, I found out once we got free. They took me down some stairs and threw me in the cellar, and when my blindfold came off, I found that Heather... I mean, Miss Fields was already down there. They’d taken her too.”

O’Brien looked like he was going to say something about Drake’s familiar use of Heather’s name, but he obviously decided to save that for later. “Why would they take Miss Fields?”

Drake shrugged. “I’m not sure. She says she was taken off the street in front of your house, and she thinks maybe they meant to grab Lady Allison instead.”

Visibly bristling, O’Brien swore under his breath. “Why would they take my wife?”

“I don’t know,” Drake said with a sigh. “I still don’t know why they took me. At first, I thought that Danbury was behind it, that perhaps he’d taken Miss Fields as his next victim.”

O’Brien drew in a sharp breath. “Good God. I hope not. But I must admit that thought crossed my mind as well.”

“I know,” Drake said with a shake of his head. “I can’t bear the thought of him doing that to anyone ever again,

especially not someone like... Miss Fields.”

“How did you get free?” O’Brien asked.

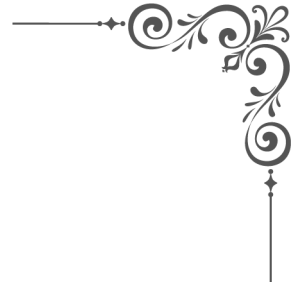
“We were able to take the door to our cell off the hinges,” Drake replied. “But not until we’d been held there for days.” He was still angry at himself for not checking the hinges earlier. “Whoever was behind it never showed their faces, but they seemed to be members of the Citizens Committee. Their leader demanded that I tell him what their associates in jail had revealed. I think they just wanted to know if we knew their identities.”

“Bloody hell. Didn’t they realize that doing something that stupid would bring them to your attention?” Running a hand through his already mussed blond hair, O’Brien sighed. “What do we do about Miss Fields? They know where to find her.”

“Exactly,” Drake replied. “But it’s just as likely that they never meant to take her to begin with and might have come here looking for your wife.”

O’Brien sucked in an angry breath. “What do you suggest we do?”

“I thought we might go wake up Ness as well,” Drake said with a hint of a smile. “Perhaps he’s up for a few houseguests, and I don’t think anyone would think to look for us there. We’ll be safer in a pack until we sort this all out.”



Chapter Nine

Heather followed Allison numbly through the house toward the servants' quarters, still in a state of shock that she and Drake had somehow managed to escape. Allison was uncharacteristically quiet, but she doubted that would last long.

Sure enough, the moment they were safely ensconced in Heather's lovely little suite of rooms, Allison whirled on her. "You were kidnapped with Drake Blackstone? You spent days alone with him?"

Heather winced at her friend's shrill voice and dropped heavily onto her comfortable bed, wishing mightily that she could just crawl into it and sleep for days. What little rest she'd gotten the last few days had been far from relaxing, and everything that had happened had mentally exhausted her. She didn't think she was ready for Allison's interrogation.

"It's not like I got to choose my cellmate," she replied tiredly. *Although if I had, I definitely would have chosen Drake.*

Allison seemed to suddenly realize the gravity of the situation and thankfully let the subject of Drake go. "Are you all right? I was so worried about you. At first, I was afraid The Viper had gotten you!" She shuddered and placed her hand on the slight swell of her stomach, then visibly tried to calm herself. "What do you need right now?"

Blinking up at the ceiling, Heather sighed. "I don't really know. Sleep probably. Mostly sleep."

Allison sighed, plainly sad to be denied the details of Heather's adventure. "Of course," she said, smiling ruefully. "You can tell me all about it tomorrow."

"I will," Heather promised as Allison left the room, although for once, she knew she wouldn't. She'd kept her relationship with Jacob a secret from everyone, and now she certainly couldn't talk about him, about the danger he posed to her and others, or about the terrible things she'd done with the

misguided impression that she was doing some good in the world. She swallowed convulsively as she remembered Drake telling her that some of the people injured in the explosion had later died.

So much had happened since she'd heard that she hadn't truly had time to process it. How could she ever live with herself, knowing that she'd played a part in those deaths, no matter how small?

With a heavy sigh, she got off her bed and strode to the window, hiding behind the curtain as she peered down at the street far below. Were Jacob and his men down there even now? How could she simply go to sleep, knowing the danger he still posed to her and everyone she held dear?

She bit her lip, wondering if she should steal away tonight to keep Allison and Quinn safe.

But where would she go? Her lack of friends and family had never been more clear to her. Allison and Quinn were really all she had, and she wasn't even their equal. She was simply a too-familiar servant. She hadn't minded that much before, but ever since she'd told Drake the secret of her paternity, regret and anger had been churning somewhere deep inside her. Why hadn't she and Allison ever talked about the fact that they could be sisters? Did Allison even know? Was that why she'd been so good to her? Had she been trying to make up for their father's cruelty? Somehow, that seemed even worse.

Tears stung her already swollen eyes, and she rapidly tried to blink them away. She couldn't believe that she'd broken down in Drake's arms so completely, nor how tender and comforting he'd been. He'd done everything right throughout their time together. She couldn't have asked for a better protector.

What she really wanted was to fall asleep in his arms and drift off with the knowledge that he'd keep her safe no matter what happened while she slept.

She shook the thought away, knowing that they'd probably never cross paths again. He'd seen her safely home and that

was likely the end of it. He didn't belong in her world, and she certainly didn't belong in his. He had said he'd take care of things, that he'd make certain she was safe, and she believed he would. But he'd never hold her again, not now that they were back in the real world where he was the son of a marquess and she was... nobody.

Before her tired thoughts could go any further, someone tapped at her door.

"Come in," she called, expecting it to be Allison.

Much to her surprise, Drake stepped into her room instead. "Drake," she whispered, then flushed. "I mean, Mr. Blackstone."

He gave her a chiding look, then crossed the room to her side, pulling her into his arms and holding her tightly. "Just because we're out of that cell doesn't mean you can't call me Drake."

She relaxed against him, all of the fear and confusion of the last few moments seeping out of her as his warmth crept in. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

He cupped her chin in his big hand and tilted her face up toward his. "I told you I'd keep you safe, didn't I? Now pack a bag. We're going somewhere that no one can find you for the next few days."

She bit her lip, glad for his reassurance but also still worried about her friends. "What about Allison and Quinn?"

"They're coming with us. We're all going to go stay with Sebastian Ness."

A little jolt of excitement went through her. Inspector Ness's wife was her good friend Jocelyn, who'd been a countess before she'd married her handsome policeman. "Do they know we're staying with them?" she asked ruefully, knowing there hadn't possibly been time to alert them of their visit.

"Not yet," he said with a wink. "But I'm sure they'll be happy to have us."

The thought of being under the protection of not just Drake but Quinn and Inspector Ness helped immensely. Jacob would be a fool to attack them at Jocelyn's house because she had an army of strapping footmen as well.

For a moment longer, he continued to hug her, then released her with a smile. "Hurry up. Get ready. I want to be gone from here before those bastards who took us even realize we're gone."

"All right," she agreed readily, wanting the same thing. "I'll meet you downstairs in a few minutes."

He nodded and turned toward the door, but then paused and looked at her over his shoulder. "Everything is going to be all right," he assured her. "I'll get to the bottom of this and bring them to justice. And... what happened between us? I'll make that right as well."

"Thank you," she murmured tremulously, afraid to even guess at what he'd meant by that last comment. He'd said he wouldn't abandon her, and somehow she believed him, but she really didn't see how he could possibly achieve such a thing. She could never be either his mistress or his wife, so where did that leave them?

Once he'd left, she sagged heavily against the wall, praying for the strength to get through this without revealing that she was probably in need of some justice as well.



WHEN HEATHER ARRIVED downstairs with her small bag full of clothes and the necessities she'd need for the next few days, Allison stood near the front door with her own bag. Usually, Heather would have been the one to pack Allison's things for her, and she felt a little pang of guilt for slacking in her duties, even though she knew Allison was quite capable of taking care of herself.

"We're going to Jocelyn's," Allison murmured, while the rest of the servants milled around the entrance hall, getting in each other's way, and Drake and Quinn consulted in quiet tones near the stairs.

“I know,” Heather whispered back. She swayed a bit, her vision fogging as stress and exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her.

“Here, sit down until we’re ready to go,” Allison instructed, tugging her toward one of the stiff chairs along the wall.

Heather sank into it gratefully, wondering if she had it in her to remain conscious more than another few moments.

“As soon as Driver brings the coach around, we’ll be on our way,” Allison assured her, obviously sensing how close Heather was to collapsing. “This horrible nightmare is almost over, darling.”

Drake called me darling...

That was the last thought she had before darkness claimed her.



WHEN HEATHER CAME TO, Drake was once again holding her in his arms in a coach, but this time the coach belonged to Allison and Quinn, who sat on the seat across from them.

She immediately realized how improper this must look, how completely beyond the pale, and she struggled to move away. Allison was staring at her wide-eyed, and she knew her friend would have a million questions tomorrow.

“You fainted,” Allison supplied, worry chasing away her curiosity. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you faint before. Are you all right? Blackstone caught you before you hit the floor and carried you out here.”

“You’ve been through a lot,” Drake murmured when she found the courage to look up at him. “I’m sorry I couldn’t let you rest for a bit.”

“I’m fine. I know we couldn’t stay there.” Once again, she tried to move off him, but he tightened his arms, preventing her from doing so.

“You’re fine where you are,” he told her firmly. “I know it’s not proper, but these are surely extenuating circumstances, and our friends don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Allison chirped, looking absolutely delighted instead of scandalized. “Just try to rest until we arrive.”

That was easier said than done, but she tried, sinking back against Drake’s warm chest, which felt better than even her bed could have. She’d wished for this but hadn’t expected to ever have it again.

Drake rubbed her back gently with his big strong hand, and before she knew it, she was fading away once again, despite their audience and the man who might possibly be after them at this very moment.



WHEN HEATHER WOKE UP again, she was in a comfortable bed, and sunlight streamed through a filmy white curtain. She must be at Jocelyn’s but she had absolutely no idea what time it was, though from the angle of the sun, she guessed it was at least noon. She didn’t know how she’d gotten here, but the thought of Drake carrying her through the house and tucking her into bed made warmth bloom in her chest.

For the first time since Jacob had told her of his plan to kidnap Drake Blackstone, she actually felt safe, as though she could breathe.

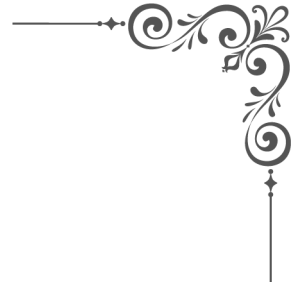
Before she could get out of bed, a young maid named Maggie, who Heather vaguely remembered from the months she and Allison had stayed with Jocelyn, looked up from the chair where she’d been reading. She put the book aside and handed Heather a glass of cold water.

“Here, drink this,” she instructed. “You’ve only been asleep for a few hours. The gentleman told me to make sure that you don’t try to get up yet.”

“Thank you,” Heather murmured, drinking deeply and then handing the cup back. “But I really must see to Lady Allison...”

Maggie shook her head. “Lady Allison instructed that you needed to sleep more as well.”

The look in the girl’s dark eyes didn’t brook any argument, and exhaustion was once again overtaking her, so Heather did as she was told and eased back against the pillows, letting sleep claim her once again.



Chapter Ten

Sebastian Ness had been less than pleased to be woken in the middle of the night, but once Drake and O'Brien had explained what was going on, the inspector had welcomed them in with open arms. His wife Jocelyn had been the wealthy widow of an earl before they'd wed, and their home was a magnificent white marble mansion in Mayfair, large enough to sleep an entire army.

After making certain that Heather was settled in one of Sebastian's guest rooms, Drake had somehow managed to drag himself into the one they'd assigned him and fallen into a deep dreamless sleep.

By the time Drake woke up again, night had fallen, and he fumbled to find the switch for the gaslights so he could see what time it was. Luckily, it was only seven in the evening, and he hurriedly availed himself of the modern bathroom attached to his room, which boasted hot and cold running water, before dressing and heading downstairs.

He'd like to go see Heather and find out whether she was doing all right, but he knew he'd already compromised her in every possible way.

He'd have to do something about that, he realized grimly. Last night, when both of them had believed it to be their last night on earth, it had made perfect sense to make love to her. Now that they'd survived, the price for the pleasure they'd shared might very well be his freedom.

He shook away the thought of what a future with her might entail, determined to take things one at a time. First, he had to ensure she was safe. Then he would worry about the rest.

The sound of voices led him to a sitting room, where O'Brien, Allison, Ness, and his wife Jocelyn were having predinner drinks.

"Good evening," Drake said stiffly as he entered the room, feeling very out of place. He knew that the two couples were bosom friends, and although he liked both men very much, he

didn't think they trusted him. This was certainly the first time he'd ever been a guest in Ness's house, and he hadn't actually been invited. He'd pretty much forced his way in.

"Good evening," Ness said, standing and striding over to the sideboard. His host was a tall, dark-haired man with blue eyes and a rugged face. His wife was a stunning redhead, who gave him a welcoming smile. "Would you like a drink?"

"I'd love one," Drake admitted, glad to have something to take the edge off. "Does anyone know how Miss Fields is doing?"

Allison gave him an unreadable look but then smiled. "She'll be fine, but she's still sleeping."

Relief poured through him, and he gratefully accepted the drink that Ness handed him. He drank deeply, glad for the burn that traveled through his system, chasing away some of the chill he'd felt ever since those bastards had taken him. He prayed he never had to feel that helpless again.

"I've got men stationed all around the house, even one on the roof, but they haven't seen anything suspicious," Ness told him. "We also still haven't been able to locate either your coach or your driver."

Drake sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Edgar's fate weighed upon him heavily, but he'd had so much on his shoulders, he hadn't had much time to devote to worrying about his long-time driver. "Thank you."

"I sent someone to check out the address you gave me, but there was no one there," Ness continued, his expression grave.

"They must have cleared out as soon as they realized we'd escaped," Drake replied, wishing he'd knocked down that door when he'd had a chance. This could all be over now if he had.

"We did some checking, and the building you were being held in is an old warehouse that has been being used by the Citizens Committee," Ness informed him. "We're still trying to get more information."

Even before the group's leader had made himself known, Heather had guessed the reading material in the cellar might

be a clue about who had taken them. Drake was somewhat surprised and embarrassed that he'd spent so much time thinking it was his brother. He sat down next to O'Brien. "Has there been any news of Danbury?"

"He's going about his business as usual," Ness said darkly. "I've had a man on him day and night for weeks."

"Good." Drake thought about what he could tell Danbury about why he hadn't been home for days, then wondered if his brother even noticed his comings and goings. He'd certainly never appeared to. Their father's townhouse was so large he and his brother had often gone days without running into each other. In any event, he'd have to track Danbury down tomorrow and make up an excuse for why he was staying gone. Perhaps he'd claim to have a new mistress.

The thought made him pause, gazing down into the liquor swirling in the bottom of his glass. He had a lovely little house in Belgravia, not far from O'Brien's actually, where he'd kept his mistresses in the past. Perhaps he could take Heather there to keep her safe. Since his job required the utmost discretion, he'd always been careful to keep the place a secret.

But it seemed wrong somehow, to take her there. He wasn't quite certain exactly what he felt for her, but it was more than he'd felt for the other women who'd occupied the house. There had been a total of four in the last eight years, but none of them had held his interest for more than a few months. The women who sought such positions tended to be shallow and conniving. All along, he'd been aware that Heather wasn't like that. She wasn't someone he could just tuck and forget. But she also wasn't the type of woman he could marry.

Marry? It startled him that the thought had even crossed his mind. He'd always been so certain that marriage and a family were not things he wanted. But the thought of being able to come home every night to Heather's welcoming warmth and beautiful smile stirred something deep within him.

It would be scandalous if he were to wed someone like her, but what other choice did he have? Especially when she could very well be carrying his child.

Strangely, the thought of that didn't terrify him as much as it would have in the past.

"Blackstone?" Ness called, obviously not for the first time.

Drake looked up to find them all staring at him expectantly, and he realized he'd completely lost track of the conversation.

He cleared his throat in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. You caught me woolgathering, I'm afraid."

Ness frowned, looking as though he knew exactly where his mind had been, but didn't comment on it. "I was just asking what the plan is going forward. Much as Jocelyn and I enjoy having you all here, we can't live together forever."

"Yes, of course," Drake replied, taking another drink to cover his unease. "We must apprehend whoever was behind the kidnappings. Once we have whoever runs the Citizens Committee behind bars, we should all be safe. In fact, I was just thinking of moving myself and Miss Fields to a house I own in Belgravia so that we won't impose on you any longer. We'll be safe there. No one knows that I own it, and I've always been careful to keep my comings and goings private."

"What about Allison?" O'Brien asked. "We still don't know if those bastards meant to take her instead of Miss Fields."

"You can remain here for the time being. I'd just feel more comfortable in my own home." Though he and Ness were friendly, the inspector's earlier comment proved that he really didn't want his superior living with him, and Drake couldn't say he blamed him.

"Heather is not yours to protect!" Allison interjected, her lovely face flushed. "She belongs with us! We will keep her safe. I don't know what happened between the two of you when you were in that cellar together, Blackstone, but if I were a man, I believe I'd call you out!"

O'Brien put a calming hand on his wife's arm but he appeared just as incensed. "You've been treating her with far too much familiarity, Blackstone. It doesn't look good."

All four of them were staring at him now with varying degrees of suspicion. Ness was the only one who didn't look as though he wanted to murder him where he stood. The amount of concern that Heather's employers and friends had for her wellbeing still surprised him, but he was glad they were so fiercely loyal.

"Miss Fields and I went through a very frightening situation together," he said carefully. "That created a bond between us that I cannot explain. I want to make sure those bastards don't get their hands on her again. That's all."

"Can you assure us that nothing... untoward happened between the two of you?" Jocelyn asked, finally speaking up. "Because if it did... despite her station... I think that we are going to have to insist that you make it right."

Drake swallowed thickly. How the hell was he supposed to answer that? Admitting just how many liberties he'd taken with her would be asking for trouble. He'd already considered the ramifications of what had passed between them, but he bloody well didn't like being taken to task for it by his subordinates. And he needed to find out what Heather wanted before he talked to anyone else.

Before he could answer, Heather entered the room, her face flushed. She'd obviously heard what O'Brien had asked him. "Leave him alone," she snapped, casting Drake a pained glance before looking away again in embarrassment. "He saved my life, and now you're interrogating him? Demanding that he... what? Make an honest woman of me? He's the son of a marquess, for God's sake."

"I don't care if he's the son of the bloody king!" Allison declared, shocking Drake with her profanity. "If he's compromised you in any way, he must do the right thing by you."

"He didn't compromise me!" Heather assured them all, the lie making him extremely uncomfortable. "But as he said... going through that together created a... bond between us."

How much of the conversation had she heard? Did she already know that he wanted to take her to Belgravia? If she

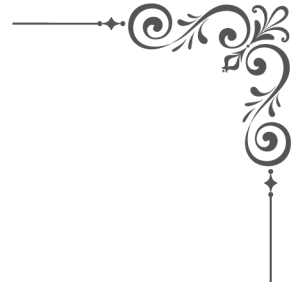
would just look at him again, he would know. Her lovely blue eyes were so expressive...

Shaking himself, he sighed and ran a hand through his hair in agitation. "I'm glad that you all have such concern for Miss Fields. It is not my intention to make things more difficult for her. All I'm saying is that she might be safer with me in Belgravia. Whether she comes or not is entirely up to her."

At last, she looked his way, and what he saw in her eyes nearly took his breath away. Pure trust and... He didn't even know how to put a name to what else he saw. All he knew was that she wasn't ready to end this thing between them yet either.

"I think he's right," she said softly. "If you could do without me for a while longer, Allison, I think I'd be safer with Drake." Her face flushed even redder. "I mean, Mr. Blackstone."

Her use of his first name hung heavily in the room for a few moments before Ness cleared his throat and shook his head. "Well, we don't have to decide anything tonight. I believe dinner is ready. Shall we go in?"



Chapter Eleven

Heather followed Allison and Jocelyn into the dining room, feeling awkward. She didn't take her meals with Allison and Quinn when they were at home. Instead, she generally had the cook make up a tray for her to eat alone in her room. As the lady's maid, she wasn't really welcome amongst the rest of the staff or with the family, which made for a lot of lonely meals.

However, when she and Allison had lived with Jocelyn and Evelyn, everything had been very casual. The four of them had often eaten together, so this wasn't the first time she'd been in Jocelyn's dining room. But she sensed she'd only been invited tonight because of her harrowing adventure and her newfound connection with Drake Blackstone, whatever that might be.

Her cheeks still burned from the conversation she'd heard earlier. Her friends had been interrogating Drake, demanding to know what had happened between them and even insisting that he do right by her. She would have cried if it wasn't so comical. She appreciated their concern for her, but a man like him would never consider actually marrying a woman like her. She was beneath him in every possible way.

