



**MR. CLARKE'S
DEEPEST DESIRE**

ENTERPRISING SCOUNDRELS ♥ BOOK 2



SOPHIE BARNES

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Miss Compton's Christmas Romance

London, 1850

Having arrived in Mr. Hillsborough's cramped office some five minutes earlier, Rosamund Parker waited patiently while the solicitor riffled through a messy collection of papers, almost knocking over his teacup in the process. She pressed her lips together firmly and swallowed a sigh. The man had known this day would come ever since the first will was read last year. One would think he might have been better prepared.

Exasperated, she glanced at the only other person present – Uncle Howard, Papa's rightful heir to the title and thus the newly minted Earl of Stoneburrow. Nearing his fiftieth year, he did not look much more than thirty. Rosamund had always considered him a serious man, and he appeared especially so now, his expression appropriately somber, his gaze conveying the same degree of apprehension twisting her insides into knots.

It took great effort to keep from fidgeting while she waited, so she clasped her hands together tightly and forced herself to be still.

Having two wills that were equally binding was most unusual. So much so she'd never heard it done before. And

yet, Papa had managed. The letter he'd left behind as an attachment clearly requested that the first will go into effect if she'd not yet reached her majority at the time of his death and still remained unwed.

Both being the case, a year of mourning was expected to pass before the reading of the second will.

As if sensing her watchful gaze, Uncle Howard returned her glance. For a moment they merely stared at each other, then the ghost of a smile caught the edge of his mouth. It was followed by a comforting nod of acknowledgement, as though he meant to tell her she needn't fret – that all would be well.

It had been so far. Uncle Howard had offered support. He'd helped her according to Papa's wishes. She'd lacked for nothing besides her beloved father's presence. Forcing back the tears, she gave Uncle Howard a stiff nod in return.

Mr. Hillsborough cleared his throat, drawing both their attention. "Here we are. The late Earl of Stoneburrow's last will, consisting of no less than twenty pages. Most of it pertains to the final distribution of his assets, the majority of which shall naturally go to you, my lord."

"And the rest?" Uncle Howard inquired.

"It says here...ahem..." Mr. Hillsborough adjusted his spectacles. "I am leaving all of my worldly belongings to my brother, Howard Parker, with the exception of five hundred pounds intended for my daughter, Lady Rosamund Parker."

Rosamund snapped to attention. Five hundred pounds? That was all? She stared at Mr. Hillsborough in dismay. While no paltry sum for most people, it wasn't much for an unmarried woman of her social status. Good heavens. She couldn't envision it lasting her more than a year. If that.

Disappointment gripped her heart. She'd not expected this. Worse, she didn't understand it. Why on earth would Papa choose to do this? How could he be so cruel to deny her?

"Her dowry shall remain the same," Mr. Hillsborough read, offering some small measure of comfort. "A sum of three thousand pounds, to be issued in full by the bank upon receipt of a legalized marriage contract. With her mourning completed, it is my hope to encourage my daughter to marry expediently. I therefore forbid my brother from lending further financial support."

All hope for an easy solution slipped from Rosamund's grasp. She drew a shaky breath. Forget one year. If she weren't careful, her five hundred pounds would be gone before the end of the Season, since her inheritance would likely have to cover her maid's salary, as well as the cost of daily provisions. She clutched her armrest and tried to calm her breaths. She'd have to be frugal if she were to make the funds stretch.

Not so much because she had an aversion to finding a husband or because she didn't believe she could snatch one up. With her dowry worth three thousand pounds, any number of men would readily make her an offer – something Papa would have taken into account.

Even in death, he sought to see her settled, on the way to building a family of her own. Deep down, she knew his stipulations were made out of love, because her happiness mattered to him more than anything else in the world.

The problem was she did not want to rush into marriage or settle, lest she end up just as unhappily married as he'd been with Mama.

"I expect you'll want to return to Society now, so you can give the eligible gentlemen careful consideration," Uncle

Howard said once they were in their carriage and headed back to Grosvenor Square.

Unwilling to discuss her concerns, Rosamund forced a smile. “Yes. It seems I must set my mind to securing my future.”

“I realize the situation is not ideal – to be forced to find a husband the moment you’re out of mourning.” He shifted as though uncomfortable. “We’ve been happy to have you stay with us in the country this past year, but my family is fairly large, what with six children who’ve yet to fly from the nest. Squeezing all of us into one home has been a bit of a challenge.”

“I’m sorry if I’ve overstayed my welcome. I never intended—”

“You mustn’t apologize for accepting the help I offered. Indeed, it is I who am sorry for what you have lost. I’ll not make life harder for you by turning you out.” He gave her a frank look. “I’m not ready to move to London permanently just yet. Stoneburrow House is your childhood home, and you’ve always struck me as being responsible. So I’m going to let you remain there if you like, for as long as you wish. Provided you promise not to leave the house unchaperoned.”

The gratitude she experienced at those words could not be measured. It lessened part of the blow she’d been dealt that morning. “Thank you. That’s incredibly kind of you.”

He dipped his head before meeting her gaze. “And should your plan to marry fail, you may rely upon myself and Lady Stoneburrow to help you find an appropriate position, either as a lady’s companion or as a governess. There’s much we can do without thwarting your father’s will.”

As hard as it was, Rosamund managed a smile. She ought not be dissatisfied with her options. They were to be expected. And yet, she could not stop from wishing for more – for an opportunity that would afford her some level of independence. All she needed was time and the freedom to make her own choices.

For such a thing to be possible, she'd require an income. Not just any income, but a handsome one capable of sustaining her until she met the right man. Or decided to scrap marriage altogether and become an eccentric spinster.

Not too farfetched an idea, given the fact that it would be deuced difficult finding a man who would not just support her interests but let her pursue them with the passion she'd always longed to do.

“Will you be all right?” Uncle Howard asked when he dropped her off at her Mayfair residence. “Despite what I said, you're welcome to join me and my family in Sussex for a brief visit, if you feel like getting away from it all for a spell. I'm heading back there in the morning.”

“Thank you. But if I'm to find myself a husband, I probably ought to remain in London and get started. The servants are reliable. Mary, my lady's maid, will serve as chaperone, besides which I've close friends nearby. “

“I'll wish you luck then.” He seemed to consider what to do next and eventually gave a small shrug. “Please don't hesitate to write. My wife and I are both ready to offer advice should you need it.”

They parted ways as soon as he'd escorted her inside. Despite her offer of tea, he was eager to be on his way to his next meeting. Just as well. She wanted to be left alone with her thoughts. It was imperative she solve the puzzle pertaining to

her limited funds as quickly as possible so she wouldn't be forced to make a hasty decision regarding marriage.

Oh, how she wished she'd had the forethought to start doing so months ago so she'd not be in such a bind now. But that would have required a level of anticipation she'd sorely lacked. It never occurred to her that Papa's second will would make life harder for her. If anything, she'd imagined it would simply encourage her to stop mourning – to return to Society with renewed purpose.

In a way, this was the end result, though with demands and consequences she'd not seen coming. It felt like she was being punished when Mr. Hillsborough delivered the news, but now that she'd had some time to recover and reflect, she believed Papa had done it with the best of intentions. By forcing her to grow up and stand on her own two feet, he pushed her as he'd always done, to set a goal and strive to achieve it.

Having removed her black bonnet, she entered the parlor where she rang for some tea and sandwiches. She sank onto the sofa to think. Five hundred pounds was not enough capital with which to start a lucrative business, and seeking employment was not an option either if she meant to make an upper class match.

Perhaps she could sell some of her jewelry?

No, that was not a sustainable plan.