She cast a quick glance at him as he took a seat across the table from her. He did not belong at this end of the table. If Jocelyn had abided by the strict rules of etiquette that governed the lives of the *ton*, he would have been at the head of the table near Jocelyn herself, as they were the highest-ranking people in attendance.

He didn't seem to question it though, simply taking his place and arranging his napkin on his lap, carefully avoiding making eye contact with anyone. To her surprise, he seemed just as uncomfortable as she did.

For a moment, she had the fleeting wish that they were back in that cellar, where only the two of them had existed and she'd felt free to talk to a marquess's son as though she was his equal. For those few brief days, she hadn't felt alone.

Although she was thrilled to be free, she knew that nothing could ever be the same between them now that they were back in the real world. Surely, he knew it too?

She didn't quite understand why he wanted to take her with him, but if she was truly given the choice, she'd accept in a heartbeat, no matter the further damage to her reputation. It wasn't as though she had a chance of landing a husband anyway, so why should she care what people thought? She wanted more of his drugging kisses... She'd like to do everything they'd done last night and more. She had the feeling that the things they'd shared had only been the beginning of the pleasures he could show her, and she wanted to experience all of it.

Her cheeks heating once more, she tore her gaze away from him and cast her eyes down at her plate, hoping no one had seen her staring at him.

A glance in Allison's direction assured her that she hadn't been that lucky. Allison was looking back and forth between Heather and Drake as though she was watching a tennis match and was trying desperately to figure out the score.

Well, Heather hoped Allison figured it out so that she could ask her friend later. Because at the moment, she felt just as confused.

Much to her relief, dinner passed fairly quickly, with the two married couples carrying the bulk of the conversation. The unpleasantness of the drawing room was behind them now, and they all seemed thrilled to be in each other's company, as though they were at some country house party instead of banded together for protection.

Heather felt a pang of jealousy, once more feeling very alone, always the third wheel, the odd one out. She was on the fringes of their lives but never truly a part of them. She could only look in, like a starving child with her nose pressed against the glass, wishing for any scraps they might toss her.

Blinking back a sudden wash of tears as she remembered the starving girl she'd once actually been, she grabbed blindly

for her wine glass, only to knock it over and send a blood-red stain rushing across the snowy white tablecloth.

“I’m so sorry,” she gasped, as Drake jumped to his feet to avoid getting it in his lap.

He smiled briefly at her, the first time he’d met her gaze since they sat down, and hurried to sop it up with his napkin.

“It’s quite all right,” Jocelyn hurried to reassure her as several footmen stepped forward and took over for Drake, hurriedly cleaning up the mess and then melting back against the wall.

Heather knew her face must be flaming even more scarlet and wondered how much embarrassment a person could take in one night. This seemed to be all the proof any of them might need that she did not belong here, and the desire to flee the room was so strong that it was all she could do to remain in her chair.

Drake sat back down. “It really is all right,” he assured her quietly, pitching his voice low so that only she could hear. “No harm done.”

“I’m so clumsy,” she muttered. “I should have been more careful.”

He waved her apology away with a casual motion of his elegant hand, and her gaze caught upon the way the candlelight reflected in his shiny dark hair. He looked even more handsome tonight in his formal black evening clothes, and she wondered if he’d somehow found time to send for his own things or if he’d borrowed something of Inspector Ness’s.

Since she’d had a chance to pack some of her own clothes, she felt that she looked better than usual in the one fancy dress she owned, a lovely sapphire blue gown with black embroidery. Allison had insisted that she get it the last time the modiste had come, and she hadn’t been able to say no, especially when her employer was paying. Sometimes she accompanied Allison to events, and she needed to look presentable even if she was just supposed to fade into the background.

“We need to talk,” he said, even quieter this time. “Can you meet me in the garden after everyone goes to bed?”

She could only nod, her heart racing with the anticipation of being alone with him again.

They didn’t speak again through the rest of the meal, and she swallowed a groan of frustration when Jocelyn announced that the men would be going to Inspector Ness’s study for cigars and drinks while the women adjourned to the gold drawing room.

She had no doubt her friends were about to demand to know every detail of what had happened between her and Drake in that cellar, and she had no idea what she should tell them.

Sure enough, they’d barely settled in their chairs before Allison and Jocelyn turned to her expectantly. “You simply must tell us what happened between you and Blackstone!” Allison demanded. “He’s acting very familiar with you. And you can’t even look at him without turning scarlet.”

Heather stared at the floor, unable to look at them. “We already told you. Being together in such a dangerous situation formed a bond between us. He just wants to ensure that I stay safe.”

“And he doesn’t think Sebastian and Quinn are capable of protecting you?” Jocelyn asked, her tone prickly in defense of her beloved husband. “I don’t understand why he wants to take you somewhere else. Surely you’re safer here. It all seems very suspicious to me.”

Heather pressed her hands to her cheeks, unsurprised to find them flaming hot. She decided she might as well tell the truth, as nothing else would convince them to let her go with Blackstone. “Very well. We did share a few kisses,” she admitted.

“A few kisses?” Allison asked, arching her brows suspiciously. “And that was enough to make you want to go away with him, unchaperoned, to a house where he probably keeps his mistresses?”

With a gasp, Heather surged to her feet, crossing the room to the window and giving them her back as she struggled to compose herself. She didn't know which hurt worse, the thought of Drake having mistresses or the thought that he was considering her for that role. How could she have been so foolish? Of course, that was all he could possibly want from her. Especially after she'd already given herself to him so freely.

"That was harsh," Jocelyn finally chided Allison. "You don't know that's what he uses this place for, Allison."

"Well, he doesn't live there himself. He lives in the family townhouse with Danbury. So why else would he have a whole house sitting there unused?" Allison fired back, sounding exasperated. "I just want her to know what his likely intentions are."

The fact that Allison thought her incapable of navigating her relationship with Drake washed away some of her embarrassment, leaving anger in its wake. She didn't understand why they thought their situations had been so different than her own. Both of them could have ended up broken-hearted, cast away after they'd given up their virginity, but they'd been willing to take that chance.

Well, so was she.

"Both of you decided to take a lover," Heather finally said, turning to face them. "You were both very open about it with me, and I was completely supportive. So why shouldn't I explore my attraction to Drake? I'm nearing thirty, and he's handsome and kind. I might never get a better opportunity to see what all the fuss is about. Besides, I really do think he will keep me safe."

Allison stared at her for a long moment, then cleared her throat. "Jocelyn and I both had the upper hand in our situations."

"So you're saying that it's different because I'm nothing but a servant?" Stung, but knowing it was probably true, she turned away again, blinking back a sting of tears. "I'm not

expecting him to marry me. I know that's impossible. And I'm not even certain I'd want that if it wasn't."

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Allison said quickly, her lovely face scrunching in chagrin. "I'm just worried about you. What if you became pregnant? What if he breaks your heart?"

"The same could have been said of both of you when you were falling in love and not thinking clearly," Heather said stubbornly, refusing to consider either of the things her friend had mentioned. Then she sighed, embarrassed that she was lashing out instead of listening to the wisdom her friends were trying to impart. "I don't know what I'm saying. I don't know what I want. I just know I'm not ready to walk away from him yet. And if I don't go with him, what chance do I have of ever seeing him again?"

Allison and Jocelyn looked at each other, their eyes wide.

"Made that much of an impression on you, did he?" Allison finally asked with a crooked smile. "It was the same way with Quinn. Even though I was just a girl when we first met, I knew no one else would ever do."

"I didn't know what to think of Sebastian the first time we met," Jocelyn said with a laugh. "But I certainly couldn't get him out of my mind."

"I was so afraid," Heather admitted. "But he was so kind. He tried to comfort me, even though he obviously felt uncomfortable. But he has this sweetness about him, despite his curt manner. And when he kissed me... it was magical."

"Magical?" Jocelyn laughed, her green eyes sparkling with merriment. "Good gracious. You do have it bad."

"What does it matter if I go with him?" Heather asked. "I have no social standing to ruin. No one would even know."

Allison bit her lip. "I'll do what I can to convince Quinn. But I don't think that he'll allow it."

For the first time in her life, it suddenly occurred to Heather that she could go with Drake if she wanted to. Though

she loved Allison and was thankful for the job she'd given her, neither she nor Quinn could dictate her actions.

The thought swirled inside her head, startling and life-altering.

All this time, she'd been campaigning for women's rights, so why on earth would she allow someone else to tell her what to do with her life and her body?

"Can you do without me for a while?" she asked Allison, knowing that was truly the only barrier. She couldn't risk her job for something that even she knew would be fleeting.

"Of course," Allison said with a frown. "I just don't know if Quinn—"

"Then I think I will go with him," Heather hastened to interrupt her, even less willing to let Quinn decide her fate than Allison. "I really want to."

For a moment, both her friends looked at her as though they'd never seen her before. But then Allison smiled at her with grudging respect. "Well, if you really want to, I think you should."

"So do I," Jocelyn agreed. "Sometimes you just have to trust your instincts."

Heather gave a sigh of relief, even though she wasn't certain that what Jocelyn said was true. She'd thought that getting involved with Jacob was a good idea too, and look where that had gotten her!

However, the reminder of Jacob strengthened her resolve. She truly did believe that Drake would keep her safe. But she also knew that what she'd done with the Citizens Committee was bound to catch up to her. And when it did, she wanted one more spectacular memory to get her through the rough days to come.



DRAKE SUFFERED THROUGH after-dinner drinks and cigars with O'Brien and Ness, painfully aware that they did not really want him there. But he didn't want to be here either.

He couldn't wait until it was time to rejoin the ladies and he could finally have a conversation with Heather about their next steps. He needed to know whether she had any intention of going with him when he left.

Why was it so important to him that she did? He wasn't quite certain, and that made him even more edgy than usual.

It wasn't until Ness and O'Brien began to talk about The Viper that his attention was finally caught and held. Taking a sip of his brandy, he leaned back in his chair and focused on their conversation.

"Did anything happen on the case while I was gone?" he asked.

They exchanged a look, obviously surprised he'd finally decided to chime in. "Nothing that we know of," Ness said darkly. "However, by the time we do know anything, it's always too late."

O'Brien gave a brief laugh. "Too bad we can't arrest people for what we think they are going to do."

Drake smiled despite himself. "That would be ideal, wouldn't it?" Then he sobered. "I don't think I'll be able to forgive myself if another woman is killed before we get enough evidence to bring a case against that bastard."

"Nor I," O'Brien agreed.

"I sometimes wish I could just take matters into my own hands," Ness admitted. "I hate that someone like Danbury can continue to get away with such evil, even after we've already figured out that he's The Viper."

"The laws are there for a reason," Drake replied, even though he knew all too well how unfair the whole system was. If he'd had the same evidence against a common man, he'd probably have already hung by now. But the people who made the rules had always made sure that they were in their favor.

"We know that," O'Brien snapped. "That doesn't keep us from being frustrated by how slow this is going."

“Do you think I’m not frustrated?” Drake fired back, anger surging through him. “I have more reason than most to want him stopped.”

“You also have more reason than most to want to see him go free,” O’Brien pointed out, his face carefully neutral.

Drake’s anger at that accusation was only tempered by the fact that they had no idea what his older brother had put him through growing up. They didn’t know how much he’d been bullied and tortured by someone who was supposed to love and protect him. They didn’t know his father had never stepped in to do a damn thing about it.

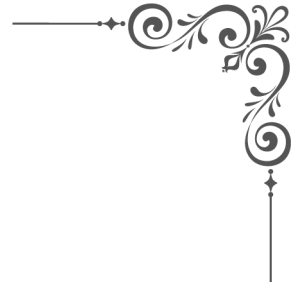
He took a deep breath, struggling not to explode. They didn’t know, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to tell them. And because of that, he was in this by himself, as had always been the case.

“I’m not going to defend myself to you,” Drake said shortly. “I’ve told you repeatedly that I intend to do everything in my power to bring him to justice.”

Ness sighed and shook his head. “Don’t mind us. We’re both still just a little on edge about what happened to you and Miss Fields. We feared that perhaps your brother had made her his next victim.”

“That crossed my mind too,” Drake relented. “Let’s just get back to it tomorrow, shall we? Constable Pond would alert us if my brother was up to no good. So for tonight, let’s just try to relax and enjoy our evening.”

“You’re absolutely right,” O’Brien agreed. “Let’s rejoin the ladies.”



Chapter Twelve

By the time the men finally rejoined them, Heather was more than ready for them to do so. Though she loved being around Allison and Jocelyn, she wasn't used to being considered an actual guest, and she still felt quite awkward. She also didn't want to listen to any more advice and speculation about what was going on between her and Drake. She still wasn't sure herself and needed some time to think about it all now that her life wasn't in imminent danger.

Drake caught her eyes the moment he entered the room, and she could tell that he felt the same way and had endured many of the same questions as she had. Understanding surged between them, and for perhaps the first time in her life, she suddenly felt truly part of something. The time they'd shared together in that cellar had forced them to shed the social niceties and be completely real and honest with each other. They had become a team.

The thought fluttered through her mind, enticing and beautiful, until she remembered that she hadn't truly been honest with him. In fact, the entire basis of their relationship had been a lie.

He crossed the room to her side and took the chair next to her, which she'd chosen specifically because they set a bit apart from the others. It wasn't as though no one in the room could hear them, but if they pitched their voices low enough, the others would have to stop talking themselves and listen very carefully.

"How are you?" he asked softly, the moment he sat. "Did you get some rest?"

"I'm fine," she responded, her voice just as low. "I slept the whole day away. How about you? You got even less sleep when we were in that cellar than I did."

"I slept longer than I should have," he said ruefully. "I only meant to rest an hour or two but I suppose it all caught up to me. I only joined the group a little while before you did."

Silence fell between them but it wasn't awkward. With him, she didn't feel as though she needed to talk all the time.

She gazed at him out of the corner of her eye, while pretending to be interested in what the others were saying. They were talking about going to Sebastian and Jocelyn's country estate for the summer, though Sebastian didn't think he could get away from his job for very long and Allison was a bit concerned about being far from the city so close to when she should be giving birth.

It didn't seem as though Drake was really listening to them either. He seemed just as aware of her as she was of him. She wondered if he was also remembering their kisses. The way he'd held her breasts in his hands as he kissed her hungrily. The way his powerful body had moved over and inside hers, bringing her to such ecstasy.

She loved his lips, she decided. It really wasn't quite fair that a man should have such a lush, mobile mouth. He'd been born to grant sinful pleasure.

"I have so much to talk to you about," he murmured. "But I feel like nothing I have to say to you can be said with an audience. Are you still going to meet me in the garden later?"

"Of course," she breathed. "As soon as I can get away, I'll find you there."

A smile stretched that mouth she'd just been admiring, making him even more gorgeous. What she wouldn't give to simply launch herself into his arms and kiss him until the whole world fell away. The future remained dark and cloudy, but when she looked into his eyes, she could almost believe that everything was going to work out.

She waited about half an hour more before standing up and yawning theatrically. "I'm still tired. I think I'll retire for the night."

Allison gave her a strange look that she didn't want to even try to interpret but then nodded. "Have a good night. We'll talk in the morning."

Careful not to even glance in Drake's direction, Heather said goodnight to the others and then headed up toward her room, still a bit confused about why she'd been given a guest room instead of sent back to the servants' quarters where she belonged.

Once she shut her door safely behind her, all the stress and terror of the past few days caught up with her, and she collapsed across her bed, staring up at the ceiling as conflicting thoughts and emotions battled in her mind.

What am I doing?

Every time she wasn't directly looking at Drake, the doubts assailed her, making her wonder if she'd lost her mind. Why hadn't she been content with her life the way it was? She'd had things much better than most people of her station, and she should have been grateful that Allison had given her such a wonderful home. Instead, she seemed to always be burning for the things she could not have.

And Drake Blackstone was definitely one of the things she could never have.

With a groan, she forced herself up and stared at her wan face in the mirror, pinching her cheeks to try and bring some color back to them. Though it would be dark when she went outside to meet Drake, she wanted to look her best.

For the next half hour or so, she kept herself busy getting ready, but when even she couldn't find anything else to do, she decided to steal down to the garden now. She simply couldn't stand being cooped up in this house any longer. Perhaps her ordeal in the cellar had kept her from ever wanting to be in an enclosed space again. She yearned for some fresh air.

The Nesses' garden was large and well-kept, with lovely little footpaths and a wide variety of trees and flowers. Tonight they looked somewhat sinister, the dark branches still mostly bare and reaching for the moonlit sky. Shivering, she pulled her wrap tighter around her shoulders, wishing she'd grabbed something heavier. Winter was lingering this year.

Toward the back of the garden was a secluded bench tucked behind a sheltering hedge. Perching on the edge, she listened intently for any sign of Drake, her heart pounding with the anticipation of being alone with him again. They'd been around far too many people today.

At last, she heard quiet footfalls coming her way, and she cleared her throat so he would know where to find her. He rounded the corner and immediately caught her up against him, his wonderful strong body warming her instantly, his scent already so dear and familiar.

"There are guards all over the place out here," he murmured, tugging her into an even more secluded nook in the hedges. "I'm glad they're here to keep you safe, but we should talk quietly so we're not overheard."

She nodded jerkily, feeling overwhelmed by the depth of the mess she'd managed to get herself into. Even though they'd escaped, Jacob and his men were still out there, and she wouldn't be safe until Drake made certain they were all behind bars.

But Jacob would never go to jail without telling anyone who'd listen that she'd been involved. It seemed that no matter how she turned the whole thing over in her head, she couldn't imagine a scenario where she got out of this unscathed. Perhaps she should just tell Drake about her involvement with the Citizens Committee tonight. He'd find out eventually, and when he did, he was bound to feel horribly betrayed.

But what were the odds that he'd understand? That he wouldn't hate her once he found out the truth? She didn't want to take that chance. She wanted to enjoy these last few days while she could.

For a moment, he just hugged her tightly, but then he let her go. "Have you had a chance to think about what we talked about earlier? Would you like to come stay with me for a while?"

"Yes," she breathed, even though she knew it couldn't end well. "I'd love that, Drake."

“Good.” He sounded relieved, and though it was hard to see him clearly in the darkness, she thought he was smiling. “Your friends are worried about you. Worried about what might have happened between us. I know that you probably are too.”

She took another step back, suddenly wary. “What happened is none of their business,” she said, rubbing her hands against her arms, remembering with startling clarity how it felt to have this man inside her. “I don’t regret it,” she said fiercely, needing him to know that no matter what came of all of this, that had been the one good part. She wouldn’t have missed getting to know him despite all the heartache it would inevitably bring.

“I don’t regret it either,” he murmured, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I just need you to know that after all of this is over, after I see those bastards brought to justice, I will make this right.”

Her heart slammed into her throat, and she swallowed dryly. This wasn’t the first time he’d said that, but she had no idea what he meant by ‘making it right.’ “What are you saying?”

“I feel as though I took advantage... of you... of your fear. I should have been stronger, shouldn’t have given in to my desire.” He shook his head, then sighed grimly. “I wasn’t thinking of anything but how much I wanted you, and because of that... You could be with child, Heather.”

Her hand unconsciously went to her stomach, and tears stung her eyes. For so long, she’d dreamed of a family of her own, but this wasn’t how she’d wanted it. She didn’t want to repeat the cycle of her own life, giving birth to the bastard child of a highborn man who could never claim it.

His gaze followed the movement of her hand. “I would never make you go through that alone. I will take care of you. I promise.”

She laughed hollowly. “Are you asking me to be your mistress?”

He was a good man. A kind man. And he probably even thought he was doing the right thing now. But she knew all too well that his interest in her would fade, especially once she was swollen with his child and no longer attractive. Eventually, he would leave. They all did.

“No,” he said slowly, sounding very uncertain. “I’m not asking you to be my mistress, Heather. That’s not what I want at all. I’m asking you to be my wife.”

“Your wife?” She stared at him in mingled elation and dismay, certain she’d misheard him. “You must be joking.”

“I’m not.” He ran a hand through his inky hair, seeming uncomfortable and uncertain, emotions she knew he didn’t often feel. “I’ve ruined you, Heather. And I want to do right by you.”

Her heart broke a little at his sweetness, But she knew he didn’t want this. “When we met, you didn’t even think me worthy of being introduced to you,” she reminded him gently. “And now you’re going to marry me?” She shook her head. “Besides... you didn’t ruin me. I was... ruined before we ever met.”

A soft sound of denial escaped him, but then, to her surprise, he reached out and pulled her back against him. “I don’t like that word. I shouldn’t have used it. You’re not ruined, darling. You’re beautiful and perfect. I don’t care if I wasn’t your first. I would be honored to make you my wife.”

“Oh, Drake,” she whispered, wanting so badly to take his words at face value and stunned by his easy acceptance of the fact that she hadn’t been a virgin. She wished more than anything that she could just accept his proposal, pretend that they could make things work, pretend that he loved her. But they’d only known each other a few days, even though it somehow seemed a lifetime. His honor was commendable, but she couldn’t ask him to destroy his reputation because they’d had sex when they’d feared they would never make it out of that cellar alive. She knew that eventually, he’d come to resent her, that he’d be ashamed of her.

She almost wished that he *had* asked her to be his mistress. Even that was probably more than she deserved but at least then she'd have been able to remain with him a little longer.

His men would undoubtedly catch up to Jacob soon, and her old lover would give her up in a minute to save his own skin. And once Drake realized that she'd had a part in this, that she'd been part of the explosion that had cost two lives... He would hate her then.

There was no possible way that her life could have the fairytale ending he was offering her right now.

"You don't have to give me an answer yet." Seeming to sense her inner turmoil, he pressed his lips tenderly to her temple. "It was foolish of me to bring this up tonight. We've both had a rough few days, and we shouldn't be making any rash decisions. I just wanted you to know that I didn't take what happened between us lightly."

"Neither did I." She sighed and gazed up at him, wishing she were someone else, someone who hadn't already destroyed her life so completely. Because there was nothing in the world that she wanted more than to say yes. "I loved making love to you, Drake. It is the only thing that has made any sense to me since this all began."

Tossing caution to the wind, she lifted up on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck. She could never be his wife, but perhaps she could steal a few more minutes in his arms. "Kiss me," she breathed. "All I need in this moment is to be close to you again."

He drew in a sharp breath, then wrapped his arms around her, lifting her up against him as his mouth came crashing down upon hers. The hunger in his kiss fed the desperation clawing deep within her. They kissed as though they might never see each other again, as though this was the last time they'd ever know this sweet pleasure.

Still holding her against him, he carried her over to the stone bench, his hands lifting her skirts so that she could straddle his lap as he sat. Not to be outdone, she struggled with

the front of his trousers. He groaned and brushed her hands away, freeing his erection to the night air.

She wrapped one hand around him, stunned by his heat, by the silky heft of him. As she experimentally stroked him from base to tip, he broke the kiss long enough to gasp, "I love your hands on me."

She stroked him again, and he groaned and buried his face in the crook of her neck. "Much more of that and I'll come undone in your hand, darling."

She laughed breathlessly, remembering how he'd touched her before coming inside her, the way he'd pleased her so completely first. Could she do that for him? Were there different ways of making love than just the one they'd engaged in? She wanted to learn them all.

Before she could act upon her newfound power over him, he shifted so that his hot, heavy length was probing her entrance. "Take me inside you," he whispered.

Shivering, she realized what he wanted and let him press inside her. She slowly sank down upon his length until he was seated deep inside her. Eyes wide, she stared at him in the dim light. "Oh, Drake."

"Is this all right?" he asked, his voice rough. "Can you ride me, Heather?"

She nodded jerkily, still shocked by how full she felt, as if he'd filled every single lonely part of her. She slowly rocked against him, feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable at first, but then getting into a rhythm that rubbed that most sensitive spot just right, making that shimmering feeling start to build deep within her.

"That's right, darling," he breathed, his hands on her hips, guiding her as he moved against her, making all the feelings intensify to a fever pitch. Suddenly, heat burst within her, spreading from her center out in a fountain of pleasure even more intense than she'd felt the last time.

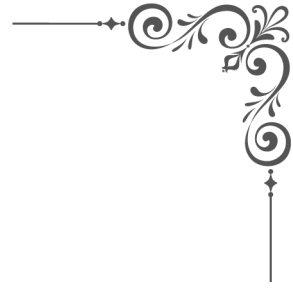
She fell forward against him, muffling her cry in his shoulder as he drove into her even faster. Suddenly he went

rigid beneath her, choking back his own hoarse cry.

They clung together, still breathing heavily, and she pressed her face against his shirt, wondering what in the world she was doing. She certainly hadn't meant to do this with him again tonight. But she also didn't want to talk about the ridiculous idea of marrying him.

This was all there could be between them, and that was fine. She was a modern woman, and there was no reason why she couldn't take a lover if she wanted one.

She would go with him to the house where he kept his mistresses, and as long as he was good to her, as long as he still wanted her, she would stay there with him. All she knew for certain was that she wasn't ready to let him go.



Chapter Thirteen

Drake walked Heather back to the house, his hand at the small of her back, his emotions in utter chaos. What the hell had just happened?

He hadn't invited her out here with the intention of asking her to marry him, but the words had somehow spilled out just the same. He knew it was sheer madness, but it was the right thing to do given the fact that he'd made love to her in that cellar and again just now.

He'd thought that he'd taken her virginity, that he'd ruined her, but she'd told him that wasn't the case. He'd wanted to ask her who she'd had before him, but he was very afraid that it hadn't been a good experience, that she'd been taken advantage of by some bastard like her father.

And he was still reeling over the fact that she'd turned down his proposal.

He couldn't believe he'd ever thought himself above her in any way. He'd come to realize she had the heart and soul of a queen, and he'd suddenly felt as though it was he who didn't have enough to offer.

As they neared the house, where laughter spilled out on the terrace, he slowed and turned to look at her. "Promise me you'll think about everything I said."

A rueful smile tugged her lips. "Only if you promise to do the same."

He nodded, then leaned down and gave her a lingering kiss, wondering if he'd ever grow tired of this. She was endlessly fascinating to him. He wanted to talk to her for hours and have unlimited time to explore her sweet body, and most of all, a large bed with a locking door.

With a sigh, he finally let her go. "Sleep well. I have some things to do in the morning, but you'll be safe here. When I get back, you can tell me what you've decided."

"I will," she murmured, walking through the door, then pausing and turning to look back at him. "Goodnight. Thank

you again, for everything you did for me during the last few days. I'll never forget it."

"You're welcome," he said quietly, though he didn't like the way she'd said that. As if she was saying goodbye instead of just goodnight.

With a sigh, he sank down on a bench on the terrace, staring up at the starry sky, feeling nearly as powerless and out of control as he had in that cellar.

That woman did the strangest things to him. But strange in a good way...

He suddenly grinned, thinking of the explosive passion they'd shared just now in the garden. No other woman had ever made him so hungry for her that he was willing to risk everything just to have her one more time.

For several minutes, he allowed himself to relive the last half hour, but finally, he shook the erotic thoughts away.

As wonderful as it had been, he couldn't forget her reaction to his proposal. And he couldn't help but be stung by it. He didn't know what he'd expected, but it certainly hadn't been that.

With a groan, he pushed himself to his feet. He planned to leave the house early in the morning, and though he doubted sleep would come to him, he should at least try.



THE NEXT MORNING, DRAKE left Heather in the care of O'Brien while he and Ness went to Scotland Yard. He was eager to try and get to the bottom of what had happened and bring the leader of the Citizens Committee to justice. Heather wouldn't be safe until he did.

"I don't think you're ready for this," Ness observed as they paused outside the cell where the two members of the Citizens Committee they already had in custody were housed. "Are you certain you want to do this? I can question them myself if you're not in the right frame of mind. No one would blame you if you took a few days off."

Drake just glowered at Ness, even though he was probably right, then strode forward and unlocked the door. He needed to get Heather out of his mind and concentrate on the matter at hand. The way to the leader of the Citizens Committee was through the men in this cell. If their leader hadn't been certain they'd give up his name, the bastard wouldn't have taken Drake to begin with.

When he and Ness entered the cell, the two men scrambled up from the cots where they'd been laying, staring at them nervously.

"What do you want with us?" the larger one demanded. He was a hulking brute of a man with a bald pate and thick dark beard. The other one was slim and freckled, his bright red hair out of place in the drab cell.

Ness glanced down at the clipboard in his hands, looking completely bored. "James Oliver and Micah Brown?"

"I'm James Oliver," the larger one said, seeming to have taken it upon himself to be the spokesperson for them both.

"We're here to ask you some questions," Ness told them. "About the Citizens Committee."

"We ain't telling you nothin'," Micah finally piped up.

Drake stared them down, channeling every ounce of aristocratic disdain he possessed. "Oh, I think you will. You see, my friend here isn't above making you very uncomfortable until you do."

That was a bluff, actually. Drake would never condone beating someone for information, but they didn't know that. And Ness looked the part of a bruiser, with his muscular build and steely gaze, even though he had more heart and intelligence than most men Drake knew.

"What's in it for us if we talk?" James asked, his bravado already fading.

"Two people are dead because of the Citizens Committee," Drake growled. "Why don't you do the honorable thing for once in your life and not worry about what's in it for you?"

James swallowed visibly, then exchanged a look with Micah. Whatever he saw in his compatriot's gaze must have decided him. "We didn't know that he meant to hurt anyone," he said finally. "We thought we was doing a good thing, fighting for workers' rights."

Micah nodded. "He's a madman. Dangerous. And he hasn't even tried to help us since we got arrested."

Ness made a show of inking his pen. "Tell us his name, and we'll see if we can get a deal for you."

Again, they exchanged a look, but then James nodded. "His name is Jacob Lindon."



HALF AN HOUR LATER, Drake and Ness were seated in Drake's office, planning their next moves. James had given them not only Jacob Lindon's name but a pretty good idea of where he could be found during the day.

Lindon would probably be lying low since Drake and Heather had escaped and knew where his headquarters were, but now they knew his home address and a list of pubs he liked to frequent.

"Send men out to all these places," Drake decided, running his forefinger up the list that Ness had compiled from James's information. "While you're doing that, I need to put in an appearance at home. I have to know what Danbury's been up to in my absence."

Ness nodded. "Once we take Lindon into custody, I'll send word."

"Thank you." Drake rubbed his hands across his face, wondering if he'd ever get a good night's sleep again. He felt like he was at the end of his strength and wanted nothing more than to collapse into bed, press up against Heather's softness, and sleep for a month.

The thought surprised him but made him certain that a marriage between them would be a good thing for them both. He'd certainly never thought of a woman like this before,

imagining just sleeping beside her instead of making love to her.

“No rest for the wicked, eh?” Ness said with a smile. Then he sobered. “I saw you coming back from the garden with Miss Fields last night.”

Drake lowered his hands, pinning Ness with a glare. “It’s really none of your business, but you can tell the rest of your nosy little group that I took her out there to propose.” He was tired of the accusations and somewhat hurt that they all seemed to expect the worst out of him. Hadn’t he always comported himself with decency and discretion?

Ness caught his breath, raising his eyebrow. “Really? I must say I’m quite surprised.”

“Why should you be?” Drake fired back. “She’s a beautiful, sweet woman who didn’t deserve any of this. I won’t have people thinking less of her because she was alone with me for a few days.”

“I agree,” Ness said quietly. “But we both know that those in your circle won’t feel the same way. They’ll always look down on her.”

“I don’t give a damn what anyone thinks,” Drake said stubbornly, though he cringed inside to think of what his father would say and how it would affect Amelia if he married a lady’s maid. Then he smiled darkly. “Besides, once we arrest Danbury, my family is going to have a lot more scandal to weather than my marriage to a lady’s maid.”

“That’s true.” Ness gave a wicked laugh, seeming to also see the humor in the situation. “I doubt anyone will be talking about your marriage at all once it becomes common knowledge that your brother is The Viper.”

Drake nodded. “Besides, it might not matter anyway. I’m quite certain she turned me down.”

Ness’s laughter didn’t stop. If anything, it grew louder. “She did?” he finally managed. Then he visibly made an effort to control his mirth. “I wouldn’t take it too personally. She probably knows how ostracized she’ll be, how horribly she’ll

be treated by those in the *ton*. I had the same concerns about marrying Jocelyn.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” Drake mused, suddenly glad Ness had explained her actions from his perspective. If anyone would know how it felt to marry someone above their station, it would be Ness, who’d somehow seduced a countess. Drake himself had been guilty of assuming Ness had been after the status and money, but now that he’d seen Ness with his lovely bride, he had no doubt there was truly love between them.

“I’m sure O’Brien will feel better knowing you tried to do the right thing.” Ness leaned back in his chair, looking more relaxed than he’d been since they started the day.

“It reflects well upon him that he’s so concerned about his wife’s lady’s maid,” Drake said grudgingly.

“Heather is more than a lady’s maid to all of us,” Ness replied reproachfully. “She’s family.”

The word *family* dug into Drake’s chest like a cocklebur because he didn’t think he’d ever truly experienced that, and he longed so desperately for it that it embarrassed him.

Drake pushed to his feet. “Well, I’m going to go find Pond and have him give me a full report. Send someone for me if you have any luck finding Lindon.”

Ness nodded, and Drake strode from the room, wondering why it had pained him so much to hear Ness speak about family. He supposed that it was because he’d felt that last night. That the rest of them were a sort of family and he wasn’t a part of it. He’d always felt like that, since his own family wasn’t really much of one at all. Amelia had spent most of her life with their aunt, Danbury was a monster who’d never done anything other than pick on Drake, and his father was a beast of a different kind. The marquess was a cold, cruel man who didn’t seem to care about anything but the title.

Perhaps that was why he’d proposed to Heather last night. He’d looked around and seen the warmth and love in the room and suddenly wanted that fiercely for himself.

Maybe he was just tired of being alone.

He hired a hack to take him to his house, realizing he still hadn't found out what had happened to his carriage and driver. Ness had men looking for them, but he felt a personal responsibility to bring his driver home safely. Edgar had been with him for years, and although Drake didn't know him well, he did know that he had an elderly mother who needed him. If the worst had happened, Drake needed to make certain the old woman was cared for.

Lindon had a lot to answer for when he found him.

Drake had the hack driver drop him off about a block away from his family townhome, then slowly walked down the street, his eyes peeled for Constable Pond. He found him half a block away, leaning in the shadows of a house across the street, his gaze sharp and focused.

"Constable Pond," he called softly, coming up beside him. "How are you, lad?"

Randall Pond was a serious, eager young man with dark hair and deep, soulful brown eyes reminiscent of a puppy. O'Brien and Ness thought the world of him, and he'd done such a good job of keeping track of Danbury during the daylight hours that perhaps it was time for them to give him a little more responsibility.

Pond's eyes lit up. "Sir! Very glad to see you! We've been worried about you."

Drake smiled. The lad seemed completely sincere. "Thank you, Pond. Had a bit of a rough go of it, but I'm fine now. Have you anything to report?"

"I do, sir. Danbury seems to suddenly have a very keen interest in Burrow's tailor shop. He's been there five times in the last two weeks. And every time he goes, he pays close attention to the tailor's wife, Mrs. Maria Burrow. She's a lovely woman, quite a few years younger than her husband, Mr. Burrow."

"Interesting," Drake said with a frown. "Does he seem interested in her romantically?"

“That would be my guess,” Pond said with a nod. “But she seems loyal to her husband.”

“I think I’ll set someone else to watch her then,” Drake assured the younger man. “Good work, Pond.”

Pond beamed at the praise, and Drake clasped him on the shoulder before saying goodbye and then continuing on to his father’s majestic townhouse, which had frankly never felt like a home.

He paused on the front steps for a moment, deciding that he’d never come back here until he caught the bastard. He’d been remaining in residence the last few years mainly to keep an eye on Danbury, but it had taken a toll. Even before he’d known that his brother was The Viper, he’d feared what he might do. Though they rarely saw each other, it had been difficult to live under the same roof with such evil.

The door opened for him, and he nodded at the butler, Wheeler, as he entered the front hall. “Is Danbury around?” he asked, handing off his coat.

“I believe he’s in the study,” Wheeler replied.

Drake strode down the hall and entered the study without knocking. “Danbury,” he said curtly.

His brother looked up from some paperwork on the desk in front of him, frowning. “Drake,” he murmured. “To what do I owe this honor?” It always amazed Drake that Danbury looked so damned unassuming. He had the same dark eyes and hair as Drake but was much slimmer and dressed like a dandy. If one passed him on the street they’d never guess that the viscount’s favorite pastime was murdering young women.

Drake took a seat in the chair in front of the desk, trying not to show how much it disgusted him to even be in the same room with his brother now that he knew for certain what the bastard had done.

“I’m moving out,” Drake said abruptly. “Thought you should know.”

Danbury’s frown deepened. “Why?”

“I’ve a new mistress,” Drake managed, coming up with the lie on the spur of the moment, realizing he should have thought of a better answer beforehand but also somewhat surprised his brother had cared enough to ask. Danbury was usually completely uninterested in his life unless he could somehow use his position for his own benefit. His stomach turned at the thought of how Danbury had accompanied him to J Division a few times, pretending interest in Drake’s work when all he’d really wanted was to see whether they were on to him.

“So?” Danbury asked, finally giving him his full attention. “You’ve had mistresses before and you never felt the need to spend all your time with them.”

“This one is special,” Drake said simply, his mind filling with Heather. If she kept refusing to marry him, perhaps he really could make her his mistress.

As soon as he had the thought, he dismissed it. He could never do that to her. He respected her too much to treat her so poorly. If she continued to refuse him, he was going to have to find the strength to let her go.

“What’s so special about this one?” Danbury asked, his eyes widening. “She must be an extraordinary lay.”

“It’s none of your damn business,” Drake snapped, pushing to his feet. “I’m going to go pack.”

His brother said nothing else, but as Drake strode away, he suddenly felt that it had been a bad idea to speak to him at all. He didn’t owe him any explanations, and the last thing he wanted was for Danbury to know anything about the new life he was trying to build.



“DRAKE! TO WHAT DO I owe this surprise?” Amelia cried, rushing across her parlor to give Drake a hug.

For a moment, he just pressed his face against her chestnut hair, inhaling her familiar scent. They didn’t see each other as much as he’d like, since they were both so busy, but after his

meeting with Mortimer, he'd felt the need to pay a visit to the only decent member of his family.

"I wanted to ask you about something," he said with a sigh, reluctantly releasing her. "Can we talk?"

She nodded, searching his face, a haunted look in her dark eyes. For the first time, he wondered if she knew about Mortimer's sins as well.

He wanted to ask her, but if she didn't, he would just be bringing shame and sadness into her life. Time enough for her to feel those things after Mortimer had been caught. For now, Drake was more interested in another matter.

As she instructed a nearby maid to bring them some tea, he settled into a chair near the fireplace. "I've met someone," he said. "I've asked for her hand."

Amelia sank into the chair across from him, delight chasing away the shadows in her eyes. "Oh, Drake! I'm so happy for you! Who is it? Do I know her?"

"I think you probably do," he mused, realizing that she knew Allison well enough to have met Heather at least once. "It's Allison O'Brien's lady's maid. Heather Fields."

"Heather Fields?" Amelia bit her lip. "I do know her... She's lovely..."

"She *is* lovely," Drake said, though his sister's hesitation told him quite a lot. "I know that she may not be the woman you'd have chosen for me, but I care for her very deeply. I'm hoping you'll give me your blessing."

A dozen emotions passed across Amelia's face before she finally settled on a tentative smile. "Does it really matter what I think? You're obviously in love with this woman."

"I'll always care about what you think, Amelia," he told her earnestly. "And the last thing I want is to bring scandal down upon our name, but she makes me happy."

"Then I'm happy for you," she said, her smile spreading. "I'll welcome her with open arms."

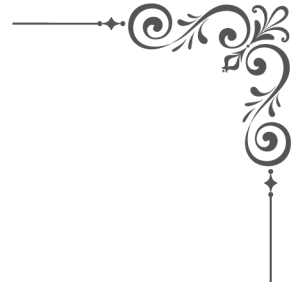
He sighed, feeling that at last something was going his way. “Thank you. You don’t know how much that means to me.”

“Any scandal that comes our way will be worth it just to see the look on Father’s face when you tell him you’re marrying a servant.” She laughed merrily. “Please let me be there for that!”

His mood darkened a bit at the reminder that nothing he’d ever done had made his father happy, but his sister had a point. If he was going to disappoint the man, he might as well do so gloriously.

“Well, she hasn’t said yes yet,” he admitted, finding that it wasn’t getting any easier to say that.

“Oh, Drake,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re going to have to give me all the details!”



Chapter Fourteen

Heather spent the day relaxing and visiting with Jocelyn and Allison, just as she'd done a hundred times before, but it all felt off. Her time with Drake had given her a new confidence, a yearning to have a deeper relationship with these women whom she loved so much, even though she could never truly be one of them. If she accepted Drake's proposal, could the two of them somehow find a place with their friends?

Jocelyn's son, a toddler named Oliver, tumbled about upon the floor with his new puppy, keeping them all amused with his antics, and Heather noticed that Allison's hand repeatedly went to her belly, as though she was thinking about her own child. Heather swallowed and covertly placed her hand on her own stomach, wondering if she and Allison might be pregnant at the same time. If she was Drake's wife, then perhaps her child could actually play with Allison and Jocelyn's as an equal.

My sister.

She found herself gazing at Allison's profile for the millionth time, desperately trying to find something in Allison's features that was reminiscent of her own. She'd kept her parentage a secret all these years, but suddenly, she had to know. Had her mother been lying? Had Allison known all along but just chosen not to acknowledge it?

"Are you my sister?" she suddenly blurted, and the words were so harsh and shrill they hurt her own ears.

Both Jocelyn and Allison froze, teacups halfway to their mouths, staring at her as though she'd sprouted wings. Heat spread through Heather's body like she'd swallowed lava.

Unfortunately, it was too late to back down now. The words were out there, and she couldn't take them back.

"What?" Allison finally asked, her lovely brow crinkling in confusion.