She thought of her friend, Miss Onnor Richards, who'd sold a couple of novels for which she'd received a fair sum of money, but shook her head. She herself had the creativity on par with a lump of clay and would not be able to come up with anything others would care to read.

Her skill at painting, while decent, was no more special than that of the next young lady's. Neither was her needlework. And since she couldn't compose to save her life, it was probably best if she dismissed the arts altogether as a means of survival.

No, her passion was science and progress – not really a source of great wealth unless she invented something. And since successful inventions required the spark of a unique idea, years devoted to research, trial and error experimentation, and funding, she'd only be wasting her time by attempting such an avenue.

Exasperated, she slumped against the back of the sofa and expelled a weary breath. She stared at the silk wall covering, at the intricate sage green pattern repeating across a paler green background. How did men manage? How had her father done it?

Rosamund straightened with a jolt. He'd invested.

She leapt up and hastened to her father's study. His ledgers and notebooks were neatly filed on a shelf. She grabbed his most recent ledger and began leafing through it.

There were all manner of things listed, from the cost of boot polish to a recently fixed carriage axel. But there were also payments made to various companies. She opened his notebook and read his bold script, choking slightly on a sudden wave of emotion. Papa had not been perfect, but he'd been there for her when she'd scraped her knee or asked for advice. And while he'd not understood her fascination with gears and mechanical things, she missed him dearly. He'd been her rock since her beloved mother's death ten years prior.

She took a slow breath, allowed her heart to unclench, and gave her attention back to the notebook. The names of several

companies appeared along with notations pertaining to profitability and projections for the future. There was a London newspaper, a coal mine, two cotton mills, the Cadbury Brothers, along with their competitor, Fry's of Bristol.

Rosamund scrunched her nose. She knew very little about journalism, mining, cotton, or chocolate. Although each company seemed like a good option to invest in, she'd hoped to find something she would be not only interested in but passionate about.

A name popped into view.

A&C Locomotive.

It was mentioned as a relatively new enterprise, a growing business Papa had been keeping an eye on.

Rosamund's heart gave a hard knock as her interest piqued. This was something she could envision herself supporting. And if she were able to make money off it too, then so much the better.

Satisfied with her find, she decided to set off for A&C Locomotive the following day with Mary in tow. The next morning, dressed in lavender taffeta and with her hair coiled beneath her bonnet, Rosamund hailed a hackney carriage and gave directions to the jarvey.

Although it was not her first excursion into the City, it was her first journey across it. Ordinarily, she stuck to Mayfair and its surrounds, and whenever she'd gone to the country, she and Papa had headed west on Oxford Street. Now she was travelling northeast, which opened a whole new world consisting of squatter buildings surrounded by steam rising from the gutters. There were merchants hauling carts, and delivery boys carrying brown paper parcels. A chimney sweep

hurried past in the opposite direction, a ladder propped high on his shoulder, while a flower girl called to those passing by.

The interesting mix of people going about their daily business helped the hour – long journey pass quickly. Even Mary, who'd seen much more of London than Rosamund, was captivated by the installation of a stained glass window in what looked like a newly built church.

The hackney turned onto a quieter street and gradually slowed to a halt. Rosamund alit to the cobbled road and took a moment to glance around while Mary climbed down beside her. Located in Bow, the area allowed for room to breathe. Buildings weren't crammed together and also looked a lot simpler – like they'd been built for practicality rather than aesthetics.

Tilting her head back, Rosamund read the sign adorning the red brick siding across the street.

A&C Locomotive.

Satisfied she was in the right place, she fished a shilling from her reticule and paid the jarvey. He touched the brim of his hat, thanked her, and snapped the reins. The action set the horses in motion and the carriage trundled off, hopping across the uneven street as it gathered momentum.

She returned her attention to the building, raised her chin with determination, and started up the front steps with Mary right on her heels. They entered through a black door with a transom window and immediately found themselves in a large square room with white walls, wood floors, and leather benches lining the wall. Tall glass windows at the opposite end brightened the space while offering a view of the courtyard below.

Rosamund took a sharp breath upon seeing the long row of buildings located on one side with railway tracks on the other. She instinctively rose onto her tiptoes in an attempt to see more, excitement causing her pulse to leap when she glimpsed what could only be part of a steam locomotive.

“May I help you?” asked a middle-aged man. He got up from behind a desk immediately to the right of a glass door leading onto some black metal stairs that descended toward the courtyard.

Recognizing him as an A&C Locomotive employee, Rosamund approached. “Lady Rosamund Parker to see Mr. Clarke, please.”

A flicker of interest appeared in the secretary’s sharp eyes. He raised his chin. “Do you have an appointment with him?”

“I’m afraid not, but I’m happy to wait until he’s free to see me.” Rosamund shot a quick look at Mary before adding, “We’ve come all the way from Mayfair.”

The secretary gestured toward the benches. “In that case, please have a seat over there, and I’ll see if he’s able to meet with you.”

Rosamund did as he suggested and glanced around the room. A potted plant stood in one corner while a clock on the wall above it showed the hour as being just after two. Rosamund drummed her fingers against her lap and glanced toward the glass door through which the man had vanished. Stretching her spine, she was able to see some of the factory workers milling about in the courtyard below.

She itched to take a closer look. After all, this was what interested her – this was progress. According to newspaper clippings she’d uncovered in her father’s study, Mr. Clarke

was an upcoming businessman known for creating an innovative steam engine designed to travel farther on less fuel. Rosamund was very excited with the prospect of getting involved in his work.

The glass door opened and the secretary stepped back inside the reception room. He hesitated briefly before telling Rosamund, "I'm afraid Mr. Clarke is too busy to see you right now."

"Oh." Rosamund bit her lip and did her best to hide her disappointment. She glanced at the clock once more. It was only ten after two. "I'm happy to wait."

The secretary firmed his lips. He tapped his fingertips lightly on the desk. "If you leave your address, I can inform you when he has the time to accept social calls."

Rosamund stared at him. "Social calls?"

"You are not the first woman to show an interest where Mr. Clarke is concerned."

It took Rosamund a good few seconds to comprehend what the secretary implied since it was so far removed from her own reason for coming. Her eyes widened. "I'm here on business, sir. As a potential investor."

"Ah..."

"Perhaps if you tell him this, he'll find a moment to spare."

"I'm afraid your reason for coming makes little difference. As I'm sure you can imagine, Mr. Clarke is a very busy man." The secretary retrieved a piece of paper and pencil from a drawer and placed them on the desk. "As I said, I'm happy to let you know when his schedule opens up."

Rosamund frowned at the paper and pencil. Intuition told her this man deliberately blocked her access to Mr. Clarke.

But why?

Unable to think of a good enough reason and unprepared to return home without achieving her goal, she turned to Mary and murmured, "Please wait here. I shan't be long." Raising her chin, Rosamund swept past the desk and toward the glass door.

"Hold on," the secretary exclaimed. "You can't go through there. Come back!"

Rosamund ignored him and opened the door. Moving quickly, she stepped out onto the metal stairs and descended toward the courtyard, the heels of her shoes creating a clanging sound with each hurried step.

"My lady," came the secretary's voice from behind her. "You mustn't be here. Please come back upstairs with me at once."

Rosamund turned, intent on pleading her case. "I just want to take a quick look."

The secretary's expression tightened. "This area is strictly off limits to uninvited guests and as I have already told you—"

"It's all right, Mr. Pinkerton," a man called from somewhere behind Rosamund. "Let her be."

Mr. Pinkerton huffed a breath. "It would seem Mr. Clarke has changed his mind."

The secretary disappeared back up the stairs, leaving Rosamund to seek the man she'd come to see. But when she glanced around, the businessman had vanished once more.