Heather swallowed, realizing that Allison didn't know. Of course, she didn't. Heather knew her well enough to know that she'd never let her own sister work as her servant. She'd always known that, so why was she letting her mind play tricks on her now? Why hadn't she kept her mouth shut? She was going to ruin everything.

"Which one of us were you talking to?" Jocelyn asked gently, leaning over and placing her hand on Heather's as if to give her support.

Heather glanced at Jocelyn gratefully but then met Allison's lovely blue gaze. "When I was trapped with Blackstone, he asked me how I came to work for you, and I told him the story that my mother told me. It just made me start wondering if you knew. If you've known all along."

"What story?" Allison asked carefully. "I don't know what you're talking about, Heather."

There was still time to stop, to blame her outburst on the kidnapping, but Allison's eyes were so gentle and confused that Heather knew she had to go on. She took a deep breath, wondering what she'd do if Allison turned her out now the way her mother had once done Heather's. She didn't know that she'd blame her. Who wanted a reminder of their father's sins brushing their hair each night?

"When she was dying, my mother told me to go to your mother and ask her to take me in. She said that even though she'd been kicked out without reference, your mother owed me. Because I was your father's child." Tears stung Heather's eyes as she told the sorry tale.

Allison gasped, pressing her hand to her chest, her eyes wide with shock.

Jocelyn squeezed Heather's hand once more and then stood. "I'll leave the two of you to sort this out," she murmured, gathering up Oliver and hurrying from the room to give them privacy.

Heather winced, wondering why she'd done this in front of Jocelyn to begin with. But she honestly hadn't been thinking at

all. The words had flown out of their own volition.

“You’re my... sister?” Allison said at last, her own eyes brimming with tears. “Oh, Heather! Of course, I didn’t know. Of course not! But I’ve always wanted a sister, and I felt an affinity for you from the first day we met. This explains so much!”

Laughing and crying at the same time, Allison stood and pulled her into a bone-crushing hug. “I love you, Heather. Nothing could make me happier than knowing that you’re my sister.”

“You’re not angry?” Heather whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I was so afraid you’d be angry.”

Allison pulled back and gave her a chiding glance. “I could never be angry to find out such wonderful news. The only person I’m angry with is my father for taking advantage of your mother. And my mother.... Well, this is yet one more thing she needs to answer for,” she added darkly. Allison’s mother had done many terrible things to her children, and Allison did not have a good relationship with her.

“I was glad that she allowed me to stay.” Heather brushed away the tears, even though they were still coming. “If she wouldn’t have, I’d have been homeless or forced to do what my mother did to survive.”

“Yes, but... Heather. You’re the daughter of an earl, and you’re working as my lady’s maid. You’re my *sister*, and you’ve been working for me this whole time.” Allison shook her head in wonder. “Well, I can’t change the past, but I can certainly change the future. You no longer work for me. As soon as we move back home, you’ll be given a guest bedroom in the family part of the house and an allowance. Whatever you choose to do after that is up to you.”

Heather gaped at her. “You’re willing to just take my word for it? I have no proof other than what my mother told me.”

Allison hugged her again, then pulled her to a large mirror in a gilt frame that hung across the room. “I see it. Can’t you see it? How much we resemble each other?”

“I’ve always thought that we do look a little alike. Especially around the eyes,” Heather admitted, staring at the reflection of her and Allison side by side. A thrill ran through her at her sister’s easy acceptance. Why hadn’t she done this years ago? She should have known Allison would react this way.

Allison grinned and pecked her on the cheek. “Besides, you’re my very best friend, and I’ve always thought of you as a sister. I love you. I trust you more than anyone except Quinn. I definitely believe in you more than I believe in my mother.”

“Thank you,” Heather breathed. “I love you, too, and you can’t imagine how wonderful it feels to hear you say that.”

Allison laughed and hurried toward the door. “Come on! We have to go and tell Quinn! I want to tell everyone! You’re my sister, and that’s something to celebrate!”



WHEN DRAKE ARRIVED back at the Nesses’ house later that night, he was surprised to find a small party underway. Allison had invited all three of her brothers and their wives, along with a few other people he didn’t know. About a dozen guests were laughing and drinking in the sitting room, and he stood in the doorway for a moment, just watching, trying to figure out what on earth they were celebrating.

To his surprise, he soon realized that Heather seemed to be the center of the activity. One person after another approached her, seeming to be offering her congratulations. He’d gotten used to seeing her in rather plain clothing, but tonight she wore a dazzling lavender gown, which was cut low enough that it made his mouth water. The sparkling amethyst necklace had to be Allison’s, but he had no idea why she’d loaned such finery to her ladies’ maid.

He shook his head, wondering what the hell had happened in his absence.

“They’re sisters,” O’Brien said, coming up behind him. “Allison just found out today, but apparently, Heather has known all along.”

Drake gave him a look askance. “And Allison is all right with it? She’s not upset?”

“Why would she be upset?” O’Brien asked, his expression inscrutable. “She loves Heather. We all do.”

We all do.

Drake gazed moodily at the woman who’d turned his world upside down, wondering what this meant for her. What it meant for him. If O’Brien and Allison’s half-brothers, one of whom was the Earl of Hawkesmere, were ready to give Heather their full protection, then what need did she have of him?

The thought made him strangely bereft, and he shook his head to clear it. “I proposed to her last night,” he said quietly. “I only want what’s best for her.”

“You barely know her,” O’Brien said, obviously not impressed.

“I knew that Allison was her sister before you did,” Drake snapped. “We shared a lot during those days we spent trapped together. I’m certain I know her better than I’d know some society chit I met at a ball and married a year later, having only spent a half dozen well-chaperoned evenings with.”

O’Brien suddenly laughed. “I suppose you’re right about that.”

Drake ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “I feel like I’m saying everything wrong. I do care about her. I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t. Besides, she didn’t accept. Not right away at least. She’s supposed to tell me tonight.”

Staring at him with what seemed mingled puzzlement and dismay, O’Brien finally waved a hand in her direction. “I won’t get in your way. Not if you mean to do right by her. But you’ll have to clear it with my wife.”

With a relieved nod, Drake stepped further into the room. One obstacle cleared. And he wasn’t too worried about Allison. They’d been friends since childhood.

And his conversation with Amelia earlier in the day had done a lot to ease his mind about the certain scandal. If she didn't care, then nothing anyone else said mattered.

Now all he had to do was get Heather to agree to marry him. Forcing down his misgivings, he crossed the room to her side. She was talking to the Earl of Hawkesmere's wife, a lovely blonde whom Drake had heard had once been a maid herself. All three of Allison's brothers had married well beneath them, but they all seemed more than happy.

The fact gave him a little comfort. No matter what storm might come out of his decision to marry someone below him in social status, the Strathmores were living proof that he could withstand it.

With a smile at Heather, the countess stepped away, leaving the two of them temporarily alone. A glow of happiness lit Heather's eyes and stained her cheeks, and he was completely enchanted with her all over again. Dear God, she was so lovely.

"Allison took the news well, I hear," he said softly. "I'm glad you did it, Heather. I'm glad you had the courage to tell her the truth."

"So am I," she said, glancing around the room at all the aristocrats as though she wasn't quite certain their love and acceptance were real. "She doesn't want me to work for her anymore. She wants me to move down into one of the guest rooms and insists upon giving me an allowance. It's all rather surreal."

He tried to smile but feared it fell flat. "And what about you, darling? What do you want?"

She met his gaze for a long moment, and all the heat and passion between them flared hot and bright once again. "I don't know. But I still want to go with you for the next few days. I want to be with you until you find the ones who did this to us."

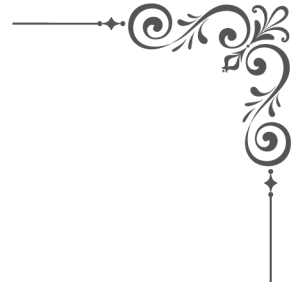
For the first time all day, the aching pit in the bottom of his stomach quit hurting. "Good," he murmured. "I'm glad to hear

it.”

Before they could say anything else, Allison beckoned Heather impatiently from across the room, where she stood with gorgeous dark-haired Vanessa Strathmore, who had been a famous actress until she married the reclusive Adrian Strathmore.

“Looks like you’re needed elsewhere,” he told her softly. “But I’ll have a servant pack your things and we’ll leave when the party is over?”

She nodded. “That sounds wonderful.”



Chapter Fifteen

Two hours later, Heather stood shivering in the front entryway of Drake's home in Belgravia. As she allowed his butler to take her coat, she glanced around the dim foyer, wondering how many other women had entered into a sexual relationship with this handsome-as-sin aristocrat. And how many of them had he turned back out onto the streets when he tired of them?

She shook the thought away and tried to smile when he led her toward the stairs.

"I have half a dozen constables guarding the outside of the house," he told her. "We'll be safe here."

"I trust you," she assured him.

The person she didn't trust was herself. Who was this person she'd become? Her life had changed entirely tonight. Allison was now offering her the family she'd always craved. She couldn't believe that she'd left her sister on the night that she'd finally accepted her as an equal, just to run away with a man.

Not just any man, though. She sighed as he strode up the stairs in front of her, his body straight and strong. Soon, all her lies would come toppling down on her head. Was it so wrong to want just a few more nights of heaven before all of this was lost to her? Before this beautiful man started looking at her with disgust instead of soft longing?

Even Allison might turn her back on Heather when she found out she'd been part of the Citizens Committee, that she'd been part of that bombing, part of Drake's kidnapping...

Squaring her shoulders, she decided not to worry about any of that right now. She'd made love to Drake twice now, but neither time had been in a real bed nor had they been able to relax and take their time. She wanted tonight to be perfect.

One last wonderful memory to take with her to prison...

She shivered again as they reached the top of the stairs, and Drake turned to her with a gentle smile. "I've had a room

prepared for you, if that's what you want. I know that the last few days have been difficult, and I would never presume that you want to stay in my room tonight. I just wanted you here with me."

"Oh, Drake." His consideration chased the last of her doubts away. She threw her arms around him and lifted on her tiptoes to press a swift kiss to his lips. "I want to stay with you. I want to fall asleep in your arms. There's nothing I want more."

A beautiful smile lit his face and then he kissed her again, hard and passionate this time, tasting of whisky and the promise of what was to come. "Come with me," he said at last, taking her hand and tugging her down the hall to a door on the right.

The room they entered was obviously his, decorated in masculine tones of blue and green. The walnut bedroom set was massive, the bed at least twice as wide as the one she'd had at Allison's. She drifted around the room, letting her fingers trail across the crushed velvet counterpane and shiny wood, glad that he hadn't taken her somewhere frilly and pink, a room that had been decorated by his last mistress. She had no doubt that such a room existed somewhere in this house, but it seemed significant to her that he'd taken her here instead.

"Do you like it?" he asked quietly, still standing near the doorway, looking oddly vulnerable with his hands in his pockets.

"I love it," she assured him, leaning against the foot of the bed, wishing she knew the proper way to seduce him. Some women seemed to be natural temptresses, but she'd never felt that she was one of them. But this man made her yearn to be a seductress. She wanted to keep him enthralled with her. She never wanted him to walk away.

He prowled across the room to her side, pulling her into his arms and just holding her tightly. "What do you want right now, darling? Would you like to just go to sleep in my arms?"

Heat stained her cheeks as she realized he was going to make her be the one to say it. Though she appreciated that he was giving her the option, she'd rather hoped that he'd want her so badly that he'd start stripping off her clothes the moment they walked into the room.

"I do want to sleep," she admitted. "But first I want to make love. I want to know what it's like to be completely naked with you. To fall asleep in each other's arms afterward."

He put a fingertip beneath her chin and tilted her face up so he could stare down into her eyes. In his, she saw unmistakable desire. For now, for this moment at least, he was as captivated by her as she was with him.

"I want that too, Heather." He gave a rueful little laugh. "I want you so desperately, more than I ever expected to want anyone. It scares me a little."

"It scares me too," she said, stunned that he'd admitted any weakness to her. But perhaps that was why she cared about him so very much. He was a strong, powerful man, but when he was with her, he allowed himself to show his tender side. That sort of trust didn't come easy to him, she knew, and she hated that eventually, he was going to learn that it was misplaced.

Releasing her, he gestured to a door across the room. "I have a bathtub big enough for two. Would you like to join me?"

"Yes," she murmured shyly, even though the thought of bathing with him seemed very intimate. Perhaps even more intimate than making love.

He once again led the way to the bathroom, which was bigger than her entire suite of rooms at Allison's had been. The sunken tub with porcelain tile in shades of blue was indeed big enough for two, so deep that she could probably swim in it.

He leaned down and plugged the tub, then turned on the faucet. It came to life with a startling explosion of water,

which popped and gurgled for a moment before it became a steady stream.

“I’m still not quite used to the luxury of having hot water whenever you want it. For too many years, footmen hauled huge pots of hot water up and down the stairs for Allison, and it took forever.” Allison’s new house had wonderful plumbing, but as a servant, she was still only allowed one hot bath a week.

“No more waiting for water to be hauled,” he said with a smile, shrugging out of his jacket. “Do you need some help undressing?”

The heat in her cheeks intensified if that was even possible. “Yes, please.” Usually, she wore clothes that she could easily get in and out of herself, but the dress she was wearing was one of Allison’s, loaned to her for dinner tonight, and she’d have a hard time taking it off herself.

Removing his waistcoat and unbuttoning his shirt, he tossed them on the vanity chair with his jacket, and then walked toward her bare-chested, giving her a fantastic view of rippling muscle with a dark patch of hair in the center that she couldn’t wait to run her fingers through.

“Turn around,” he murmured, his voice husky with desire.

Shivering, she did as he asked, then caught a glimpse of them in the mirror on the other side of the room. They looked good together, she decided, her eyes half-closed as he proceeded to unfasten her dress, pressing his lips tenderly to each inch of skin he revealed.

He let the gown fall off her shoulders to pool at her feet, then released her petticoats and drawers, removed her corset cover and corset, at last leaving her in nothing but her chemise and the sparkling amethyst necklace that Allison had gifted her tonight, insisting that she needed some jewelry of her own. She took a few deep breaths, having been laced tighter than she was used to all night.

“I don’t know how you ladies wear such torture devices,” he said, running his hands over the sensitive skin under her

breasts where the corset had created deep ridges.

“I don’t either,” she said with a hoarse laugh, reveling in his gentle touch. “I live for the moment each night I can take it all off.” She couldn’t even imagine how nice it would be to have a man do this for her every night. No, not just any man. *This* man. The thought was almost too painfully beautiful to bear.

Bending down, he lifted the edges of her chemise and slowly pulled it over her head. Then he gently brushed her hair aside and removed her necklace, placing it carefully with the rest of her things and leaving her standing there as bare as the day she was born.

Her first instinct was to cover herself with her hands, but when she met his gaze in the mirror, she found him staring at her with such rapt adoration that she forced herself to leave her hands at her sides.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, still behind her, holding her gaze in the mirror as he cupped her full breasts, his hands dark against her pale skin. “I think this is the first time I’ve really gotten a good look at you.”

She endured his gaze for as long as she could, but then turned in his arms, still feeling shy and vulnerable. “This isn’t fair,” she said, trying to sound cheeky instead of terrified. “You’ve still got clothes on.”

He laughed and stepped away, his hands going to his falls. “Well, we can’t have that, now can we?”

He shoved his trousers and underclothes down his legs and then kicked them away, this time not bothering to fold them neatly but just leaving them on the floor.

She’d never had the chance to really look at him either, and what she saw now took her breath away. He was tall and broad, heavily muscled, his skin bronzed and free of blemishes. And between his legs...

She looked once, then gasped and looked away, then looked back again, unable to help herself. So *that* was what it looked like. Strange to think that she’d engaged in the sex act

three times already, yet she'd not really gotten a good look at... She was embarrassed that she didn't even know what to call it.

It looked fierce and demanding, thrusting up against his belly, hard and thickly veined. Looking at it now, she wasn't quite sure how it had ever fit.

"It's all right to look," he told her, appearing very pleased with himself. "I like it when you look at me."

"You're very nice to look at," she admitted, taking a few steps closer to him. "Can I touch you there?"

"I really wish you would," he breathed.

She gingerly wrapped her fingers around him, stunned by the steely heat. She experimentally moved her hand up and down his length, loving the way he tensed and thrust into her palm.

Before she could go much further, he gave a choked laugh and turned toward the tub. "Hold on a minute. I don't want to flood the whole house." Reaching out, he turned off the faucet and she saw that while they'd been undressing, the tub had filled almost to the brim.

"Here, let's get in while it's still hot," he suggested, stepping in and sitting down with his back against the far end and then holding out a hand to her. "Sit here in front of me."

She stepped in, very aware of her nudity as she sat between his spread legs. He wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her back against him so that her back leaned against his chest, and she could feel his hardness pressing against the small of her back.

"There," he murmured in her ear, his breath hot against her neck. "How does that feel?"

"Wonderful," she said softly, enveloped by the heat of the water and the strength of his body. "I don't know if I ever want to leave."

He chuckled and hugged her tightly. "Let's just stay here forever then."

Relaxing against him, she let out a deep sigh, feeling utterly at peace. Bad things still threatened outside these walls, but for the moment, she was safe. Even more than that... she was happy. She was fairly certain that she was happier than she'd ever been in her entire life.

Reaching past her, he grabbed a sponge off the table beside the tub and soaped it with a bar of lavender soap. "Can I wash you?"

She nodded wordlessly, and he slowly began to slide the soapy sponge over her skin, at first concentrating on her arms, but then moving on to her breasts. She watched the sponge move across her, the feel of it against her sensitive nipples almost more pleasure than she could bear. A deep ache started deep inside her, and she knew now that he was the only thing that could fill it.

His mouth pressed against the side of her neck, kissing her hotly as he moved the sponge even lower. "Spread your legs," he said, guiding her left leg over the rim of the tub.

She did as he'd instructed with her right until she was completely open to both him and the hot water.

"So beautiful," he whispered, kissing her neck again, moving her heavy hair over one shoulder so he had better access.

Then he moved the sponge between her legs, rubbing it deliciously over the petals of her sex, until she was panting and moving against him, desperately chasing the feeling he'd given her before.

When it finally crashed over her, she cried out; she couldn't help herself. This time was even more powerful than before, racing through her veins until her whole body seemed to spasm and then release. She fell back against him, letting her legs fall back into the tub, trying to catch her breath.

"That was incredible," she managed at last. "Every time we're together, you make me feel even better than the time before."

“Good.” He kissed her temple, and she suddenly became very aware that he had not yet had his release.

“What do you want me to do for you?” she asked shyly, turning her head to look at him.

“Let’s just finish washing up,” he said hoarsely. “What I want is best accomplished in a bed, not a tub.”

Admiring his self-control, she turned all the way around, sitting cross-legged at the other end of the tub. “Then let’s hurry.”

He nodded fiercely, and they both rinsed off. He stood first, getting out and wrapping a towel around his lean waist. Then he turned and offered her a hand, helping her step out and then handing her a towel as well.

Her hair was still mostly dry, so she quickly toweled off her body before hanging the towel over a chair and scampering into the big bed. He joined her moments later, then turned to face her, propping his head up with his arm as he gazed at her.

She reached out and ran her fingertips over his dear face, touching every one of his features, thrilled to finally be able to do so. He closed his eyes and leaned into her touch, seeming to enjoy it.

“If someone would have told me a week ago that I’d be naked in a man’s bed, I never would have believed it,” she said with a soft laugh. “But I feel comfortable with you.”

“I feel comfortable with you too,” he said, opening his eyes again and catching her hand, kissing it, and then letting it go. He drew her closer until their damp naked bodies were pressed together from chest to toe. She was very aware of how much bigger than her he was, and she’d never felt so feminine.

Cupping her face with his warm palms, he kissed her with so much tenderness it took her breath away. His full lips played gently with hers, learning every curve of her mouth before his tongue began to tangle with hers and the kiss went from something sweet and tender to hot and full of desire.

She kissed him back, twining around him, rubbing her hands up and down his broad back, even daring to touch the round swells of his bottom, loving the way his muscles flexed beneath his skin.

His hands roamed her body as well, leaving trails of fire in their wake. The carnal sensuality of being able to touch and be touched without restraint was even better than she'd imagined.

At last, he pulled away and threw off the covers, his dark eyes hot with desire. "Can you get on your hands and knees?" he asked, his voice rough. "I want to take you from behind."

She had a sudden vivid image of watching a stallion cover a mare, the raw brutality of it, but did as asked anyway, her whole body shivering with desire. As soon as she did, he moved behind her, rubbing his hands along her bare bottom. "You're so gorgeous like this," he told her, his voice rough with desire. "I love the way you look here."

Then he rubbed his length against her damp core, sliding it against her several times before nudging it inside her, then driving deeply until he was completely seated.

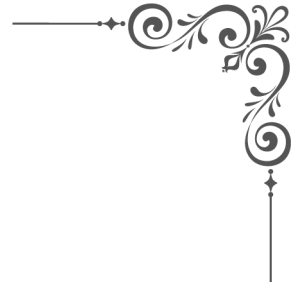
She gasped at the fullness but instinctively seemed to know what to do when he began to move within her. The power of his thrusts was so primal that the shimmering sensation began within her almost immediately.

Soon she was crashing over the edge again and then he joined her, crying out and shuddering deep within her. They stayed locked like that for a few moments before he pulled out of her and collapsed on his side of the bed, patting the place beside him.

"Come here, darling," he whispered. "Let me hold you while we sleep."

Exhausted both mentally and physically, she crawled up beside him, pillowing her head on his chest as he pulled the blankets around them.

Had she ever been this warm in her life? She doubted it. Safe and secure, she fell asleep in Drake's arms.



Chapter Sixteen

“**M**ake certain no one gets on the property,” Drake told one of the constables guarding the house the next morning as he hurried out the front door. He’d slept until after nine, two hours past when he’d planned to be in the office. He didn’t regret oversleeping though. Waking up with Heather in his arms had been one of the most amazing experiences of his life.

For a few peaceful minutes, he’d just watched her, admiring the way her dark hair spread across his pillows. It was exactly the way he’d imagined it. He’d wanted nothing more than to wake her up and make love to her again, but then he’d glanced at the clock and shot out of bed like an arrow.

As much as he’d like to stay in bed with Heather all day, he had other responsibilities. He had to make certain Lindon had been captured and also finish compiling his evidence against Danbury. Though he knew it still wasn’t enough, he had to at least try to get a magistrate to hear the case.

“We’ll guard her well, sir,” the constable assured him. “I have men all around the perimeter. No one will get past us.”

Drake nodded abruptly and entered the coach he’d taken from his father’s house, wondering again what had happened to his, and more importantly, what had happened to his driver, Edgar. That was one of the first things he planned to ask Lindon once he had him behind bars.

When he finally arrived at his office, he was disappointed to find that the men he’d sent out last night had been unsuccessful in tracking down Lindon. However, he was quite relieved to hear that they’d found Edgar in a nearby hospital with a concussion and his coach in a shed near the warehouse.

It sounded as though Edgar would recover, but he needed to go down and check on him soon and see if he needed anything.

Frustrated, he thought about what Pond had told him about his brother’s newfound fascination with the tailor’s wife. Was

she his next victim?

He already had a man watching the shop, but he decided that he needed to go down there himself. Perhaps he should warn them.

He sighed, feeling as though he was being pulled in far too many directions. The most important thing right now was to make sure his brother paid for all the despicable things he'd done. It was time to speak to the magistrate. He still didn't feel like he had a very substantial case against Danbury, but what was he supposed to do? Wait for his brother to kill again and make a mistake?

No. He would not allow any more women to die.

With a sigh, he prepared to present the most difficult case of his life.



HEATHER SPENT THE MORNING exploring Drake's home, pleased to discover that it wasn't the overdone pleasure palace she'd feared. The décor was tasteful and elegant, far more masculine than she'd expected.

She'd been sad to wake up alone, but she knew he had to work. The responsibility of bringing both Jacob and The Viper to justice hung heavily on his shoulders, and she knew he'd never rest until he accomplished those tasks.

As she drifted from room to room, she allowed herself to imagine, just for a little while, what it might be like to truly be Drake's wife, to live here in these beautiful rooms. She would wake up with him in that big, comfortable bed and have dinner with him in the large dining room with the exquisite cherry wood dining set. In the evenings, they'd adjourn to the library, filled with floor-to-ceiling bookcases with leatherbound volumes and sliding ladders. They'd sit in the deep, comfortable chairs and talk and read.

Sighing, she collapsed in one of those comfortable chairs and shook her head, though there was no one around to see.

She couldn't go on this way. If she was going to have any chance of a future with the man she'd grown to care about so deeply, she had to tell him the truth.

Already, it might be too late.

Knowing him as she thought she did, she believed there was the slightest chance that if she told him what had happened, if she explained to him how frightened she'd been of Jacob, that he might forgive her. He might even be able to find a way to get her out of the mess she'd gotten herself into. But if he found Jacob today, if he found out that she'd been a part of the bombing and the kidnapping... If he thought she'd lied to him, he'd never forgive her.

Please, don't let him find Jacob today.



DRAKE'S DAY HAD BEEN long and disheartening, but as he rushed up the front steps of his house that evening, he was happier than he could ever remember to be returning home. The thought of Heather waiting for him made him ridiculously grateful. In her arms, maybe he could forget that he'd made no progress on either finding Lindon or advancing his case against his brother.

He'd finally had his meeting with the magistrate and presented all of the evidence that he and the others had gathered against Danbury, but the man had not been convinced that Mortimer was The Viper. In fact, the man had ordered him from his office, obviously unwilling to even consider trying to charge a peer with something so terrible without undisputable proof.

He stopped to briefly speak with Constable Graham, one of the officers he'd left guarding the house, assuring himself that nothing suspicious had occurred while he was gone, then entered, taking the stairs three at a time.

"Heather!" he called. "Where are you, darling? I'm home."

"I'm in the bedroom," she replied, her voice wafting from up the stairs.

He rushed into the room, then paused in the doorway, finding her sitting in a chair before a roaring fire, an open book in her lap.

“I love seeing you here,” he said, moving across the room and kneeling on the floor in front of her, shocked by how much it soothed him to be with her. The urge to pour out all the troubles of the day nearly overwhelmed him. He’d never before felt the need to share his problems with a woman. “I love the thought of coming home to you every night.”

“I love it too,” she murmured, but he saw none of the excitement he’d expected. Instead, she looked worried. On edge. “I’ve been waiting all day for you to come home.”

He frowned, sensing that something was wrong. “Were the servants unkind to you? Did they make you feel unwelcome?” If he found out that someone in his employ had hurt her, even a little bit...

“No,” she hastened to reassure him. “Everyone was very good to me. The cook served me a lovely lunch and assured me she’d have dinner ready by seven.”

He frowned, searching her face for answers. “Then what is it, darling? You seem troubled.”

She cupped his face in her hands, but her eyes welled with tears, and the bad feeling in the pit of his stomach intensified. “Oh, Drake. There’s something I need to tell you. Something I should have told you from the beginning. But I’ve been so afraid... because I fear that once you hear it, you’ll no longer want to have anything to do with me.”

His mind raced in a dozen different directions as he tried to anticipate what she’d say next. She seemed utterly sincere, truly worried about his reaction, but he couldn’t imagine what could be so dire. “There’s nothing you could say to make me feel any differently about you,” he told her gently, believing it to be the truth.

A strangled laugh escaped her. “Don’t say that. Don’t say that until you hear what it is.”

“Very well.” Pushing to his feet, he walked over to the sideboard and poured himself a tumbler of whisky, sensing he was going to need it. Then he took the other chair in front of the fireplace, giving her his full attention. “Say whatever you need to say.”

She cleared her throat, the tears still falling. “I was part of the Citizens Committee,” she said all in a rush. “I’d been active in the Suffrage movement, and when I met Jacob, he convinced me that I needed to get involved with his group as well, that they were helping the working man. I thought it would be another way that I could make a difference.”

He took a deep drink of whisky, letting it burn all the way down his throat, too shocked to even speak. What the hell was she telling him?

“I had no idea they were going to bomb that factory. The moment I saw the explosion, I realized that I’d gotten in way over my head. I tried to quit the group, but Jacob said they would never let me go, that I knew too much...”

“You are a member of the Citizens Committee,” he said dully, praying she’d deny it, that he’d somehow misunderstood her.

A sob caught in her throat, and she shook her head. “I didn’t know what kind of a man Jacob was. He can be very charming, and I suppose I was seduced by him, by his vision of the changes he wanted to see in the world...”

“You were lovers,” he realized, numb with disbelief. When she’d told him that she hadn’t been a virgin, he’d assumed she’d been taken advantage of, not that she’d willingly entered into a relationship with a criminal like Lindon.

“After the bombing, I tried to get out,” she said again. “I told him that I didn’t want anything more to do with him, but he wouldn’t let me go. He told me that if I didn’t do what he wanted, if I didn’t get you to tell me what those men who were captured knew about him, that he would kill me. I didn’t know what to do.”

“You were working with that bastard,” he finally managed, a wave of betrayal washing over him, shattering the momentary happiness he’d arrived home with. “You were never kidnapped.” The knowledge that every single beautiful thing that had passed between them had been a filthy fucking lie was almost more than he could bear. He’d never believed in anything the way he’d believed in her. How could he have been so stupid?

“I never told him anything,” she hastened to defend herself. “I knew I couldn’t do that. I never would have done that to you. Not even to save myself.”

He downed the rest of his whisky and shoved to his feet, unable to sit and listen to this any longer. “Stop talking,” he snapped. “Don’t you realize how much you’re incriminating yourself?”

“I wanted you to hear it from me!” she cried as he reached the bedroom door. “I couldn’t live with the lie any longer. I never wanted to hurt you, Drake.”

“Too late,” he muttered beneath his breath, his heart shattering as he slammed the door behind him.

He stood out in the hallway, breathing heavily, still stunned by what he’d learned. She was one of them. He was harboring a damned criminal in his home.

He’d asked her to be his wife.

Hysterical laughter bubbled up within him but he tamped it down viciously. There would be time for self-recrimination later. For now, he had to decide what the hell to do next.

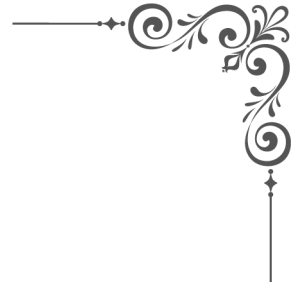
The answer came to him immediately, and even though he hated it, he knew she’d left him no choice. His integrity had already been questioned enough. If anyone knew he’d willingly let a criminal go free, Ness and O’Brien would never trust him to bring Danbury to justice.

He strode to the front door, finding Constable Graham right outside where he should be. “Arrest the woman upstairs and put her in a holding cell at J Division,” he said shortly.

“Gather up all the men who are here and escort her to make sure she gets there safely.”

The constable’s eyes widened, but he just nodded and turned on his heels to do Drake’s bidding.

One way or another, Drake was going to get to the bottom of this.



Chapter Seventeen

The moment Drake slammed the door behind him, Heather burst into sobs. She'd hoped that when she told him that she'd been a member of the Citizens Committee, he'd care enough about her to forgive her for the part she'd played in his kidnapping. Why hadn't he understood that she'd had no choice?

She supposed the fact that he hadn't just proved that she'd been right to tell him that she'd deceived him, right not to accept his proposal. In a way, the tears were those of relief, because she no longer had to worry that at any minute she might be found out. She only hoped that once he calmed down, he'd be able to appreciate her honesty.

Her breakdown hadn't even had a chance to work itself out before someone knocked softly at the door. Gasping, she rubbed her hands hopelessly across her face, trying to get control of herself. "Come in," she called brokenly, hoping against hope that Drake had come back, that he was at least willing to talk to her about this.

Instead, the young, blond, uniformed constable that she recognized from earlier in the day came in, looking bashful but resigned. "Miss Fields," he said, looking everywhere but at her tearful face. "I'm Constable Graham. You're to come with me."

She stared at him, still blinking back tears. "Wh-what? Where are we going?"

Was Drake sending her back to Jocelyn's? Did he want her out of his house so badly that he'd send her away without another word? He had every right to do so, but she'd thought that he'd at least take some time to think about it all before taking such a drastic step.

"I'm to take you to J Division, Miss." The young man's ears pinkened. "You're being arrested."

"Arrested?" she breathed. She didn't know why she was so surprised. She knew that she was guilty, that she deserved to

pay for her crimes, but she hadn't really thought Drake would be the one to make her do it.

"Yes, miss." He cleared his throat. "I'll give you ten minutes to prepare yourself."

She swallowed thickly and nodded, thankful for his kindness. But how did one prepare themselves for something like this?



AFTER LEAVING CONSTABLE Graham to arrest Heather, Drake headed straight to J Division. He needed to talk to Ness before Heather arrived. He needed his friend to help him make sense of what had happened. All he knew was what she'd admitted to him. She'd been an accomplice to the bombing, which meant she was partly responsible for the deaths of two innocent people. She'd also had a hand in his kidnapping.

He still couldn't believe that the whole time that he'd been trying to rescue her, she'd been trying to learn his secrets. She'd probably never been in any danger at all.

God, he'd fallen for her so utterly he hadn't even suspected it!

He didn't trust himself to see the situation clearly. He didn't want to talk to her. He was afraid of what he'd do.

Once he arrived, he barged directly into Ness's office, glad to find the man hard at work on a pile of paperwork.

"I just arrested Heather Fields," Drake said without preamble.

Ness blinked and slowly put his pen aside. "You did what?"

"She was in on it," Drake said, and then let out an explosive breath. "She's part of the Citizens Committee. She was Lindon's lover. She admitted everything to me."

"Heather?" Ness shook his head, looking at Drake as though he'd lost his mind. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

“I don’t understand either,” Drake said, knowing it sounded insane. “I came home from work, and Heather told me everything. She said that it had all been a lie. That she was working with those bastards the whole time.”

“Heather *Fields*?” Ness asked again, as if Drake was talking about someone else.

Drake could only nod. “I don’t know how I could have fallen for her so completely, how she got me to let my guard down. I need you to question her when they bring her in. I can’t do it. But I need to know everything. Why she did it.” He sighed and raked his hand through his hair. “No matter what she says, I think we need to hold her here for a few days until we capture Lindon.”

“I’ll put her in a private cell,” Ness agreed, looking troubled. “I just can’t see her doing something like this. And Allison’s decided to claim her as her sister...”

“I don’t care,” Drake said coldly. “If she’s committed a crime, she needs to pay for it just like anyone else.”

“Even though you care for her?” Ness asked quietly.

“Especially because I care for her,” Drake snapped. “I’m not thinking clearly right now. I proposed to her, and she lied to me. I can’t trust myself to make the right decision here.”

“Damn,” Ness said with a shake of his head. “I suppose O’Brien and I were wrong to worry that you wouldn’t be able to do what needs to be done with Danbury.”

Although that was exactly the reaction he’d been hoping for, he couldn’t bring himself to be happy about it. In fact, he was starting to wonder if he’d ever be happy again.

He cleared his throat, deciding he might as well tell Ness the rest of the bad news. “I talked to the magistrate today. He decided that we don’t have enough of a case to proceed with Danbury’s arrest,” he admitted. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what else we can do.”

Ness sank back in his seat, looking as though he’d had the wind knocked out of him. “I knew the chance of seeing him prosecuted for this was slim, but I still hoped...”

“I had the same hope,” Drake said grimly. “And now there’s a possibility that Danbury will hear that I tried to bring a case against him.”

“We’ll just have to keep following that bastard until he makes a mistake,” Ness replied, his eyes sparking with anger. “We can’t let him kill anyone else.”

“I know.” Drake sank into a chair, all of his fight gone for the moment. “But between that and this thing with Heather...” He just shook his head, unable to even finish his thought, let alone his sentence.

“Well, maybe O’Brien can think of something,” Ness suggested, seeming to take pity on him. “I’ll talk to Miss Fields first. One catastrophe at a time, I always say.”



HEATHER PACED THE NARROW cell, her thoughts chaotic, still somewhat shocked that Drake had actually thrown her in jail. She supposed she should be glad that at least she’d been granted a private cell because she was quite certain she wasn’t tough enough to survive among those who regularly ended up in such places.

Shortly after Constable Graham had brought her here, she’d had a very lengthy visit from Sebastian Ness. Jocelyn’s husband had been kind but he’d also questioned her relentlessly about both her involvement in the kidnapping and the bombing.

She’d been completely honest with Inspector Ness, and he’d seemed sympathetic to her plight, but he’d been evasive about why she was actually being held and what the charges against her were. She had a feeling he didn’t actually know, that Drake had sent him to question her but hadn’t told him the whole story.

Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them fiercely away. She’d cried enough already. She needed to clear her mind and try to figure out what was happening. Would she really spend the next few years of her life in this room? Just the thought of it made the walls close in even more.

Before she could go down that road too much further, she heard the lock turn, and then the door opened, admitting Allison.

She'd never been so happy to see anyone in her life.

"Heather!" her sister cried, rushing forward and embracing her in a bone-crushing hug. "I came as soon as I heard!"

For a moment, Heather just hugged Allison tightly, overwhelmed by the thought that she had someone on her side now, someone she could count on. Allison had always been that for her, but as a friend and an employer, not in the way a sister would be. "Thank you for coming," she breathed.

Allison finally stepped back, looking her over from head to toe as if to make sure she wasn't injured. "Are you all right? What on earth was Blackstone thinking? I'll have his job for this, I swear."

Hanging her head, Heather sat down on the edge of the narrow bed, leaving room for Allison to sit beside her. "It's not his fault. I was part of the Citizens Committee, Allison. I was there when they bombed that building and I was in on Drake's kidnapping. I deserve to be here, but that doesn't make it any less scary."

"Oh, Heather," Allison murmured in dismay, sinking down on the bed beside her. "How did you get involved with people like that?"

Heather sighed and then reluctantly told Allison everything.

When she was finished, Allison just shook her head and jutted her chin stubbornly. "That bastard took advantage of you. He threatened you and terrified you. What else were you supposed to do?"

"I don't know," Heather replied miserably. "I just wish I could go back and make better decisions. I wish I'd never gotten involved with Jacob to begin with. I'm so sorry that I've done these terrible things now, of all times, when you've accepted me as your sister. I'll understand if you have to

distance yourself. Tell all those people you invited over last night that you were wrong.”

Allison shook her head dismissively. “I don’t give a fig what other people think. I’m just worried about you. As soon as I leave here, I’m going to find you the best solicitor money can buy. I’ll get you out of here, I promise.”

This time, Heather couldn’t hold back the tears. When Allison had her mind made up, no force on earth could get in her way. “Thank you so much,” she managed. “I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

“You’re my sister,” Allison said softly. “There are no debts between sisters.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” Heather said, overwhelmed by Allison’s unconditional support despite what she’d done. “I don’t deserve you.”

“You deserve nothing but good things,” Allison said firmly. “Nothing that has happened changes that. You were just trying to help make this world a better place, and that bastard took advantage of you. I’m just disappointed in Blackstone. I expected better of him.”

“He’s just doing his job,” Heather said, wondering why she still felt the need to defend him. He’d proven that he didn’t really care about her at all, so why couldn’t she shake the soul-deep hurt that he hadn’t even tried to understand how afraid she’d been of Jacob?

“Well, Quinn is a man of the law too,” Allison said sharply. “But his first loyalty would always be to me, no matter what I’d done.”

“Not many people have what you and Quinn have,” Heather reminded her, even though, for just a few days, she’d thought that maybe she could have a taste of such happiness and companionship. She supposed that Quinn and Allison’s relationship had been what had driven her to strive so hard to find someone of her own. She’d wanted what they had so badly.

“I’m sorry,” Allison said with a huff. “I just thought he really cared about you. I thought he was going to protect you. But then he refused to listen to you and threw you in jail!”

“I don’t blame him,” Heather admitted. “I knew this would be hard for him to forgive. He’s a man of honor and principles. That’s why I decided to tell him myself. I knew he’d never understand if Jacob told him, but I thought that maybe if I was honest with him...” She laughed bitterly and shrugged. “If our positions were reversed, I probably would have done the same thing.”

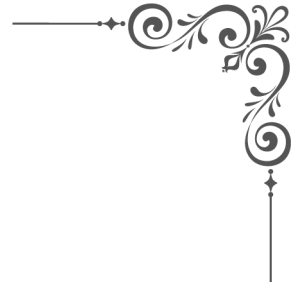
“No, you wouldn’t,” Allison said decisively. “You are far more forgiving than that uptight stick in the mud.”

Heather couldn’t control a snort of laughter. “That’s what I love about you,” she told her sister. “You can always make me laugh, no matter how dire the circumstances.”

Allison gave her one last hug and then pushed to her feet. “I’ll be back, I promise. But right now, I need to see what I can do to get you out of here.”

Standing as well, Heather trailed her to the door. “Thank you for coming,” she said, fighting the urge to grab her sister’s arm and beg her not to go. She couldn’t stand the thought of being alone in here for one more minute. “It means the world to me.”

Allison rapped on the door and then kissed her on the cheek. “Chin up. We’ll have you out of here in no time.”



Chapter Eighteen

“**Y**ou have a lot of explaining to do!”

Drake looked up from his desk to find a seething little ball of blonde pregnant fury standing in his doorway. Allison O'Brien looked as though she'd like to murder him with her bare hands, and Quinn, who stood glowering over her shoulder, looked just as angry.

He sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face. Now that he'd had a little while to calm down, and he'd spoken to Ness about what Heather had told him, he realized that perhaps he'd acted a bit precipitously in arresting her.

“Come in,” he said in resignation. “Shut the door behind you.”

“Drake!” Allison cried as she took the seat in front of his desk. “What are you thinking? Heather is as much a victim in all of this as you were. I thought you wanted to protect her!”

“What charges are you holding her on?” Quinn demanded, remaining standing protectively behind his wife.