Instead, several of his workers had stopped to stare, causing self-awareness to flare inside her.

Until she spotted the engine and everything else faded into the background.

Inhaling deeply, she admired the glossy green paint and the gleaming brass trim as it sparkled beneath the afternoon sunlight. Ladders propped against either side allowed the workers to access the top, some busily tightening bolts while others appeared to be monitoring the stack.

Meaningful work was happening here and she wanted more than anything else in the world to be a part of it. Drawing herself up, she squared her shoulders and straightened her spine, then started forward. A group of workers near the engine noticed her approach and looked in her direction. Their faces were dusted in soot, their hands covered in grime. None wore a jacket or waistcoat, their shirtsleeves rolled up past their elbows to show off their equally dirty forearms.

Rosamund ignored them, her attention riveted by the perfect machinery right before her. Without thinking, she reached out her hand, sliding her gloved fingertips over the sleek paint.

“May we help you, miss?” one of the workers inquired.

Rosamund drew back and turned toward him, his question reminding her of her purpose. Facing him and the three other men who were standing behind him, she gave a quick nod. “I’ve come to speak with Mr. Clarke. Do you know where I might find him?”

Two men shifted, as if prepared to give her an answer, but a third pushed his way past them and gave her a slow head-to-

toe perusal. His hair was a mess, his features obscured beneath layers of filth, but his gaze was intense, his scrutiny so thorough it made her face burn hotter than ever before. Unwilling to let someone in his position upset her wellbeing, she forced herself to meet his gaze and hold it.

He produced a wry smile. “Who should I say has come to call?”

The other men frowned but chose to say nothing.

“My name is Lady Rosamund Parker. I am the late Earl of Stoneburrow’s daughter.”

If the man knew who her father had been, he offered no indication. He merely gave her a blank stare before glancing at his colleagues. “Are you able to finish up here while I help the lady find Mr. Clarke?”

The other men pressed their lips together, gave swift nods, and the man Rosamund had been speaking with gestured toward the right. “This way. If you’ll please follow me.”

He led her to one of the many doors set in a long brick building that stood on the opposite side of the courtyard. Upon opening the door, he stepped aside and held it so Rosamund could enter the space beyond, which turned out to be an office. A wide desk stood at the center with a comfortable looking chair placed behind it. Two other chairs intended for visitors stood opposite. A couple of technical drawings hung on the wall to the right, the clean lines of their thin metal frames and spotless glass providing a simple look not dissimilar to the reception area. The room was, she acknowledged, uncluttered and tastefully decorated, predominantly in masculine tones.

Rosamund’s gaze drifted toward the left until she spotted a screen over which a pair of men’s trousers and a jacket had

been neatly folded and hung. She quickly averted her gaze from the items and went to take a closer look at the technical drawings.

“If you would please excuse me for a moment, my lady.”

Rosamund glanced at the man who’d helped her, intending to thank him for his assistance before he went in search of Mr. Clarke. Much to her surprise, however, he stepped behind the screen rather than exiting through the door.

“What on earth are you doing?” she asked, appalled by the sound of water splashing. If she didn’t know any better, it sounded as though he were taking a bath.

“Freshening up,” he said.

She frowned at the screen. Additional splashing could be heard and then the trousers were pulled down and rustling sounds emerged. A minute passed before the scruffy man she’d met outside stepped from behind the screen. He was dressed in the clothes that had hung on the screen just moments before, his face now spotless and his hair neatly combed.

The transformation was irrefutable. He’d gone from unremarkable to heart-stoppingly handsome in less time than it took her to have her hair done in the morning.

Mouth dry, pulse racing, and feeling like an absolute fool, she stared at him as he strode toward her.

He stretched out his hand. A wicked gleam brightened his dark brown eyes. “Mr. Clarke, at your service.”

Matthew studied Lady Rosamund's features with interest. There was an almost perverse amount of pleasure in watching her eyes widen with shock as she realized he was the man she'd come to meet. He knew her well enough of course, which was why he'd asked Mr. Pinkerton to send her away. But then Lady Rosamund had, as so many pompous peers often did, decided she would not be told what to do. Which had prompted him to let her stay and deal with the consequence of her snobbery.

He didn't miss the flash of annoyance that crossed her face as she took his hand or the fact that she swiftly snatched hers away after barely one shake. It also didn't escape him that she looked vastly different from when he'd last seen her.

She'd been no more than ten years old at the time. Now, she was fully grown, with the sort of figure a man could easily spend his lifetime dreaming of holding close in his arms. Her light blonde hair, mostly concealed by her bonnet, appeared to have darkened with age. Delicate cheekbones and a slim nose accentuated the fullness of her lips while the azure blue of her gaze was like a lure, intended to captivate and enthrall.

Matthew steeled himself against her allure. Judging from the lack of recognition in her gaze, she had no idea they'd met

before and that they shared a past. Of course she wouldn't when he had been beneath her notice back then.

He almost snorted with disgust at the recollection of just how badly her family had treated him and his mother when they'd been in their employ.

It was almost serendipitous that Lady Rosamund was now here, seeking a meeting with him. He wondered what she might want. She was still staring at him as though he'd just materialized from out of nowhere.

He studied her with what felt like decades worth of pent-up contempt, while doing his best to keep his features carefully schooled. "Lady Rosamund. How may I assist you?"

She took a sharp breath. "I...um...That is to say...Oh dear..."

He couldn't quite stop from grinning at her dazed demeanor.

Embarrassment creased her brow and tightened her features. "Forgive me, Mr. Clarke, for not realizing sooner."

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he gave one shoulder a casual shrug and rocked back on his heels. "It's quite alright. Few would expect the owner of a company to work alongside his employees, least of all when the work involves getting grimy. But I've always enjoyed being involved and doing my part. It fills me with a great deal of satisfaction."

She seemed to consider this and then slowly nodded. "I think I understand."

Matthew seriously doubted it. This woman was made to lounge on velvet cushions while dressed in fine silks and Belgian lace. He didn't believe she'd dirtied so much as a

fingernail during the course of what he presumed must be nearly twenty years of her life.

Instead of saying so, he gestured toward the nearest chair and waited for her to sit before claiming his own seat opposite. “I trust you’ve not come to learn of my reasons for choosing to engage in manual work. So tell me, how may I be of service?”

Lady Rosamund straightened and seemed to consider how to proceed before finally saying. “I have recently inherited a small sum of money from my father.”

Matthew held himself perfectly still. He’d read about Stoneburrow’s death in the local paper last year. Satisfaction had been his first reaction at the time, followed by absolute nothingness.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he murmured without an ounce of feeling behind the words.

Lady Rosamund dipped her head in acknowledgment of the sentiment. “Thank you, Mr. Clarke. He was a good man, an excellent father, and is now sorely missed.”

Chest tight, Matthew gripped his armrest and clenched his jaw. He was unable to reconcile the man he had known with the one Lady Rosamund described. Based on his own experience, Lord Stoneburrow was a bastard who deserved to rot for the manner in which he’d wronged Matthew’s mother.

Rather than say as much, he flattened his mouth and waited for Lady Rosamund to continue. She fidgeted with her crisp taffeta skirt for a moment before explaining, “I would like to invest this money. While researching companies of interest, I happened upon yours.”

Intrigued, Matthew gave her an approving nod. “Go on.”

Lady Rosamund took a deep breath. “The sum at my disposal amounts to five hundred pounds. I should like to invest four hundred of that in A&C Locomotive.”