“She's safe in jail,” Drake said, though that wasn't the only reason he'd done this. “Lindon is still out there. He can't get to her here.”

“You never should have taken her to your house to begin with,” Allison snapped. “Heather was perfectly fine with us.”

He sank a little lower in his chair, knowing she was right. He hadn't been thinking clearly where Heather was concerned since the moment he'd found himself in that cellar with her.

“You either have to charge her with something or let her go,” Quinn said, as though Drake didn't know that. “Do we need to get her a solicitor?”

“I could charge her with a lot of things,” Drake snapped back. “Conspiracy, kidnapping, even as an accessory to murder.”

“She didn't know they were going to blow up that building,” Allison cried. “All she did was stand watch. Surely

you know her well enough to believe that!”

“I don’t know what I believe,” Drake fired back. “She made me believe she was a prisoner too. I probably could have escaped sooner if I wouldn’t have been trying to protect her.”

“She *was* a prisoner!” Allison’s blue eyes, which he suddenly realized were so very much like Heather’s, were snapping fire. “They took advantage of her. They threatened her life. She was frightened out of her mind, but her feelings for you weren’t a lie.”

He shot to his feet and paced behind his desk, tension coursing through him until he thought he would snap. Because the thought of Heather sitting in a jail cell was driving him mad with guilt and worry, even though he was the one who’d put her there. He gave a sigh of resignation, knowing that he couldn’t continue down this path. “I’ll release her into your custody as long as you promise you’ll keep her safe.”

Quinn nodded. “Of course, we will. We won’t let her out of our sight.”

Drake met Quinn’s eyes. “I can’t be seen to be going easy on her. She’ll have to testify against those bastards when we find them.”

“I’m certain she’ll be happy to,” Quinn said, his manner finally gentling. “I heard that your meeting with the magistrate didn’t go well.”

“They won’t prosecute Danbury,” Drake snapped, still furious. “There’s not much else we can do.”

Quinn sighed and shook his head. “Ness and I were afraid of this. We’ve been working on a plan, but I’m not sure you’re going to like it.”

“Tell me,” Drake demanded. “At this point, I’m willing to try anything.”

Quinn gave a nod in his wife’s direction, and Drake realized he didn’t want to talk about it in front of her, which didn’t bode well. “Why don’t the three of us get together later at your house? We can talk then.”

“All right,” Drake agreed, hoping whatever they proposed would be something he could actually direct all this anger into. He needed something else to focus on before he went mad.

“So Heather’s not being charged with anything? We can take her home?” Quinn verified, as though not certain Drake had meant it the first time.

Drake gave a sharp nod. “But I’m counting on you to protect her. With Lindon still out there, it isn’t safe for her.”

“Sebastian and Jocelyn’s house is as secure as it can possibly be,” Quinn assured him.

Allison had been quiet for a while, but now she gave a brittle laugh. “You seem to care quite a lot about her safety for someone who had her thrown in jail for no reason!”

“There were plenty of reasons,” Drake fired back. “But I never said I didn’t care about her.”

For some reason, Allison gave a triumphant smirk at that. “You need to decide what you want, Drake. Before it’s too late.”

With that, she swept out of his office, leaving him to share a bemused look with Quinn before the man trailed obediently after her.



TWO HOURS LATER, HEATHER was back in her room at Jocelyn’s, soaking in a luxuriously hot tub, trying desperately to scrub away the memory of jail. She didn’t know if it was possible. Though she’d only been held there a few hours, the stench of fear, rot, and piss seemed to have somehow permanently ingrained itself in her skin.

She’d been so afraid that she was going to be locked in that cell for years. It seemed a bit surreal that she’d been let go so easily, although Quinn had explained that her release was dependent on her testimony against the other members of the Citizens Committee.

She hated to be disloyal to anyone, but she didn’t think she could live with herself if she remained silent after what they’d

done. Jacob needed to be stopped and perhaps that was how she could atone for her part in the bombing.

A wave of intense emotion washed over her, but she wasn't even certain what she was feeling. Was it anger or relief? Guilt or regret?

She still couldn't believe that Drake had refused to listen to her, that he'd been so quick to believe the worst of her. In the end, she supposed that she'd just proven she was as worthless and low class as he'd first thought her.

Whenever she remembered the look of betrayal in his eyes, she was filled with despair. She hated that she'd disappointed him. He'd given her his trust, something she knew he didn't do often, and she'd completely destroyed it.

Part of her wanted to go to him, to beg him to give her one more chance to explain herself, but could anything she said really change things now? Once trust was broken, it was nearly impossible to get back again.

Dunking her entire head underwater, she told herself she should just be glad that she'd gotten through this with her freedom and her life. Drake had never truly been meant for her, so she needed to just let him go.

At least she had a few beautiful memories to take with her into spinsterhood.

Hopefully, that was all she took with her...

She pushed herself back to a sitting position and her hand strayed to her flat belly. She didn't want to bring another bastard like herself into the world.

He'd said he'd take care of her and any child she bore, even offered to marry her, but that was before he knew who she really was. If she tried to foist a child off on him now, he might even doubt it was his, and she couldn't blame him.

With a sigh, she reached for a towel and got out of the tub, only to be startled by a soft knock on the door that separated the bathroom from the bedroom.

"Yes?" she called, expecting Jocelyn or Allison.

“It’s Maggie,” called the young maid who had watched over her the day she’d arrived at Jocelyn’s. “Lady Jocelyn sent me to ask if you wanted some food sent up and to help you get ready for bed.”

Hurriedly drying off, Heather slipped on her robe and opened the door. “Surely there’s been a mistake. I don’t need any help. And I definitely don’t feel like eating anything.”

All she really wanted was to cry herself to sleep in the big, soft bed that beckoned from across the room.

Maggie bit her lip, her big brown eyes filled with worry. “But I’m to be your lady’s maid, Miss Heather. It’s a great honor that Lady Jocelyn picked me. I’ve only ever been an upstairs maid, but I’ve watched the lady’s maid here, and I think I can do it. I’d really like to try.”

“I’m to have a lady’s maid?” Heather bit her lip, unsure whether to laugh or cry. This was too much. It was all too much. But she also knew that this truly was a huge promotion for young Maggie, and she didn’t want to ruin the girl’s chances to make a better life for herself.

Maggie frowned, obviously sensing her hesitation. “If you’re not happy with Lady Jocelyn’s choice, I’m certain they’ll find you someone else,” she said dejectedly.

Heather sighed in resignation. “I’m certain you’ll be perfect.”



NESS AND O’BRIEN ARRIVED at Drake’s house for the agreed-upon meeting to discuss their next steps to deal with Danbury just a little before midnight. It had been a long, stressful day, but he’d been glad when they arrived because the house already felt too empty without Heather in it.

He ushered them into his library, where a fire burned in the grate but seemed to do little to dispel the chill in the air. It seemed as though summer would never come.

The two men were somber as they took the pair of chairs in front of the fire and Drake poured them a drink. “Thank you

for coming,” he told them as he handed them their glasses. He hadn’t wanted to go to Ness’s house, given that Heather was now residing there along with the rest of them.

O’Brien nodded as he accepted the glass. “Heather is fine,” he told Drake with a hint of a smile. “In case you were wondering. She had a bath and settled in for the night.”

Drake turned his back and returned to the sideboard to pour his own drink, not wanting them to see how glad he was to hear that. He cleared his throat and finally went to join them, taking a chair that was a bit apart. “Let’s get to the matter at hand. You said you had a plan regarding Danbury?”

“We do,” Ness said, twirling his drink idly in his hand and staring down at the amber liquid. “We just don’t know how you’ll feel about it.”

“At this point, I’m willing to listen to anything,” Drake said with a sigh.

The two men exchanged a glance, and then O’Brien set his glass aside and leaned forward. “We’d like you to talk to your father about committing Danbury to an asylum.”

Drake sucked in a surprised breath, his mind racing. Danbury was a monster and needed to be locked away, but after talking to the magistrate today, he didn’t believe his brother would ever see the inside of a prison cell. He wouldn’t wish the madhouse on anyone, but when he thought of Evelyn Lindsay’s mangled body, he knew that his brother truly was insane. He couldn’t get the system of law to work against a member of the aristocracy, but what did it matter where his brother was locked up, as long as he was?

His momentary elation dimmed almost immediately as he thought of his father and what the marquess would say if he even suggested that he lock up his heir, the one he’d set all his hopes and dreams on. But surely, even his father must know what kind of a man Danbury had become.

“It will be difficult,” he finally admitted. “My father will fight against it with every breath in his body.”

“We were afraid of that.” Ness shrugged, looking defeated.

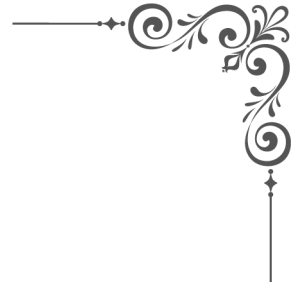
Drake shook his head. “I just said it would be difficult. I didn’t say I wouldn’t try.”

“Good.” O’Brien gave a sigh of relief. “It seems the only way we’ll ever be able to eliminate the threat he poses to the people of this city.”

“I’ll try and impress upon my father the scandal that could be brought down upon our name if Danbury gets caught. He would do anything to avoid that.” With a pang, Drake remembered the conversation he’d had with Ness about how the scandal of his own marriage to Heather would be eclipsed by his brother’s arrest. He supposed he needn’t worry about either of those things now.

He could go on being the perfectly respectable member of the *ton* he’d always been.

So why didn’t that give him any comfort at all?



Chapter Nineteen

Drake hadn't even had breakfast the next morning before Constable Graham arrived at his front door to inform him that Jacob Lindon had finally been apprehended. Some of Ness's men had found him at one of the pubs they'd been watching, and although he'd apparently put up quite a fight, they'd taken him into custody.

He shrugged into his jacket, donned his hat, and ordered his coach to be brought around. He'd planned to speak to the family doctor, a man he'd known his entire life and trusted implicitly, about getting Danbury committed this morning, but all that could wait. He wanted to look into the eyes of the bastard who'd disrupted his life so completely.

The tables would be turned this time. Lindon would no longer be able to hide behind his mask and henchmen. Drake would be in complete control of the situation, and he felt he needed that after the chaos of the last few days.

Half an hour later, he arrived at J Division and found Ness waiting for him in his office.

"I thought you'd come as soon as you heard," Ness said with a grim smile. "I held off on questioning him. I knew you'd want to be here when I did."

"Are you certain it's him?" Drake asked as they headed to the room where Lindon was being held.

Ness shrugged, his blue eyes twinkling. "I think so, but perhaps we should have Heather come down here and identify him, hmm?"

Heat scalded Drake's face at his friend's gentle ribbing. He hated that his feelings for her were still so easy to read. He cleared his throat. "I think we should. Perhaps if he sees that she's here, that she intends to testify against him, he'll just make it easy on us and confess."

Ness scoffed, knowing as well as Drake did that Lindon wouldn't confess to anything. "I'll send for her if you want. We do need her to make an official statement about her part in

the Citizens Committee and what Lindon forced her to do, especially the threats he made toward her if she didn't comply."

For the first time since she'd tearfully admitted that she was part of the Citizens Committee, Drake allowed himself the fleeting thought that perhaps Heather really had been in danger. Maybe that bastard really had threatened to kill her if she didn't get as much information from Drake as she could.

But she'd never asked him anything.

"Get her down here," Drake said, ignoring the way his heart leapt at the thought of seeing her again. "It's time I listened to her story myself."

Ness grinned and instructed a passing constable to go and personally escort Heather down to the station.

With that matter finally settled, Drake focused on the matter at hand. Time to finally meet his nemesis.

He pulled open the door to the interrogation room and finally found himself face-to-face with the leader of the Citizens Committee.

Jacob Lindon looked up as Drake entered the room, his face shuttering as he recognized him. He was a handsome, dapper man, with dark hair and bright green eyes. Even before he said a word, Drake could see how Heather had been drawn in by him, a thought that enraged him even more.

Had she loved this bastard? Did she love him still? Was that why she'd refused Drake's proposal?

Drake took the chair on the other side of the table, dimly aware of Ness behind him. That was good. He might need his friend there to stop him from killing Lindon once he opened his mouth.

"Jacob Lindon, I presume?" Drake growled. "We've met, but the last time I saw you, you were wearing a mask."

Lindon smiled, showing no hint of nerves. "I don't know what you're talking about. I've never seen you before in my life."

Drake clenched his fists, forcing himself to stay calm. He wouldn't give Lindon the satisfaction of knowing how angry he was. "Let's dispense with all the lies, shall we? We have at least three witnesses who are willing to identify you as the man who organized the warehouse bombing that caused two deaths. Not to mention that I recognize both your voice and your vest as belonging to the man who held me prisoner in the cellar of the Citizens Committee headquarters for two days earlier this week."

The smirk on Lindon's face dropped somewhat, as did his relaxed pose. "If Heather Fields is one of your witnesses, I think you should consider the source. That lying bitch can't be trusted, as I'm certain you know by now."

"You threatened her," Drake gritted out. "You said you'd kill her if she didn't help you."

"Is that what she told you?" Lindon shook his head with false sympathy. "Was that before or after she fucked you?"

"Shut your mouth. You don't get to talk about her that way," Drake snapped, anger simmering within him. The more he looked into Lindon's cold green eyes, the more he believed Heather's story. He remembered suddenly the way the bastard had strangled her while threatening to kill her if Drake didn't give him the information he wanted. The fear on her face had not been feigned, and Lindon hadn't been holding back. She'd had bruises around her throat afterward.

Before Drake could give in to his rage, Ness stepped forward, wisely taking the focus off Heather. "The two men we have in custody, the ones you were so worried about that you took the assistant police commissioner hostage, have told us everything. We really don't need anything else from you; we were just giving you the chance to confess."

"I'm not confessing to shite," Lindon snarled.

Drake pushed out of his chair and strode from the room, knowing that if he didn't, he'd kill the bastard. Every time he looked at Lindon, he thought about how helpless he'd felt during his captivity, how the man had mocked him and threatened Heather.

For the next twenty minutes, he paced the back hallway, his guilt rising. He still didn't understand how Heather had let herself get involved with Lindon, but he no longer believed she'd been a willing participant in his own kidnapping.

Finally, Ness joined him, looking somewhat harried. "I've moved him to a cell and officially charged him with kidnapping and murder," he said as he gestured for Drake to join him back in his office.

"Thank you," Drake said shortly. "I shouldn't have gone in there with you. I'm too close to this. I just felt like I needed to look him in the face."

Ness waved a dismissive hand. "He infuriated me too," he admitted. "If he'd talked about Jocelyn that way, I'd have ripped his head off."

A huff of a laugh escaped Drake despite his guilt and anger. "Tell me honestly, Ness. You heard her story. Do you think Heather's telling the truth?"

Ness nodded shortly. "I do. She's just a sweet girl who made some bad choices."

Shoving a hand through his hair, Drake let out a deep sigh. "I didn't listen to her. I was so cruel."

"It's not too late to fix things," Ness said kindly. "If you want to."

"That's just it," Drake admitted. "I'm not certain I do." The feelings he had for Heather terrified him, especially now that they'd been tested. He didn't think he could go through such pain again.

Before Ness could reply, a soft knock sounded at the open door behind them.

Ness cleared his throat and stood, giving Drake a sympathetic look. "Miss Fields is here, sir. I'll let the two of you talk."

Wincing internally, Drake pushed to his own feet, finding Heather standing nervously in the doorway. From the look on

her face, she'd heard at least the last part of his conversation with Ness.

"You sent for me?" Her voice trembled, but she squared her slim shoulders and met his gaze, refusing to be cowed. Her courage humbled him once again.

"Come in," he murmured, shutting the door behind Ness and then rounding the desk to take the chair Ness had vacated.

For several minutes they simply stared at each other, and Drake found himself eagerly drinking in the sight of her. It seemed like it had been years instead of hours since they'd last seen each other.

"We have Jacob Lindon in custody," he said at last. "Ness and I just finished interviewing him."

She swallowed convulsively. "That's good. He'll finally have to pay for his crimes, and the O'Briens and I can finally go home."

"Yes. I believe you'll be safe now." He reached for a pen on Ness's desk, twirling it between his fingers just to keep from reaching for her.

"Is that all?" she asked, her brows furrowing.

"Of course not," he muttered, knowing he was going about this all wrong. "After talking to Lindon... I just wanted to give you a chance to explain yourself."

Color rushed to her cheeks, and for the first time since he'd met her, he realized she was angry. "I already tried to do so, but you wouldn't listen."

He cleared his throat, feeling like the biggest ass who'd ever lived. "I'm willing to listen now, Heather. I want to understand how you got involved with the Citizens Committee, how you didn't see what Lindon was right away. How you could have... given yourself to him."

"Are any of those questions pertinent to your investigation?" she asked, her voice wooden. "I already answered them once, for Inspector Ness. What good would it do for me to tell my story again? There's nothing I can say that

can heal this gulf between us. You said as much as I was approaching the door.”

Bloody hell. I can't do anything right where this woman is concerned.

Drake sighed. “I don't know what I'm doing, Heather. All I know is that I already miss you.”

Her big blue eyes filled with tears, but she blinked them rapidly away. “I miss you too, but even if we were to work this out, all the reasons why we don't suit remain. I think it's time for us both to admit that what we shared in the cellar can't survive. But I'll never forget you, Drake.” Choking back a sob, she spun and left the room, leaving Drake staring blankly after her, his heart twisting in his chest.



AS SOON AS HEATHER left Drake, she ducked into the women's loo, struggling to keep from completely breaking down. The hardest thing she'd ever done was reject Drake's overture of forgiveness, but the moment he'd started talking, she'd known it was the only thing she could do.

Taking a deep breath, she moved to the sink and splashed water on her face, washing away her tears and cooling her overheated cheeks.

It can never work. He doesn't think you're good enough for him.

She told herself that over and over until the emotional storm passed, then dried her face and stared into the mirror, stunned by how wan and pale she looked.

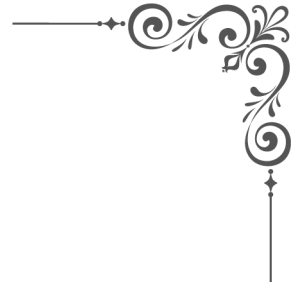
Of course, you look terrible. You just walked away from the man you love.

The thought stunned her, but she wasn't sure why. No matter how hard she'd tried to fight it, no matter how many times she'd told herself that a true relationship between herself and the marquess's son could never work, she'd still held a tiny kernel of hope in her heart that it would.

I love him. I'll never stop loving him.

When she was a child, she'd dreamed that she'd meet a handsome prince, that she'd be swept away from her pitiful life into one of beauty and romance. She'd believed that happily ever after existed, that nothing could ever destroy true love.

But sometimes the obstacles between two people were unsurmountable. None of her storybooks had ever prepared her for the fact that sometimes love just wasn't enough.



Chapter Twenty

The next morning, Drake set out for his family's country estate, which was a good eight hours' ride south of London. He rode his favorite horse, and it felt good to be out of the city. After everything that had happened during the last week, perhaps he'd needed a few days away from Scotland Yard and the chaos of his feelings for Heather.

He tried to ignore the weight of the responsibilities he'd left behind and just enjoy the ride down the country road, concentrating on the bird song instead of his worries for his friends and Mrs. Burrows. He'd left plenty of people looking out for everyone he cared about. Convincing his father that Danbury needed to be locked away was the most important thing he could possibly do.

For a while he mostly succeeded, deeply inhaling the country breeze, reveling in the sunlight that at last held a hint of warmth, and smiling at the antics of some of the livestock he passed along the way. But inevitably, his thoughts circled back around to Heather.

The last words she'd said to him yesterday before she'd left his office kept replaying over and over in his mind. Part of him knew that she was right, but they'd stung, nevertheless. He'd been so focused on the fact that she'd betrayed him that he hadn't really given himself time to reflect upon the story she'd told him, of how she'd been threatened and hurt. He'd been too quick to pass judgment, so jealous to think that she'd been with the bastard who'd kidnapped him that he'd lashed out without thinking.

He hadn't meant to make an overture of forgiveness toward her when she'd come down to the station, but the moment he saw her, he'd known that he had to at least try. Now that his initial anger had dissipated, all he could think about was her kindness, her gentleness, the way she'd held him and made love to him. Deep down, he didn't think any of that had been a lie. She cared about him. Perhaps almost as much as he'd grown to care about her. And she *had* finally told him the truth, even though she'd waited far too long.

He feared that he'd defaulted too quickly to anger as a way to protect himself from what he'd been feeling. Far too easy to be hurt and angry instead of giving her the understanding and forgiveness she'd needed.

Because he finally had to admit to himself that he'd fallen head over heels in love with her.

I love her.

Love was what he'd been feeling, what he'd been so afraid of. But did he even deserve her love when he'd been so cruel and callous? He'd had her thrown in jail, for God's sake.

No wonder she didn't want to give this thing between them a second chance. She didn't want to be hurt again, and he didn't blame her. She also thought the class difference between them insurmountable. But he'd been around the O'Briens, Nesses, and Strathmores enough to realize that they'd withstand whatever scandal might come their way. They'd entered the twentieth century, and the world he'd grown up in no longer made sense.