Elbows propped on his armrests, Matthew steepled his fingers in front of his face and acknowledged the expectancy shining in Lady Rosamund’s eyes. Clearly the woman believed he’d accept her offer without even flinching. After all, it was a substantial sum, especially for a company just beginning to make a name for itself.

What she didn’t count on, however, was the fact that Matthew would rather die than accept so much as a penny from the Stoneburrow coffers.

He leaned forward and braced his elbows on the desk. Schooling his features, he fixed his gaze firmly upon Lady Rosamund as he told her, “I’m sorry, but the minimum amount we accept from investors is one thousand pounds.”

The disheartened look in her eyes had a most unpleasant effect on Matthew. To his horror, he actually felt sorry for her. Hoping to lessen the feeling, he pushed a bowl of mints toward her. “Please have one. They’re quite good.”

She glanced at the sweets but made no move to take one. “Thank you, but I believe I must be going. Please forgive me for wasting your time.”

Pushing her chair back, she stood, much sooner than he had expected, her reticule clutched between her hands. A weak smile pulled at her lips and for one fleeting second Matthew was tempted to tell her he’d make an exception, that he would accept a four-hundred-pound investment and do his utmost to help it grow.

But to do so would be a betrayal of everything he believed in. A betrayal of his mother and the sacrifice she had been forced to make, a betrayal of himself and what he had become. So he kept silent and merely nodded.

Lady Rosamund raised her chin as if in defiance, but her eyes were overly bright, her posture too stiff. And it was then that he saw her desperation. For reasons he could not begin to comprehend, she needed the money, and he in his anger and stubborn need to reject anything with the Stoneburrow name attached to it had denied her.

“Thank you for seeing me,” she said. “I bid you good day.”

He wished her the same as she took her leave and disappeared from his life once more.

Expelling a breath, Matthew sank back into his seat and stretched out his legs. A headache was starting to form at the base of his skull. No doubt brought on by the irritation of realizing the revenge he'd just enacted wasn't enough. On the contrary, it left him more dissatisfied than before.

Eager to put the meeting behind him as quickly as possible, he stood and prepared to go meet his banker. Because the pitiful truth was he actually needed the money Lady Rosamund had offered. Without it the company would not be able to pay for the testing required or for the extra engineers he needed to hire if he was to outdo his main competitor, Harrington Engines.

Aware of his blunder and annoyed with himself for letting his pride get in the way of his company's best interests, Matthew snatched up his hat and set off. He'd find the means one way or the other without Lady Rosamund's help. Even if it meant attending the annual technological advancement party he'd been invited to. The event was scheduled to last one week

and was being hosted by the Earl of Westhaven, who just so happened to be the founder of Harrington Engines.

The retreat was intended to encourage men with similar views to engage in productive discourse and share business advice with each other. Prospective investors would also be invited and it was this aspect that saw Matthew heading toward the Westhaven estate in Somerset two weeks later.

Ordinarily, he hated socializing with the elite, but desperate times left him with little choice. Sighing, he leaned against the wall of his carriage and peered out the window as fields and meadows swept past. He'd not really thought of Lady Rosamund since they'd last met. *Really* being the operative word since the truth was far more complex than that. In fact, if he were being completely honest, he would admit that he'd thought of her quite a bit. Especially at night when he settled into his comfortable bed and his mind chose to linger on visions of her in that tightly fitted lavender gown.

Muttering a curse, he pushed her from his mind and did his best to bury the regret he still felt whenever he thought back on the harsh manner in which he'd turned her away. He could not afford to feel pity for her. Not if he was to stick to his principles and keep the promise he'd made long ago, to never ever again have anything to do with that family.

Instead he would focus on his ambition and his ultimate goal, which was to become so powerful that no other man would determine his fate. To this end, he'd worked hard. Relentlessly so. And it had paid off. He'd proven his worth to Mr. Reginald Anderson, the founder of A&C Locomotive. He was like a father to Matthew and, having no children of his own, he had left his entire company to him when he'd retired.

In the years since, Matthew had taken A&C Locomotive from a small mechanical steam engine manufacturing business, to a large-scale locomotive factory. But this had required funds – funds which had slipped between Matthew’s fingers faster than he could produce a profit.

Still, he believed in the company and the direction in which it was heading. He knew trains had to run faster. He also acknowledged that as new railway lines went down, trains would require more carriages too, and he wanted to be ready to meet supply and demand.

Hopefully the retreat at Westhaven’s estate would prove lucrative. All he needed was to convince one wealthy man of his vision, to make him believe in A&C Locomotive as much as he did.

With a new sense of hope burning behind his breastbone, Matthew alit from his carriage as soon as it pulled up to the sprawling manor.

He was greeted by a footman who came to assist with his luggage. Westhaven’s butler, who introduced himself to Matthew as Mr. Parks, informed the footman of the room to which the luggage ought to be taken before addressing Matthew.

“Several of the attendees have already arrived, sir. They are presently taking drinks on the terrace. Would you like to join them straight away or would you prefer to freshen up first?”

The sooner he met those present and got on with business, the better. Matthew conveyed this decision to Mr. Parks and allowed him to lead the way up the front steps and into a foyer that had been tastefully decorated in the Grecian style. Ornate Aubusson rugs dampened their footfalls as they crossed the

white marble floor. Keeping a steady pace, they continued through a hallway that opened onto a brightly lit sunroom where windows on all sides offered a charming view of the gardens.

Matthew glimpsed several people through the glass, their chatter increasing in volume as he drew nearer. Following Mr. Parks, he exited onto the terrace where his arrival was swiftly announced.

Westhaven, annoyingly handsome as always, stood next to the door and greeted Matthew first. “Welcome, Mr. Clarke. It’s so good to see you again.”

“Likewise,” Matthew lied. “Thank you for inviting me.”

The earl snatched a glass of champagne from a footman’s tray and handed it to Matthew. “I’ve been looking forward to picking your brain with regard to that innovative engine I hear you’ve been working on. But first, you must allow me to make introductions. Although I’m sure you’re acquainted with most of the people here, I don’t believe you’ve met my new silent partner, Lady Rosamund Parker.”

Rosamund knew Mr. Clarke would be joining them for the retreat. And she had not been looking forward to spending additional time in his company. Not after she'd learned of the lie he'd told her during their previous meeting.

Entering into business with Westhaven had offered some interesting insights, like the fact that several people she'd met thanks to this new acquaintance of hers had invested much less than four hundred pounds in A&C Locomotive. One of Westhaven's friends, a Mr. Elliot Green, had invested no more than fifty on account of the current management being too new and too risky to support larger funds.

It was, therefore, her intention to ignore Mr. Clarke completely during her stay at Westhaven Manor. She could not imagine his reason for turning her down, but since he had done so, she did not feel she owed him anything more than a passing greeting upon his arrival.

The man deserved no more. She certainly hadn't thought about him since the day he'd surprised her by transforming from a laborer into a perfectly dressed gentleman. To suppose she'd given his handsome appearance more than a passing bit of consideration would be ludicrous at best. So what if her heart began racing the moment he stepped out onto the

terrace? It was most likely due to how maddening she found him.

His intense dark gaze, the roguish smirk that pulled at the edge of his lips, and the angular shape of his jaw were infuriatingly pleasing to the eye, given how devilish she knew the man to be. And if that weren't enough, his perfectly straight nose accompanied by his tall, broad-shouldered body and thick coffee-colored hair, served no worldly purpose but to distract her.

The only rewarding factor was the look of shock on his face when Westhaven spoke of her as his partner. He turned to stare at her, the information clearly catching him by surprise. He hadn't known and why would he? It wasn't common knowledge after all. Her name wasn't noted anywhere in connection with the earl's, and besides that, their dealings with each other were relatively new, having begun no more than a week earlier.