Somehow, he had to find the words to earn her forgiveness and help her see that they belonged together. He just hoped he hadn't already ruined it all irrevocably.

He turned it all over in his head for several more hours before he finally realized that their story wasn't over yet. There was still time to fix it, still time to try and figure things out. She didn't know how he felt about her, and she'd probably been trying to defend her own heart as fiercely as he'd been trying to defend his.

They could make a life together. He was certain of it.

But first, he had to have what was certain to be a very unpleasant conversation with his father.

Determined to get it over with, he spurred his horse on to Stonebridge.



AFTER HER TRIP TO THE J Division station, Heather had spent the rest of her evening in her room at Jocelyn's house,

trying to forget about her meeting with Drake. After she'd identified Jacob from the safety of the hallway, she'd given her official statement about the Citizens Committee to Inspector Ness, with Jacob's curses and threats ringing in her ears. Even though she knew she was finally free of him, he terrified her. Luckily, she'd still been numb from her conversation with Drake.

The last thing she'd expected was that he'd be ready to listen to her now, that he'd once again look at her as though he cared. She couldn't believe she'd found the strength to walk away when all she'd really wanted was to throw herself into his arms and beg for his forgiveness.

She knew it had been the right thing to do, but she'd spent most of the evening crying for all she could never have, for the few brief moments of happiness she'd known in his arms.

But the next morning, she woke up determined to do better. She took another long, hot bath, spoiled by the luxury of being able to do so every day. Then she dressed in one of Allison's loveliest day gowns, a periwinkle blue with white lace that matched her eyes perfectly.

By the time she joined Jocelyn and Allison for breakfast, she felt almost human again after her short but terrifying stint in prison. "Good morning," she said shyly as she took her place at the breakfast table. She'd spent yesterday morning in her room and the afternoon at the station, so she hadn't really had a chance to talk to them since she'd been released.

Allison turned to her with glowing eyes. "You look beautiful," she declared. "How are you feeling today?"

"Much better," Heather assured her. "Thank you again for all you did to get me released from that horrible place."

Laughing merrily, Allison slid her the teapot. "I think you'd still be here today even if I'd done nothing. Blackstone didn't really want to keep you there. He jumped on the excuse to let you go."

"He did try to talk to me when I went back there yesterday afternoon to give my statement." Heather sighed as she filled

her teacup with steaming hot water. “But I told him there was nothing left for us to say. I’ll probably never see him again.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Jocelyn chimed in. “He’s head over heels for you, if you ask me.”

Heather looked between Jocelyn and Allison in disbelief. “That’s absolutely ridiculous. I know you’re trying to make me feel better, but I’m all right.”

She wasn’t all right. She wasn’t the least little bit all right, but it made her uncomfortable to hear them talking as though this had just been a little lover’s spat. He would never forgive her for what she’d done, and she didn’t deserve his forgiveness. She’d done horrible things, and she’d never forget the look in his eyes when he’d realized how she’d betrayed him.

Jocelyn and Allison exchanged a doubtful look but thankfully let the matter drop. For the rest of the meal, they talked about light, inconsequential things, but no matter how Heather tried to force a cheerful mien, she couldn’t shake the despair of knowing she’d never again be held in Drake’s strong arms.



DRAKE ARRIVED AT STONEBRIDGE near dusk, after having ridden hard all afternoon. He rode slowly down the tree-lined drive, taking in his childhood home with mixed feelings of nostalgia and pain. He’d grown up here, in this beautiful Palladian palace, but he still found it a bit intimidating as he approached.

Generations of his family had lived here, so it wasn’t surprising that his father was so determined to see the estate survive into this century and many more to come. But the cost of maintaining it had become staggering, and the estate wasn’t producing the way it once had.

The marquess should have realized long ago that Mortimer didn’t give a damn about Stonebridge. Once he inherited it, he’d strip it of its treasures and leave it to rot.

Am I willing to take this on?

Though he wouldn't officially be able to claim the title as long as his father and brother were still alive, if Danbury were locked up in a madhouse all the responsibilities that his brother had at least marginally taken care of would fall on Drake's shoulders.

He growled in frustration, knowing he couldn't think about that right now.

As he approached the front steps, a groom appeared to take his tired horse, and the massive front door creaked open to reveal Sanford, his father's elderly butler, who had been ruling the servants of Stonebridge with an iron fist for as long as Drake could remember.

"Master Mandrake," the old man intoned gravely as he took Drake's coat. "The marquess wasn't expecting you. He's indisposed at the moment. Perhaps he will see you in the morning."

Drake stared the man down, no longer a child to be put in his place. "I've come all this way to speak to him. I won't be put off until tomorrow. Please inform my father that I am here."

The butler looked like he wanted to protest further but finally nodded. "It will take me awhile to get him ready to receive you."

"That's fine," Drake said, though he was surprised to hear that. He'd never known the marquess to be abed at this time of day. He'd known the old man's health was failing but hadn't thought it this bad. "I'll be in the study when he's ready."

The butler strode stiffly away, and Drake made his way to the room where his father had always spent the majority of his time when Drake was growing up. He was even more surprised to find the room dark and musty, a fine coat of dust covering every surface. His consternation grew. Was his father gravely ill? Too ill to attend to the estate business? If so, it was more important than he'd even imagined to get the old man to agree to have Danbury committed. If the marquess died, and Danbury inherited the title and power that came with it, he'd be unstoppable.

He lit a few lamps and made himself presentable in the mirror, knowing his father wouldn't care that he'd ridden all day to get here. He'd still expect him to be well-groomed.

Nearly an hour had passed before the butler reappeared, looking even more morose if such a thing was possible. "The marquess will see you in his bedroom. He's not feeling well enough to come downstairs."

Drake nodded abruptly, his concern for his father growing. He'd never been close with the man, but the thought of the old man being gravely ill made him feel like the child who'd lost his mother all over again. He'd somehow thought his father would always be here, glowering and disapproving, running their family's vast empire.

"What is wrong with my father?" he asked Sanford as they climbed the curved staircase toward the second floor.

The butler looked at him askance. "It's not my place to say, sir."

Biting back a growl of displeasure for the man's evasiveness, Drake tried to maintain his composure. "No one alerted me that he was ill. If there's something wrong, you need to warn me before I go in there."

"He's not been well for months," the butler admitted grudgingly. "Anything else, you'll have to learn from the man himself."

How did the marquess manage to engender such loyalty in his servants? Drake supposed it was because he put the estate above all else, even his children.

Realizing he wasn't going to get anything else out of the butler, he sighed and followed the old man down the corridor to his father's bedroom. As a child, this room had been completely off-limits. He wasn't certain that he'd ever seen the inside of the room actually.

As expected for the master of the estate, the bedroom was cavernous, with heavy, masculine furniture, and an enormous fireplace. A fire roared in the grate, making the room oppressively hot. The dark blue drapes were drawn, and

besides the fire, only a few oil lamps lit the large space. His father had not thought electricity worth the expense, neither at his country estate nor even his London townhouse.

As Drake edged farther inside, he could just make out a frail form under the blankets on the elevated bed in the center of the room.

“Mandrake,” his father said, his voice still bombastic, even though his frame had withered. “What is the meaning of your visit?”

Crossing to his father’s side, Drake gazed down at the man who he’d once feared so greatly, surprised to find that he’d become an old man. His face was lined and gray, and dark circles ringed his sunken eyes.

“Can a son not visit his father?” Drake asked, a bit stung by his father’s lack of welcome, even though long experience should have made him expect it.

“What do you want?” the old man snapped. “Are you here for money?”

That stung even worse. “When have I ever asked you for money?”

The marquess frowned, obviously still suspicious.

With a sigh, Drake pulled a chair close to the bed and sat down. “I’m here to talk to you about Mortimer,” he said, realizing his father had no use for pleasantries.

A flicker of unmistakable fear lit his father’s eyes. “Why? What’s he done?”

“What do you think he’s done?” Drake countered, wondering why that was the marquess’s first question regarding his golden boy. Had he known about Mortimer’s deviant proclivities all along? He suddenly realized that he probably had. How else had his brother gotten away with this for so long? He could easily see his father making any problems Mortimer had disappear.

“Just tell me why you’re here,” his father grouched. “I don’t have time for this nonsense.”

The marquess obviously had all the time in the world, but Drake was already sickened by the conversation. “He’s killing women in London. At least three. Probably far more. They’re calling him The Viper.”

The marquess closed his eyes. “There’s no proof. And they’re whores. No one will miss them.”

Drake bit his lip to keep from erupting in rage. Of course, his father knew. Of course, he didn’t care. All he’d ever truly cared about was having an heir to continue his life’s work. Why couldn’t he see that Mortimer was a monster? That he’d run Stonebridge into the ground the moment he inherited the title?

“Lady Evelyn Lindsay was no whore,” Drake said in a low, controlled voice. “She was the daughter of one of your closest friends, and your son ripped her apart.”

“Evelyn...” His father shuddered and looked away, no longer able to hold Drake’s gaze. “I didn’t know he’d hurt Evelyn.”

Drake took a deep breath and withdrew a packet of papers from his breast pocket. “He needs to be locked away, Father. You know that the laws protect him, but soon enough, he’s going to make a mistake. And when he does, everyone will know the horrific things he’s done. We won’t be able to protect our family name once his sins are splashed all over the papers.”

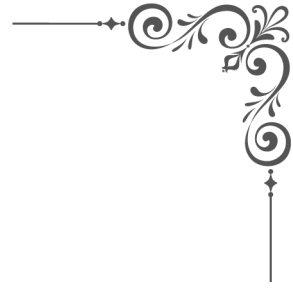
“You just want the title for yourself,” the marquess accused, pushing himself to a sitting position and glaring at his younger son. “That’s why you’re telling me all these lies.”

“I’ve never wanted the damned title and you know it! I enjoy my job. I like making the city a safer place, even though you’ve never given me an ounce of respect or encouragement. But I can’t do that when my own brother is murdering young women!”” Drake raked a hand through his hair in agitation. This man had never given him a single kind word, and he certainly wasn’t going to start now. He’d forever believe that as the younger son, Drake was utterly useless. “And you know nothing I’ve said is a lie.”

“You can cover it up,” the marquess insisted. “You can make certain that he never gets caught. That our name is never tarnished by what he’s done.”

Drake could only shake his head in disgust. “I’m not the only one who knows that Danbury is The Viper. And I won’t stand in the way of those who are trying to bring him to justice. It would mean my job, and I care about that just as much as you care about the title. Is that the legacy you want to leave? A son who puts the Ripper to shame?”

The marquess sank back, breathing so heavily that Drake feared he might die of apoplexy. Then he put out a shaking hand. “I’ll do it. Give me the papers.”



Chapter Twenty-one

The next afternoon, Heather drifted aimlessly around Quinn and Allison's garden, her mind still whirling with the events of the past week. She'd gained a lover and then lost him. Gone to jail and then been released. Gone from a servant to a beloved member of the family. Last night, they'd left Jocelyn's, returning to the O'Briens', where Allison had installed her in a lovely room in the family quarters, right next to her own. The highs and lows had left her spinning. She didn't know what to make of any of it, and in truth, wished she could just go back in time a few months, before she'd met Jacob. When her life had been comfortable and boring. Before she'd known what true heartache felt like.

She wasn't quite certain what her future held now. She'd have to testify against Jacob and the Citizens Committee, but it seemed that Allison's money and status would protect her from truly having to face justice.

How was she supposed to feel about that? She knew there was nothing she could do to atone for the deaths Jacob had caused, but she felt that she deserved more than one afternoon in jail for her part in it.

But perhaps her true punishment was having known what it felt like to love a man, to have felt loved in return, even though he'd never said it, and then to lose that love forever.

She was so lost in morose thoughts that she was startled when a man stepped out from behind a hedge right into her path. Shocked, she stumbled to a stop, looking around wildly for the policemen that she had been assured would be stationed nearby, then remembered that they'd gone back to their regular duties once Jacob had been captured. Was this a member of the Citizens Committee? She didn't think so. She'd never seen him before and he was dressed like a gentleman, with dark hair and piercing dark eyes

Then his gaze met hers, and a chill settled deep inside her. He looked eerily familiar.

Dear God. Is this Drake's brother?

“So, you’re Drake’s new mistress,” he said, his voice cold and mocking. “I’ve never known my brother to be so enamored, so I decided that I must come have a look at you.”

The Viper.

She wanted to scream, but she knew that Drake’s plan to bring this monster to justice depended on him having the element of surprise. If she let on that she knew who he was, what he’d done, he might flee the country and just continue his horrific deeds somewhere else.

Instead, she started edging back toward the house, praying that he wouldn’t be brazen enough to follow her inside. She didn’t want to bring this monster into the O’Briens’ house, but she certainly couldn’t stay out here with him.

“Who are you?” she asked warily, as if she didn’t already know.

“I’m Viscount Danbury, my dear,” he said conversationally, slowly stalking her through the hedges. “Your paramour is my little brother. He came to see me a few days ago, told me he was so smitten with you that he wasn’t going to come home anymore. Apparently, fucking you means more to him than his own dear brother. You must be very good at it. I must say, I’m intrigued.”

She gasped, hurt and indignation swirling within her. Had Drake really said such things to this man? Had he made it sound like she was some cheap whore?

No. Almost as quickly as the thought came, she managed to banish it. Before Drake had found out about her betrayal, he’d asked her to marry him. He certainly wouldn’t cheapen what they shared to a man like this. Not unless it was all part of his plan, and if so, she couldn’t take offense.

“You’re mistaken.” She wished she dared turn around and see how far she was from safety. “Blackstone has no interest in me. That’s why I’m here and not at his house. We had a row, and he sent me away.”

Danbury continued to slowly stalk her, seeming to enjoy the game of cat and mouse. “Excellent. You did prove rather

elusive to find. But if Drake's done with you, it means you're free to entertain me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said nervously, swallowing thickly as she remembered what this monster had done to Evelyn. But the house was in sight now. If she just continued on another fifty feet, she could duck inside and scream bloody murder for Quinn and the O'Briens' strapping footmen.

"You haven't told me your name yet."

"I don't intend to," she said sharply. "If Drake had wanted to introduce us, he would have. But since we are not acquainted, it is not proper for you to be here. Mr. O'Brien wouldn't like it."

Something evil flickered in those dark eyes. "You're not what I was expecting," he said conversationally, as if she hadn't just dismissed him. "I expected someone crass and vulgar. But you're almost a lady. So sweet and innocent. I see now why Drake found you so appealing."

She didn't want this man to find her appealing. In fact, she didn't want him to think of her at all. She would not become just another of The Viper's victims. This was not how her story was going to end. Giving up all pretense of calm, she whirled and sprinted toward the back door as fast as her legs would carry her.

Before she could reach it, he slammed into her from behind, crushing her against him as one hand closed over her breast. "I'm a viscount," he hissed in her ear, pinching her nipple painfully. "No bloody whore is going to run from me and not pay the price."

"Unhand the lady," an authoritative voice demanded, and she twisted her head to see the young, dark-haired policeman who was such a favorite of Quinn's step out of the hedges behind them. *Constable Pond*. She'd never been so glad to see anyone. He stepped forward, calm and surprisingly collected, a gun in his hand.

“Do you know who I am?” Danbury snapped, squeezing her even tighter, turning her so that she acted as a shield between him and the constable.

“I know exactly who you are, Lord Danbury,” Constable Pond countered. “I’m here on your brother’s orders. Let the lady go. She doesn’t want your attention.”

“He has men watching over you?” Danbury snarled in her ear. “Why would he have his men watching over a whore?”

A sob caught in her throat when he pulled out a knife and pressed it against her throat. For a second, she wasn’t quite certain what had happened. But the press of the cold metal against her skin brought a rush of tears to her eyes and the word *whore* still rang in her ears.

“Stop right there,” Pond shouted, the hand that held the gun trembling slightly. “If you take one more step, I will shoot you.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Danbury snarled. “I could cut her throat right in front of you, and you’d still never shoot someone like me.”

“I’m not going to let you hurt her.” Pond kept the gun leveled at Danbury’s head. “I’d go to prison myself before I’d let you harm one hair on this woman’s head.”

Danbury edged her a few steps toward the gate, and the knife pressed harder into her skin. From the burning sensation and the horror on Pond’s face, she was certain he’d drawn blood.

“Lord Danbury, stop!” Pond bellowed.

“I’m leaving now,” Danbury informed the young policeman. “And I’m taking the woman with me.”

Constable Pond met Heather’s gaze, and in his eyes, she saw that he’d meant every word he’d said. He’d save her or die trying. She didn’t know whether Drake had tasked him with protecting her or stopping Danbury, but she was grateful all the same.

She just didn't know how confident she was in the young man's ability to shoot Danbury when he was only inches away from her. Still, she gave an almost imperceptible nod. She'd rather die like this than let Danbury take her somewhere alone and do to her what he'd done to Evelyn.

Danbury inched back another step, and Pond pulled the trigger.



WHEN DRAKE ARRIVED back in London, he had his brother's commitment papers in hand, signed by his father and witnessed by the family solicitor. He'd left at dawn, but the weather had turned bad again, and he'd fought light rain all the way. By the time he got home, he was cold and exhausted.

Still, he only stopped by his house long enough to bathe and eat before hurrying over to Sebastian's. He only trusted Quinn and Sebastian with this, and he wanted to get it over with as soon as possible before his brother heard that it was happening and somehow managed to outwit him.

Perhaps he'd also wanted to see Heather again, so he was disappointed to find out that Quinn had taken his family home now that Lindon was in custody and no longer a threat. After a few moments' discussion, he and Sebastian decided to go get Quinn and some orderlies from the asylum. Then they'd head to Danbury's townhouse and try to intercept him before he went out for the night.

Half an hour later, they were sitting in Quinn's study, discussing their plans, when a gunshot rang out from somewhere disturbingly close.

Quinn shot to his feet. "That came from the back garden." He cast a quick glance over his shoulder as he rushed toward the terrace door. "Heather's out there."

Drake surged out of his chair, only vaguely aware of his two friends as he burst out the door, only to skid to a stop as he took in the scene before him. Constable Pond stood frozen, a gun in his outstretched hands. Danbury had a knife to Heather's throat, inching her toward the gate. His left arm was

bleeding profusely, and Drake quickly deduced that the blood was the result of the gunshot they'd just heard.

“Mortimer, stop!” Drake cried as he saw that there was also a thin stream of blood trailing down Heather's slim white throat. “Let her go!”

Mortimer whirled to face him, grimacing in pain. “Drake! Thank God you're here! That man shot me! I demand that you arrest him.”

“Let the girl go,” Drake repeated, trying to figure out why the hell his brother was even here. If Pond hadn't followed him, tried to stop him... “We'll talk as soon as she's safe.”

Mortimer scoffed, shaking his head. “No, I don't think that I will. I think she's the only thing keeping me alive right now.”

“That's not what's keeping you alive,” Drake corrected, advancing toward him slowly, vaguely aware of his friends splitting up to circle Danbury. Quinn was moving to block the gate, so he only had to keep his brother focused and talking for a few minutes until his exit was cut off. Drake reached into his inside jacket pocket, removing the commitment papers. “This is what's keeping you alive. If I didn't have this, I'd have already shot you myself.”

Mortimer's gaze flicked to the papers and then to the men who were surrounding him. “Call your men back, Drake. I'll kill her. You know I will.”

“I do know it,” Drake said, his heart thundering in his chest. “I know what you did to all those women. I know what you did to Evelyn. I also know that I'll have a hard time proving it, given your title. That's why I went and saw Father yesterday. He's signed the paperwork to have you committed.”

Finally, his brother froze, his gaze now glued to the paperwork in Drake's hand. He gave a strained laugh. “I almost believed you. But we both know Father would never do that to his heir. Especially now that his health is so bad. He cares about that title more than he cares about the deaths of all the whores in England.”

“Perhaps,” Drake admitted, letting himself stare into Heather’s eyes for the first time since he’d come outside, trying to convince her without words that he knew what he was doing, that she could trust him, even despite everything that had gone wrong between them. “But what he cares about even more is our family’s reputation. Do you think he would ever allow me to arrest you? To drag our old, illustrious title through the mud?”

Realizing he was trapped, Mortimer suddenly pushed Heather away so hard that she stumbled and fell hard to her knees. “There,” he snapped. “You have your whore back. Now let me go. I’ll disappear. Go to the Continent.”

“You know I can’t do that,” Drake replied as Quinn rushed to Heather’s side, helping her up and murmuring soothing words as he pulled her toward the door.

“I can’t go to one of those places,” Danbury cried, as Drake gave a nod to Ness and Pond, who rushed forward and easily handcuffed him, even though he struggled and fought them. “Please, Drake! I’ll die there.”

“You will,” Drake vowed, wondering why he felt no remorse at all about his brother suffering such a fate. If he’d ever had any love for Mortimer, his brother had killed it long ago. All he felt now was relief.

The Viper had been caught. No more women had to die.