And since she knew Westhaven's company, Harrington Engines, was Mr. Clarke's competitor, she rather delighted in knowing she'd gotten the best of the wicked man. He grimaced as if in an effort to gain control of his expression and whatever emotions were tumbling through his arrogant head at the moment.

Straightening, he cleared his throat and gave a short bow. "Lady Rosamund. We meet again."

Rosamund managed a slight smile. "So we do, though I must confess I wish you'd stayed away."

"You're acquainted with each other?" Surprise and something indefinable flashed in the depth of Westhaven's eyes. There one second, gone the next, too fast for her to pinpoint the exact emotion he'd just revealed.

“Yes.” Mr. Clarke, gave her a cool look. “Lady Rosamund came to me a couple of weeks ago and offered to invest in my company. I wasn’t interested, but you are clearly less picky, my lord.”

Rosamund bristled. How dare Mr. Clarke reveal that he’d been her first choice?

She shifted her attention to Westhaven, dreading his response, but he barely raised an eyebrow. Instead, his expression remained perfectly unflappable as he informed Mr. Clarke, “Only a fool would reject a lady. Especially one with an interest toward the future.”

Mr. Clarke responded with a tight smile. “Of course. Please excuse me while I go to greet the rest of the guests.”

He walked away, leaving Rosamund alone with Westhaven.

“You never said you went to him first,” Westhaven murmured as soon as Mr. Clarke was out of ear shot.

She closed her eyes briefly, then glanced at the earl. “I hope you can forgive me, my lord. I simply didn’t think it mattered.”

He held her gaze for a moment before eventually shrugging one shoulder. “I don’t suppose it does.” He offered his arm. “Perhaps you’d care to take a walk with me around the gardens. The roses are especially lovely this time of year as they begin to bloom.”

Rosamund took his arm and allowed him to lead her away from the terrace and from the man who somehow managed to bother her to no end.

“I cannot help but wonder at Mr. Clarke’s reaction to your being here,” Westhaven said as they strolled.

“Believe me, my lord, I am as stumped as you are. For reasons I don’t comprehend, he’s hostile toward me. It’s almost as though I’ve crossed him at some point, even though I only made his acquaintance recently.”

“Most surprising is the rumor suggesting he actually needs the funding. So why not accept your investment? What would possess him?” Westhaven appeared to give that thought serious consideration before saying, “He may be my competitor but I also know him to be a shrewd businessman. He’s not the sort to make decisions rashly. The company has always come first, and he has always based his business decisions on helping it grow. So why on earth would he do something so foolish as to reject the funding he so clearly needs?”

Rosamund had no idea. It was baffling and far too aggravating to warrant any further consideration. She’d already spent too much time trying to figure out Mr. Clarke’s reasoning. Whatever it might be, only he knew the answer.

Eager to speak of something else, she told the earl, “You’ve yet to tell me how Harrington Engines came to be. After all, it is unusual for a peer to enter into trade.”

“Trains have always fascinated me, and I was lucky to have a supportive father. He showed me it was possible to do as I wished, provided I was prepared to face scrutiny.” Westhaven dropped a look in her direction, his eyes sparkling with boyish enthusiasm. “Do you disapprove?”

“Not at all,” she confessed. “I like the idea of men and women pursuing their dreams no matter what it may entail.”

He gave her a satisfied smile. “I’m glad to have your support and your company for the duration of the coming

week. In fact, I look forward to furthering our acquaintance with one another.”

Heat filled Rosamund’s cheeks. The way he spoke would almost suggest an interest of a romantic nature. She considered the earl as he showed her the roses. At roughly thirty years of age, with auburn hair swept back from a face graced by kind eyes and a smiling mouth, he was a good looking man.

And yet, to Rosamund’s shame, he had no effect on her whatsoever. Not in the way Mr. Clarke did. With him, she’d felt an almost magnetic pull the moment they’d met. She’d experienced it again today on the terrace when he arrived and his gaze had found hers. For the briefest of seconds, she’d had the most ridiculous yearning for him to pull her into his arms and kiss her, right there before one and all.

Idiot.

She had no business wanting such things. Certainly not from a man who clearly hoped to avoid having anything to do with her.

Intent on ignoring him and whatever feelings he stirred in her, she gave the earl her full attention. “I look forward to getting to know you better as well, my lord.”



Matthew was trying damn hard to pretend interest in what Mr. Jonathan Bishop, the owner of Bishop Industries, was saying. But keeping his mind on the subject at hand was difficult with Lady Rosamund strolling about with Westhaven. They looked so bloody perfect together – he a good head taller than she and both dressed in complimentary shades of blue. It was enough to make even the most sober of men feel like gagging.

With a wince, he asked himself what the hell he was doing. Why was he letting Lady Rosamund get under his skin? It made no sense. He shouldn't care about her in the least. And yet his insides contracted when Westhaven dipped his head and murmured something close to her ear, prompting her to laugh with what appeared to be genuine amusement.

Matthew gritted his teeth. The urge to cross the lawn and smack them both was uncommonly tempting. He stiffened, shocked by his lack of composure and the alarming effect she seemed to be having on him. His heart beat an unsteady rhythm as he watched them stroll amid the roses. Somehow, he would have to avoid her for the duration of his stay lest he do something utterly foolish, like pull her into his arms and kiss that sensual mouth of hers.

Not good.

“And so, it would be ideal if we could join forces in order to lower the rates,” Mr. Bishop finished.

Matthew blinked. He'd no clue what the man was referring to. His ability to concentrate was clearly hampered by Lady Rosamund's presence. Yet another reason for him to be annoyed with the bothersome female.

“If you'll excuse me,” he told Mr. Bishop, “I'd like to go and change my boots.”

It was an asinine excuse at best, but a necessary one if Matthew was to maintain his sanity. What he truly needed was a very large glass of brandy to numb his senses and make Lady Rosamund's presence tolerable.

Rosamund enjoyed a lovely hot bath later that day, after which Mary helped her dress for supper. She did not elect to wear a gown cut from deep rose silk for Mr. Clarke's benefit, but rather because she wished to make a good impression on all those assembled. After all, she was the youngest attendee and as such, she knew she would be judged not only for her age but for her sex and intellect too.

This was a chance to prove she belonged.

Once again her thoughts drifted to Mr. Clarke. He'd wounded her pride by turning her down as though she were an entitled heiress in search of a new hobby. But she would prove to him and to everyone else that her interest in steam locomotives was more than a passing fancy.

Lord Westhaven spotted her first when she entered the parlor, which probably had a lot to do with him not only standing near the door but facing it while he conversed with Mr. Bishop.

Interest and admiration filled his gaze and yet...

Rosamund could not stop from breaking eye contact with him so she could map the rest of the room and its occupants.

Her pulse leapt the instant she spotted her adversary, even though his back was toward her. There was an almost challenging air about him, an obstinacy she couldn't quite walk away from no matter how distasteful she found it. Like a hangnail demanding it be picked, or a scab that simply had to be scratched.

Infuriating, came to mind.

"Lady Rosamund," Westhaven said, jolting her with the softly spoken reminder that she'd no doubt been lingering in the doorway for too long, staring at the back of Mr. Clarke's head while wishing him to perdition. "You look radiant."

"Thank you, my lord. You look rather dashing yourself. As do you, Mr. Bishop." Rosamund smiled at both men as she moved farther into the room, acutely aware of Mr. Clarke, who was standing nearby.

Westhaven caught Rosamund's arm and drew her close to his side. Still, she felt no more than friendly appreciation. Nothing at all like the shock of awareness she had experienced when she'd shaken Mr. Clarke's hand during their first encounter. Sparks had penetrated her soft leather glove then, igniting the skin of her palm and prompting a hasty retreat on her part.

"I was just beginning to tell Mr. Bishop about the new signaling system you and I were discussing," Westhaven said, bringing her focus back to the present. He shifted his posture to better address Mr. Bishop. "Lady Rosamund had the ingenious idea of implementing Jacquard's punch card system as a means by which to control signals along the railway line."

Mr. Bishop's eyebrows rose toward his hairline. "How innovative of you, my lady."

Rosamund's cheeks warmed in response to the praise. She'd never been the center of attention before, always preferring to keep to the periphery during social activities, aware that her interests and the subjects she liked discussing were unusual for a young lady. But here among these men, she finally felt as though she was being encouraged to shine, especially thanks to Westhaven's support.

"Go on, Lady Rosamund. Tell Mr. Bishop how you came up with the idea."

Rosamund hesitated only briefly before informing Mr. Bishop, "It seemed rather simple once I recalled the Jacquard loom and the Analytical Engine." She glanced at Westhaven, who gave her an encouraging nod. Calming her nerves with a deep inhalation, she continued. "The semaphore signals currently used require the manual control of levers and cannot be seen at night. Lights, meanwhile, can exist in various colors, depending on the glass casing. They're visible both day and night and, most importantly, are controlled by basic on and off switches. Creating a device that's capable of instructing the lights on a railway line to turn on and off from a remote location shouldn't be harder than using punch cards to weave intricately patterned fabrics or to produce mathematical calculations."

"What did I tell you?" Westhaven's voice was filled with excitement. "Lady Rosamund is remarkable, an absolute genius! My only regret is how long it has taken to find her, but at least she is among us at last. I tell you, Mr. Bishop, I cannot wait to tap her clever brain for additional ideas."

Mr. Bishop looked thoroughly impressed and Rosamund realized she'd drawn the attention of nearly everyone else in the room. Everyone with the exception of Mr. Clarke, who'd

moved toward the window, his attention fixed on the view of the gardens.

“Perhaps I can convince you to stop by my offices?” inquired a gentleman who’d been introduced to Rosamund earlier in the day as Mr. Stevens. “I’m in shipping and my company handles hundreds of goods each day. It would be wonderful if there were a way to automate the daily inventory. Is such a thing possible, do you think?”

“If you—”

“Now, now. There’s no sense in getting anyone’s hopes up,” Westhaven said, cutting Rosamund off. He drew her closer. “I’m afraid Lady Rosamund and I shall be very busy in the near future. She won’t have additional time on her hands for side projects.”

Rosamund bristled in response to his overbearing manner. After all, she was an investor not an employee. What right did Westhaven have to put her on display and then stop her from helping others? It made her look like an asset he had decided to show off rather than the business partner he’d told her she was.

Before she could figure out how to voice her objection, dinner was called and everyone moved to the dining room where she was unsurprised to find herself seated directly beside the earl. Honestly, his attention toward her was starting to border on the possessive. Nevertheless, she was grateful for the opportunity he had given her, and since he was a pleasant man to be around, she would not let his keenness aggravate her. Especially since he might just be trying to be a good host and help her fit in.

She actually ought to be glad to have ended up sitting with him instead of with Mr. Clarke. Thankfully, the owner of A&C

Locomotive was seated on the opposite side of the table.

But if she'd hoped to avoid conversation with him entirely, such hope was quickly dashed when the first course arrived and Mr. Clarke turned his attention toward her, his piercing gaze pinning her to her seat as he asked, "Were your parents supportive of this technological interest of yours, Lady Rosamund?"

"I...um..."

"You have to admit it is an unusual hobby for an earl's daughter to engage in. Then again, perhaps your dear papa was too busy to notice what you were up to." His gaze drilled into her as he spoke. "Or maybe he simply did not care."

The bitterness in his voice took Rosamund aback. Her stomach tightened with discomfort. For reasons she could not explain, it seemed as though Mr. Clarke despised her and her family.

Doing her best to keep calm, she told him firmly, "I can assure you, Mr. Clarke, that my father loved me a great deal."

Mr. Clarke scoffed and reached for his wine. Rosamund stiffened as heat engulfed her. She opened her mouth, prepared to give him a scathing response, when Westhaven spoke. "Mr. Clarke, your implication is highly inappropriate and unacceptable, especially given the fact that Lady Rosamund is only recently out of mourning. Apologize to her at once."

The ensuing silence was awful. No one looked at Rosamund. Instead, they dropped their gazes to their plates which only made her embarrassment grow until she hated Mr. Clarke with every fiber of her being. He was an abominable man who deserved to be tossed out on his ear and never spoken to again.

He did not appear the least bit chagrined however. Instead, he boldly stared at her from across the table. Eventually, when she thought she could stand it no longer, the edge of his mouth twitched until it became a partial smile. “Of course. Please forgive me. That was uncalled for.”

A brief hesitation followed and then the meal resumed as though nothing untoward had occurred, but the tension remained. Rosamund could feel it in the air; she could sense that something wasn't right and that everyone in the room knew it. Mr. Clarke had tossed down a gauntlet between them. If she had any doubts before as to where they stood with one another, the answer was now painfully clear. He was her enemy and she would do well to avoid him to the best of her abilities.



Matthew had been achingly aware of Lady Rosamund's presence all evening, ever since she'd entered the parlor before dinner. She'd caused the fine hairs at the nape of his neck to stand on end. Then later, during the meal, he'd thought to goad her for nothing more than the pleasure of watching her squirm. Her father had felt no guilt over telling his mother to go to the devil. The man had been desperate to get rid of her, to remove the threat she posed to his comfortable way of living.

Still, Matthew had to acknowledge he might have crossed the line. Instead of simply pestering Lady Rosamund, he'd been downright rude, and the hurt he'd seen in her eyes accompanied by confusion had made his heart clench with regret. No matter how much he wished to deny it, he hated himself for making her suffer.

Expelling a sigh, he reached for his brandy and took a long sip. At least now, with dinner finally over, he could enjoy a proper discussion with some of the men who'd shown interest in his business, without Lady Rosamund's presence. Having her prattle on about mathematics and science was far too distracting for him to focus on anything else.

She was certainly a curiosity and he had to admit that he found her knowledge downright impressive. He swallowed the rest of his brandy. Damn her, though, for showing up here and getting in the way of his plan. She was supposed to suffer the loss of an investment opportunity, not join forces with the likes of Westhaven, who could not seem to keep his bloody eyes off of her.

The earl was clearly smitten and who could blame him? Lady Rosamund was not only lovely to look at but also shared the same interest in technological advancement as everyone else present. She was, in short, the sort of woman who could inspire a man's hope of marrying a true partner.

Too bad she was Stoneburrow's daughter and not to be trusted.

"Tell me more about this engine of yours," the Duke of Ringwood said. He and his friend, the Marquess of Halifax, were two of the men who Matthew hoped would invest in his company.

Deciding to accept the distraction Ringwood offered, Matthew launched into a ten minute discourse, explaining his use of a newly developed technology his company had patented and its ability to ensure not only smoother but faster travel.

Ringwood and Halifax listened with interest until Matthew finished.

“I should like to visit your factory once we return to London,” Halifax said. “If I like what I see, I’ll provide you with financial backing. I’ll even put you in touch with the right people so you can be sure to win some lucrative contracts.”

Ringwood nodded. “The same can be said of me, Mr. Clarke. For if what you say is true and your numbers hold up, then there is no doubt in my mind that you have a promising future ahead of you in the locomotive business.”