He glanced over his shoulder to see Heather and Quinn disappear into the house. He desperately wanted to follow them inside, make certain that Heather was all right, but thanks to Pond, there would be time for that later. First, he had to see his brother secured within the gates of an institution he would never be released from. He couldn’t rely on anyone else to see it done. This heavy burden was his alone.

He crossed over to where the other three men stood, putting a hand on Pond’s shoulder. “Thank you, Pond. You probably saved Miss Fields’ life.”

“I stayed with him, just like you said,” the young man said, ducking his head. “I’m sorry my shot wasn’t better, but I was

nervous about hitting Miss Fields.”

“You did very well,” Drake assured him. “You alerted us to the trouble, and you stopped him from getting away with her. I couldn’t be prouder of you.”

Pond smiled bashfully. “Thank you, sir. That means a lot coming from you.”

Drake nodded and turned to Ness, ignoring his brother’s constant stream of vitriol as he thrashed about in Ness’s grasp. “Is he secure?”

“He ain’t going anywhere,” Ness said tightly, just as two of Quinn’s largest footmen came outside to assist them.

“Bring him inside,” Drake directed, wanting Danbury in the most secure environment he could until the orderlies from Broadmoor Hospital arrived to take him into custody.

They made their way inside, and Drake made certain that Danbury was securely tied to a chair and his wound bandaged before leaving him with Pond and Ness and using the O’Briens’ telephone to call Broadmoor and explain the situation.

When he was finished, he went down the hall to the sitting room, where Heather was being fussed over by Quinn and Allison.

He stood in the doorway, drinking in the sight of her, more relieved than he’d ever been in his life. If Danbury had managed to get away with her, if he’d done to her what he’d done to those other women...

He would have never recovered from that.

“Are you all right?” he asked, catching and holding her gaze. “Did he hurt you, Heather?”

She held up her hands, which were scraped and bloody from when she’d fallen, then touched her bloody throat. “A little banged up, but I’ll be fine.”

“Thank God.” He sagged against the doorframe. There was so much more he wanted to say to her, but this wasn’t the time.

I should have kept her with me. I should have protected her.

Allison glared at him. “Why did he come here?” she demanded. “Why did he go after Heather?”

“He thought I was your whore,” Heather said, sounding numb. “He said he wanted me to give him a taste of what I’d given you.”

Drake flinched, realizing that when he’d told his brother about his new mistress, he’d intrigued him. “Heather... I’m so sorry. I never meant for this to happen. I wanted to keep you safe, not pull you further into harm’s way.”

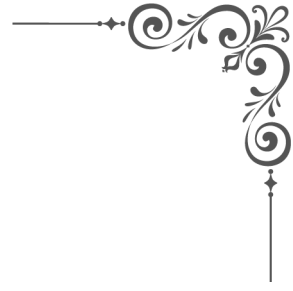
“I know,” she said, dropping her gaze to her battered hands. “It’s all right, Drake. That young constable protected me, and I know you had him watching over me. You said you’d keep me safe, and you did.”

Quinn cleared his throat, and Drake’s guilt grew. Pond had been watching Danbury, not Heather. He’d thought Heather was safe once Lindon was behind bars. Why hadn’t he made certain of it before abandoning her to fend for herself? He’d made so many promises to her, but had he kept any of them?

He had to admit to all the ways he’d failed her, all the ways he’d hurt her, but now was not the time or the place. “I have to make certain that Danbury gets safely to Broadmoor, but after I’m done... Can I come back, Heather? Can we talk?”

She nodded briefly, still not looking at him. Allison glared at him, and he knew she’d like to forbid it, but Quinn shook his head at her, and she managed to bite her tongue.

“I’ll see you later tonight then,” he said, praying he’d somehow find the words to make all this right.



Chapter Twenty-two

For the next few hours, Heather allowed her sister to fuss over her to her heart's content. Even though Heather knew that the wounds she'd sustained during her run-in with The Viper were minor, she didn't protest when Allison sent for a doctor to check her over. She reclined on the sofa in the sitting room like an invalid while the kind old man bandaged her hands and throat and left her a sleeping tonic.

After the doctor left, she let Allison coax her upstairs to her bedroom, where she was soon ensconced in a comfortable chair in front of the fire, a cup of tea and a biscuit on a nearby table, and her sister pacing relentlessly across the room.

Heather supposed she was still in shock, somewhat numbed to what had almost happened to her, though she was grateful for the sleeping tonic because she was certain that once she went to bed, the afternoon's events would come crashing back over her. How could she live with the fact that not only had she nearly died today but that it had almost come at the hands of The Viper?

Shivering, she pulled the heavy quilt Allison had wrapped around her shoulders even tighter.

"Are you cold?" Allison asked, glancing at the roaring fire as though it was somehow lacking. "I can go get you another blanket."

Heather smiled tightly. "It's fine, Allison. Really. You've done more than enough."

Allison bit her lip and perched on the arm of the chair. With a shuddering sigh, she wrapped her arm around Heather and pulled her close. "Oh, Heather. I almost lost you today." She pressed a gentle kiss to the top of her head. "We only now just truly found each other. You're going to be my child's aunt. I could just kill Drake Blackstone."

For a moment, Heather allowed herself to enjoy her sister's embrace, beyond grateful to finally have someone on her side, to have a family who cared about her. Everything that

had happened in the last few days would have been unbearable if not for Allison.

“It’s not Drake’s fault,” she said at last. The moment he’d burst out of the house, she’d known everything was going to be all right. She’d known he’d never let his brother have her. And afterward, when he’d come to check on her before leaving with Danbury, Sebastian, and the orderlies from Broadmoor, he’d obviously been concerned about her.

She was a fool to read too much into it, but he’d said he’d come back after he’d interred Danbury safely behind the walls of the insane asylum, and there was no way she was taking the sleeping tonic until he did.

“Of course, it’s Drake’s fault,” Allison said with a huff, pulling back to look into Heather’s eyes. “Ever since he came into your life, you’ve been in one dangerous situation after another. I know you care about him, but I’m afraid that he’s never going to cause you anything but pain and heartache.”

“Don’t hold back, Allison,” Drake said from the hallway outside the room. “Please, tell her what you really think about me.”

Allison flushed but stood and squared her shoulders. “I won’t take it back. She almost died tonight because of you.” Her voice rose. “She was almost murdered by The Viper, you bastard! How dare you let that monster get within a mile of my sister?”

He winced and took a few steps into the room. “You’re right. But if it makes you feel any better, I’m far angrier at myself than you could ever be.”

Allison shook her head with a choked little laugh. “Well, I don’t know about that. But I suppose it’s not up to me to decide whether to forgive you.” She turned to Heather. “Are you certain you want to talk to him?”

Heather met his troubled dark gaze and the whole world fell away. Of course, she wanted to talk to him. She couldn’t imagine a day when she wouldn’t want that. She loved him.

“I want to talk to him,” she finally said. “Can you shut the door behind you, Allison?”

Allison frowned but then nodded shortly and left the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

“Thank God you’re all right,” Drake whispered, pushing off the wall and crossing to her side, dropping to his knees in front of her and taking her poor scraped hands in his. “When I heard that shot... then ran outside to find him with a knife to your throat... I nearly lost my mind.”

“You said I’d be safe,” she said, dropping her gaze and pulling her hands back, all the pain and terror of the day rising up within her. “The way he talked to me... He thought I was your mistress... your *whore*.” Her voice broke. “I don’t know why you’re here, Drake. You made it far too clear that you no longer want me in your life.”

“I was angry when I said those things to you.” He sat back on his heels and raked one hand through his hair, looking winded and lost.

She lifted her gaze to his, tears burning her eyes. “I was so frightened. All I could think about was what he did to Evelyn. But when he treated me as though I was nothing, just a thing that he wanted a piece of... I knew I could never be with you, even if you still wanted me. I don’t belong in your world.”

He pressed his lips to her palm. “I know that I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, not after the things I said, but I’d really like to talk, to work this out. I’m convinced that we can create a future together, especially now that we won’t have to worry about Lindon or my brother.”

She pulled her hands away once again. As much as she wanted to just collapse into his arms and let him hold her for days, she couldn’t leave all these things left unsaid. They’d hurt each other badly, and she still didn’t believe they could undo the damage they’d caused. “Did you tell him that I was your mistress? That I was a good... *fuck*?”

“No!” He pushed to his feet, pacing the room in agitation, but his inability to look at her didn’t bode well. “I needed to

give him a reason why I wasn't going to live at the townhouse with him anymore. So I told him I'd taken a mistress. But I never mentioned your name. I wasn't talking about you. It was just a lie to keep him from wondering what I was up to."

A hollow laugh escaped her. "Well, your plan backfired. All you did was make him curious."

He paused at the window, his back to her, his broad shoulders riddled with tension. "You're right, and I'm so sorry. You trusted me to keep you safe, and that meant the world to me. I wanted to be your hero, the one person in the world you could count on, but I failed you in every way."

Some of the protective shell she'd managed to place around her crumbled, and a shudder went through her at the pain in his voice. "Don't make me believe in you again, Drake. You've already proven that you're not capable of staying when things get rough."

"When you told me that you'd had a part in my kidnapping, I thought you didn't care about me, that everything between us had been a lie" he admitted, finally turning to look at her. "I was hurt, and I lashed out."

Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked rapidly, trying to keep them from falling. She'd cried so much for this man already. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I wanted to, but I was so afraid you'd react exactly the way that you did. I just wanted to hold on to the magic a little bit longer. No one had ever made me feel so cherished. As though I actually mattered."

"Darling," he whispered, returning to her side and once again dropping to his knees in front of her. "I know that we haven't known each other long, that we met under the most trying circumstances. But I've never felt this way about anyone but you. I honestly don't know how we're going to work this out, how we can fit the pieces of our lives together, but I want to try. The one thing that I do know is that I love you."

She gasped, the tears spilling over despite her efforts to contain them. "You do?" she asked tentatively, finally reaching

out to him, taking his face in her shaking hands.

“I do,” he whispered, tugging at her hands until she got off the chair and knelt in front of him, their bodies only inches apart. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight against him. “I love you, Heather. I love you so much.”

That was what she'd needed, what she'd been waiting for, but she'd never thought she'd actually hear him say it.

She clung to him, sobs ripping through her, her entire body shaking. “Do you mean it?” she finally gasped. “I can't believe that you could ever forgive me for what I've done.”

“Those words have always frightened me because I feared saying them would give someone else the ammunition to hurt me,” he told her, and she was shocked to see that there were tears in his eyes as well. “But I don't feel that way with you. And if I'd let you get away without saying them, without telling you how much you mean to me, I'd have regretted it forever.”



DRAKE HAD NEVER IMAGINED making himself so vulnerable to another person. But as he waited with bated breath for Heather to respond to his declaration of love, he didn't want to take it back. He'd meant every word of it. His fate was now in her hands.

“Oh, Drake,” she said at last. “I love you too. How could I not? You are beautiful inside and out, and you've never failed me. You've always done what was right, and I love you even more for that.”

He blinked, staring at Heather for a long moment, feeling as though he'd been falling, crashing toward an inevitable death, only to be saved at the last second. “You love me?”

She only nodded, a tentative smile blooming on her face and chasing away the tears. “I love you. I'll always love you.”

With a soft whoop of delight, he pushed to his feet and pulled her up with him, whirling her around in a circle, grinning from ear to ear. “You're so beautiful when you

smile,” he told her softly, filled with sudden tenderness. “I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep you as happy as you are right now for as long as I live.”

“I believe you,” she murmured, and those words perhaps meant even more. Her trust meant everything to him.

Overwhelmed, he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, feeling as though it had been an eternity since he’d tasted her, since he’d felt the incredible rightness of being with her this way.

She wrapped her arms tightly around him, as though he was the only solid thing in her world, and passion exploded within him.

“I need you,” he groaned. “Please, darling. Let me inside of you.”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, Drake. I need you too.”

He picked her up in his arms and carried her across the room to the bed, laying her upon it and then covering her with his body, kissing her and pushing aside both her undergarments and his own, too desperate to take the time to undress either of them.

When he pressed deep inside her, the feeling of homecoming was undeniable. He’d waited his whole life for this woman, and he never wanted to spend another night apart.

“Say you’ll marry me.” He pulled nearly out and then pressed home again, his whole body trembling. “We love each other. None of the rest of it matters.”

“I’ll marry you,” she said, her eyes filled with such unmistakable love that he couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen it sooner. “I’ve never wanted anything more.”

“Thank God,” he murmured, then stopped thinking at all as ecstasy crashed over them both.



HEATHER LAY TANGLED in Drake’s arms, softly stroking his brow, listening as the house settled down for the night.

Allison was no doubt mad with curiosity, but her sister obviously knew how deep her feelings for Drake ran, and she would never insist that he leave.

She kissed his forehead, realizing how difficult this day had been for him. “Did you talk to Mortimer at all when you arrived at Broadmoor?”

He sighed and shook his head. “We didn’t talk, but I waited until after they’d put him in his cell, a cold sterile cage that wouldn’t be fit to hold an animal, and I looked at him through the bars. I needed to see that he couldn’t get out, that he’d never hurt you or anyone else again.”

She sensed that he needed to talk about it, so she said nothing, simply kept stroking his head, encouraging him to get it all out, here in the safety of this place they’d created for each other.

“They had him strapped to the bed, and he was cursing and screaming, demanding that they let him out, that he didn’t belong there. For just a minute, I thought of the boy he’d been, the big brother I wanted so badly to love me, but then I thought of Evelyn Lindsay’s mangled body, of him standing there this afternoon with a knife to your throat, and I knew he was exactly where he belonged.”

Silence fell between them for a while, as they both contemplated Mortimer’s fate, but Heather had seen the evil in the man’s eyes, and she had no doubt he was in the right place either.

Determined not to let The Viper steal any more from them than he already had, she put all thoughts of him away and concentrated on the beauty of their newly confessed love for each other, and the promise of all the good things to come.

“This morning, I was so certain I’d never have this,” she finally whispered, still stunned that he felt the same way she did, that he actually wanted to marry a lady’s maid when he could have had any woman of the *ton*.

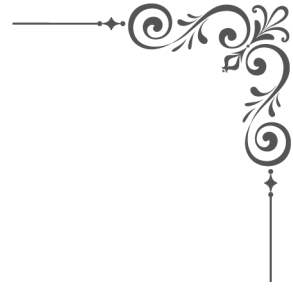
“You deserve nothing but good things,” he said, his arm tightening around her. “And I intend to give them all to you.”

“Do you want children?” she asked tentatively, having never truly allowed herself to imagine a family of her own. But his love had given her the courage to dream, and that was a dream she knew they could make come true.

“Dozens,” he replied sleepily. “You’re going to be a wonderful mother, darling. I know you’ll make each and every one of them know exactly how much they’re loved.”

Her heart broke a little as she thought of the lost, lonely children they’d both been, but it immediately lightened as she realized that he was right. Together they could do better. Together, they could do just about anything.

Closing her eyes, she snuggled against his strong chest, then drifted off to sleep, with images of the beautiful family they’d create dancing in her head.



Epilogue

October 1907

We regret to inform you that your brother, Mortimer Blackstone, the Marquess of Stonebridge, has succumbed to his madness. He passed away on October 2, of acute pneumonia. Please make arrangements to take possession of his body...

Drake let the letter he'd just received from Broadmoor Hospital fall from his fingers and sat back heavily in his chair. He'd only seen his brother once after he'd been committed five years ago. He'd gone there in '03 to tell him of their father's death.

When they'd brought Mortimer up to see him, his eyes had been completely vacant. Drake had known his brother had been subjected to all sorts of terrible "therapies," but whatever Mortimer had once been had been stripped away, leaving only a shell behind.

He'd thought about that a lot over the years, wondering if perhaps it wouldn't have been better for all concerned if Constable Pond's bullet had hit the mark, but then he'd remember Evelyn Lindsay and the others, the horrific things they'd endured before they'd died. Mortimer had deserved all that had happened to him and more. No punishment would have ever suited his crimes.

"What's wrong?" Heather asked, seeming to sense his disquiet. She'd been seated on the loveseat in front of the fire, watching their children, four-year-old Ian and two-year-old Lenore, tumble about upon the carpet, but now she stood and came toward him, leaning down to pick up the letter. She scanned it quickly, then carefully placed it on his desk.

"Oh, Drake," she murmured, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him tightly. "It's all right to feel sad. Despite everything he did, he was still your brother."

"I don't know if I'm sad," he said tightly, so many emotions whirling around inside him that he couldn't begin to

make sense of them. “I’m relieved, perhaps? Relieved that he can never escape or hurt someone in the asylum?”

She hugged him even tighter, then climbed on his lap, resting her head against his shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Later,” he said, knowing that eventually, he would need to work it all out, that she’d be the wonderful listener and confidant that she’d always been, and that their life would go on, perhaps even better than ever.

And it was already pretty damn good.

He took a deep breath and gazed at his beautiful children, both dark-haired and blue-eyed like his lovely wife. They’d been married for five years now, and being part of a family, having someone to love and hold and take care of, had been everything he’d always thought it could be.

There had been a little bit of scandal in the beginning, but they’d weathered it well, with the love and support of their friends the O’Briens, the Nesses, and all of the Strathmores. They’d created a little society of their own, and he and Heather both now felt like they belonged.

A thought suddenly occurred to him, and despite the news he’d just had, he couldn’t help but smile. “You’re a marchioness now, my darling. How does it make you feel to know that you outrank all of your friends?”

He’d taken on his father’s duties after Stonebridge’s death, and there’d been so much to do that he’d had to resign from his job as assistant police commissioner. There was a time when he’d seen himself as the top man, perhaps even had higher aspirations than that, but he’d been surprisingly glad to walk away from it all. He’d seen enough ugliness. All he wanted to do now was watch his children, crops, and animals grow.

A small smile curved Heather’s lips as well. “A marchioness?” A bubble of laughter escaped her. “I think I like that rather well.”

THE END

I hope you enjoyed reading Drake and Heather's story as much as I enjoyed writing it! If you did, I would greatly appreciate a short review where you purchased it or your favorite website such as Goodreads. Reviews are crucial for any author, and even just a sentence or two can make a huge difference.

This concludes my UNMASKING PROMETHEUS series. Or does it???

I'm fascinated with the 1920s and have considered writing three more books involving Gabriel, Samuel, and Hannah Strathmore. What will it be like for them to live through the horror of World War 1 only to spill out into the gaiety of the Roaring Twenties? In fact, I'm going to write a little Christmas prequel that you can get if you sign up for my newsletter. Are those stories you'd like to see me tell, or would you prefer that I stick to the Victorian Era? I'd love your feedback! Please feel free to email me and tell me your thoughts. I do have a little time to decide, as I've contracted to do several other projects next year.

My next release will be A SCOUNDREL IN GENTLEMEN'S CLOTHING, my contribution to the WICKED WIDOW'S LEAGUE, a fantastic series I'm collaborating on with seventeen of your favorite historical romance authors.

You can preorder it here!

[A SCOUNDREL IN GENTLEMEN'S CLOTHING](#)

You can contact Diana at Diana@dianabold.com

Visit her website at www.dianabold.com

Like her on Facebook for news and freebies

<https://www.facebook.com/Dianaboldbooks/>

[Diana's Bold Beauties | Facebook](#)

Diana is also one of the Brazen Belles, a group of twelve similar writers who have a really fun joint FB page! [The Brazen Belles | Facebook](#)

Click on the following link to sign up for Diana's newsletter.

[Sign up for Diana's Newsletter!](#)



OTHER BOOKS BY DIANA BOLD

VICTORIAN ROMANCE

BRIDES OF SCANDAL SERIES

[Gambling on the Duke's Daughter](#)

[Marrying the American Heiress](#)

[Seducing the Spinster](#)

[Finding the Black Orchid](#)

UNMASKING PROMETHEUS SERIES

[Masked Intentions](#)

[Masked Promises](#)

[Masked Desires](#)

[Dark Intentions](#)

[Dark Promises](#)

[Dark Desires](#)

[Once a Pirate](#)

[Fortune's Gamble](#)

FANTASY ROMANCE

[A Knight in Atlantis](#)

A Scholar in Wales – Coming Soon

WESTERN ROMANCE

LAST CHANCE BRIDES SERIES

[One Last Chance](#)

[Chance of a Lifetime](#)

[Love at Last](#)

[The Last Bride](#)

[Once a Gunslinger](#)

[Once a Mail Order Bride](#)

[Once a Bandit](#)

[Once an Outlaw](#)

Diana Bold has been writing since elementary school and never wanted to be anything but a writer. It took longer than she hoped to accomplish that, but she is now the award-winning author of more than thirty historical romances. She lives in the mountains of Southern Colorado with the love of her life, whom she met rather late in life but was worth the wait. When she's not writing, she enjoys traveling and genealogy.

Don't miss out!

Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Diana Bold publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

[https://books2read.com/
r/B-P-QJSG-OHVXB](https://books2read.com/r/B-P-QJSG-OHVXB)

Sign Me Up!

<https://books2read.com/r/B-P-QJSG-OHVXB>

BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.