Matthew thanked both men and shot a quick look in Westhaven’s direction. The earl was currently engrossed in a deep discussion with Mr. Bishop. Matthew decided he did not care about the subject matter, as long as he gained Ringwood’s and Halifax’s support. His prayers would be answered then and the future of A&C Locomotive secured.

“Shall we join the women?” Westhaven asked roughly half an hour later.

Matthew would much rather go to bed than spend additional time in Lady Rosamund’s company, but part of him was reluctant to leave her alone with the earl. Well, not alone *per se*. There would be other people around them, but that hardly mattered when Westhaven clearly sought more than a working relationship with her. The gleam in his eyes when he looked at her, as though she were a complex piece of machinery fitted with polished chrome and shiny brass bolts, bothered Matthew as much as the lady herself.

He ought not care what happened to her, yet the thought of her possibly being preyed upon nagged at his conscience.

Turning her away was one thing – he’d owed her nothing – but taking advantage of her vulnerability was something else entirely. She was after all an unmarried woman, too young and innocent to know what men were capable of. And there was no

doubt in Matthew's mind that Westhaven had plans where she was concerned. The calculating looks he kept sending her way were evidence enough.

Clearly, she needed a buffer – someone to keep her safe from Westhaven's advances. Her lady's maid wasn't enough. Nor were the other women present. Certainly not while she was here in the earl's domain.

With this in mind, Matthew gave up on retiring early and accompanied the rest of the men to the parlor, where Lady Rosamund was taking tea with Mrs. Bishop. The ladies fell into silence when the door opened and the gentleman entered. Mrs. Bishop, who'd been sitting beside Lady Rosamund, went to join her husband, leaving Lady Rosamund alone on the sage green silk upholstered sofa.

Westhaven stepped forward, his line of approach patently obvious.

With a few swift strides and a very ungentlemanly sidestep that placed him between the earl and Lady Rosamund, Matthew went to stand before her. He gave a short bow and wasn't the least bit surprised to see her expression grow wary.

Clearly she did not trust him. And why would she, considering how their previous encounters with one another had gone?

He pushed the notion aside, which wasn't hard to do when he was close enough now to see that her eyes were not simply blue, but contained a hint of green at the center. The effect was as captivating as the stray locks of blonde hair that had escaped her coiffure to curl against the side of her neck.

“Yes?” she inquired, her lovely pink lips parting ever so slightly.

Matthew blinked and promptly cleared his throat. "I was hoping you might take a turn of the room with me."

Lady Rosamund's expression became even more apprehensive. "I'm not sure doing so would be wise."

Matthew understood. He'd been beastly toward her since the first moment they'd met. All because he couldn't let go of the past. Considering what the past entailed, he wasn't sure anyone could blame him. He was his mother's only son and, in spite of his age at the time, it had been his duty to defend and protect her against all danger.

He'd failed miserably in this regard and now that the past had come back to haunt him, he could not help but see Lord Stoneburrow every time he looked at Lady Rosamund.

Still, he held out his hand. "Please."

With all eyes upon them, she had the power to give him the cut, to humiliate him and to get her revenge, but rather than do so, she placed her hand in his and allowed him to help her rise. Her slim fingers curled around his much larger hand to produce a shock so intense it nearly caused him to lose his balance.

He kept his footing, if only with the utmost of strength, and placed her hand on his arm. They set off together with him ensuring a measured pace since he knew the walk she'd granted him would end before he was ready. Until then, there was too much to be said, too much air to be cleared between them. Best get on with it sooner rather than later.

"Lady Rosamund, I hope you will accept my sincerest apologies for the ill treatment you have suffered on my account." He glanced at her and noted the high color in her cheeks. Her chin was raised at a sharp angle, her posture stiff,

her gaze fixed on the opposite side of the room as though she struggled to keep her composure.

“You have not only embarrassed me and denied me. You have insulted the memory of my father. Yet you expect me to simply accept your apology and move on as though nothing happened – as though you are not the most arrogant and presumptuous person I’ve ever had the misfortune of meeting.”

The set down was fiercely spoken with a venomous undertone that revealed how deep her loathing for him ran. He should not be surprised, but to his shock and utter dismay, he found himself experiencing two very contradictory sensations.

The first was disappointment on account of having lost her good opinion, which ought not to surprise him. How could it after the way in which he’d acted toward her?

Far more shocking, however, was the rush of desire he felt in response to her anger. Never before had he been more tempted to pull a woman into his arms and shower her with kisses. He wanted to taste her lips and soothe away all of those angry words. He wanted all that tightly controlled passion brimming with possibilities pressed up against him.

Good God, she’d made him go mad!

“Would you please stop squeezing my hand,” she said as they walked past the fireplace. “You’re hurting me.”

He’d not even realized he’d grabbed it and instantly loosened his grip. “Forgive me. For that and for everything else. Please, I beg you, I just—”

“What?” She looked at him with impatience. “I made your acquaintance for the first time just two weeks ago yet you act

like I've wronged you somehow, as though I deserve to be punished. For what, I cannot begin to imagine."

"You're right," he said, deciding it might be best to be honest, "and yet you are also mistaken. You and I didn't meet for the first time two weeks ago. We've known each other for years, though it has been more than a decade since we have seen each another last."

She glanced at him in surprise. Matthew hadn't meant to remind her about their connection, but his sudden intent of winning her favor had let the information slip. He took a deep breath and expelled it. He'd become increasingly conscious of Westhaven's scrutiny during the past few minutes. The earl did not look pleased and Matthew began to fear that one wrong move might lead to a challenge. Or his exclusion from the rest of the house party.

He drew Lady Rosamund farther along and away from Westhaven's prying gaze. "My mother and I were once in your family's employ. I was a hall boy while she was an upstairs maid. Suffice it to say, our employment did not end well."

Lady Rosamund was quiet a moment before she carefully asked, "What happened?"

"I'd rather not say."

She responded with an unhappy snort. "You're not being fair, Mr. Clarke. How am I supposed to defend myself or my family's actions if I don't know what the charge against us is?"

An excellent point. The problem was, the subject was not the sort of thing a man discussed with a lady. Least of all one with whom he'd shared only a brief acquaintance. It was uncomfortable and messy and it also posed the problem of causing her pain.

You should not care about that.

Yet Matthew hesitated. He did not want to trouble her with her father's sins.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Please accept my apology."

They'd returned to the sage green sofa so he released her and took a step back.

She held his gaze and for a moment they simply stood there, staring at each other until she eventually asked, "How am I to forgive a man I cannot trust?"

"I—"

"You clearly despise me, Mr. Clarke, and I'd be a fool to let my guard down around you henceforth." She took a step back, informing him that their conversation was at an end.

And then Westhaven swept in like some desperate swain eager to reclaim the lady's attention. He gave Matthew a stony look, then offered Lady Rosamund his arm and steered her away, leaving Matthew alone with two options: He could either stay and suffer humiliation or he could retire to the comfortable solitude of his own bedchamber.

Without hesitation he turned on his heel and strode off.

When Rosamund woke the next morning, she was no less annoyed than she'd been the previous evening. Somehow, Mr. Clarke had managed to do it again. Even when he'd tried to apologize for his previous actions, he'd stirred her ire. How this was possible was beyond her comprehension.

Equally confounding and concerning was the manner in which she'd responded to his touch. Again there'd been that spark of awareness the moment his hand connected with hers, and later, as they'd moved along the periphery of the room, there had been no denying the warmth seeping through her veins.

Indeed, she'd regretted his absence the moment they'd parted. It had also highlighted her lack of response toward Westhaven, for whom she'd felt nothing when he'd stepped in to take Mr. Clarke's place. As infuriating as it was to acknowledge, Rosamund could no longer deny her attraction to Mr. Clarke. Of course, as luck would have it, she'd rather toss herself off the nearest cliff than admit as much to the man himself.

"You look wonderfully rested this morning," said Mary when she came to assist Rosamund with her toilette a short while later. "I trust you slept well?"

Rosamund frowned at the maid and made a mental note to have her visit the ophthalmologist again when they returned to London. Her sight was clearly worsening if she failed to see the dark smudges beneath Rosamund's eyes.

"I have been told that horse riding is on the agenda this morning," Mary continued. She opened the wardrobe. "Which of your riding habits would you prefer to wear?"

Rosamund considered her two options briefly and eventually picked the dark green one. Expelling a breath, she took a seat at the vanity table so Mary could comb her hair. The maid plaited and twisted her blonde locks and arranged them in an intricate updo that would look elegant underneath Rosamund's hat.

Once ready, Rosamund descended to breakfast where she found several of the guests assembled, including Westhaven and Mr. Clarke. They stood when she entered the room. Westhaven even came to assist her with her chair.

Warmth filled his gaze and a smile touched his lips as he greeted her with a softly spoken, "Good morning, Lady Rosamund. You look incredibly lovely today."

She met his gaze and as she did so, a few creases appeared on his brow. His concern was evident as he studied her face more closely, but rather than mention her tired expression, he smiled more broadly and helped her into her seat, then called for a footman to serve her some tea.

By contrast, Mr. Clarke's gaze bordered on stern, yet it had the most delicious effect on Rosamund's nerves. For some peculiar reason, they danced in response, as though ignited by some electrical force.

“We were discussing pets before you arrived,” Mrs. Bishop informed her.

“Oh, and what sort of pets does everyone have?” Rosamund asked. She thanked the footman for the tea and set the cup to her lips for a sip. It was wonderfully hot, just as she liked it.

“You’ll meet my Rottweilers soon enough,” Westhaven said while buttering a piece of toast. “They were both locked up last night so as not to cause a stir, but I plan on letting them join us this afternoon.”

Rosamund tried to appear as calm as possible in response to this piece of information, but the truth was that dogs unnerved her. Especially the larger ones.

She set her cup aside with measured movements, keenly aware of Mr. Clarke’s continued attention, and made a deliberate effort to avoid looking at him.

“We have a couple of terriers,” Mrs. Bishop announced. “Sugar and Cocoa are their names – absolutely delightful company. Wouldn’t know what to do without them now that our children have moved away.”

“I too am a dog person,” said Hallifax. “I’ve got a spaniel named King.”

“What about you, Lady Rosamund,” Westhaven asked. “Do you have a dog by any chance?”

Rosamund selected a slice of toast from the breadbasket. “No. I’m afraid I do not care for dogs.”

“Do not care for dogs?” Mrs. Bishop exclaimed. “How is such a thing possible?”

“Well,” Rosamund told her gently, “I suppose it’s based on my experience with them. Having been bitten not once but twice as a child, I prefer to keep away from them altogether.”

“Then you and Mr. Clarke are of like minds,” said Mr. Bishop. “He has a cat instead of a dog.”

Rosamund’s gaze instinctively shot toward Mr. Clarke, who was in the process of taking a sip of his tea. Or was it coffee?

A fiery light filled his eyes and he set the cup aside. “I find them to be calm and independent creatures. A dog is far more needy and much more difficult to leave behind when one travels, as I so often do. With Pax, I need not have such concern. He can easily stay with one of my employees. In fact, my secretary, Mr. Pinkerton, often cares for him during my absence.” The edge of his mouth lifted. “If you don’t care for dogs, Lady Rosamund, maybe you too favor cats?”

Rosamund slowly nodded. She would not lie. Not even to thwart Mr. Clarke.

“I have a tabby named Minx.”

Mr. Clarke’s smile broadened until it became a wide grin. “Do you really?”

What followed was a highly peculiar moment during which Rosamund realized she shared an important preference with Mr. Clarke. Against all odds, they’d found common ground – a connection she didn’t share with anyone else present. The irony wasn’t lost on her. It was likely the cause behind Mr. Clarke’s display of humor.

Feeling her own lips start to twitch, Rosamund dipped her head and returned her attention to the toast which she

proceeded to butter with swift strokes of her knife. She would be damned if she let him know she shared his amusement.

“It doesn’t look like you slept well last night,” Mr. Clarke told her later as they rode out toward the fields. Westhaven, Ringwood, and Halifax led the way with Rosamund and Mr. Clarke immediately behind them.

She sent him a withering look. “If that’s an attempt at flattery, I fear you need more practice.”

“Just an observation,” he remarked. He kept quiet a moment before quietly saying. “If it’s any consolation, I didn’t sleep well either. Apparently a certain young lady has gotten tangled up in my brain. That set down you gave me last night was hard to forget and kept me from my rest.”

“If you expect me to apologize for it—”

“Of course not. In fact, I believe you were right to say what you did. I’ve behaved abominably toward you.”

“Why is that?” she asked, genuinely curious. “You mentioned having been in my family’s employ and it not ending well. Will you tell me what happened?”

He turned his attention away from her, giving his focus to the path they followed, and for a long moment, Rosamund was sure he’d say no more on the matter. Some birds chirped overhead and then, when she least expected it, Mr. Clarke surprised her.

“My mother was unmarried. She had me out of wedlock, but she was a good mother, both caring and loving. She did her very best to take care of me, and once I was old enough, I did what I could to take care of her.” Sentimental longing flickered in the depth of his dark eyes, as though a memory took him back to a long ago moment. “She was also incredibly beautiful

and as such, she drew the attention of men. Of one man especially.”

A sense of dread settled over Rosamund’s shoulders. She sent Mr. Clarke a wary look. “Go on.”

He eyed her for a moment, the plod of their horses’ hooves like warning bells encouraging her to change the subject. When she said nothing to stop him from telling his story, he said, “Your father took advantage of her.”

Rosamund sucked in a breath. Mr. Clarke’s implication was absolutely outrageous. “My father was a good man. He was honest and kind, loving and gentle. He would never cross the boundary between master and servant. How dare you imply otherwise?”

“Lady Rosamund, it is the truth.”

She shook her head fiercely. Her fingers tightened on the reins. “I don’t believe you. You’re lying.”

“I realize this must be difficult to accept, but the man you knew abused his power, and when he was through, he tossed my mother out on the street.”

“You’re wrong,” she said, her voice shaking with anger as she gave her reins a hard yank. Her intention was to steer her horse away from Mr. Clarke, but he reached out and grabbed the bridle, keeping her by his side.

“I can assure you I am not.” Mr. Clarke’s voice had hardened, his anger mirroring hers. “Mama became an inconvenience, a secret in need of covering up, and your father, the wealthy *Earl of Stoneburrow*, turned his back on her. He left her and her son to face destitution.”

Rosamund glared at him while clamping her teeth together so hard they hurt. “If that were true, then you would not be in

the position you are today. You would not be a prosperous businessman, the owner of A&C Locomotive.”

His answering laughter rang with incredulity. “You think so poorly of the common man you don’t believe it possible for him to rise up out of nothing and make something of himself?”

“It seems very unlikely if your circumstances were indeed as poor as you suggest.”

“And yet, here I am, proof that anyone can achieve greatness despite the odds stacked against them.”

“Not by honest means, I’ll wager,” she snapped. She did not intend to accuse him of being underhanded, but his insinuation had deeply wounded her. It sliced straight through her heart and made her lash out with the sole intention of hurting him in return. So she said the words without even thinking and watched as outrage filled his features.

“I am not a thief, if that is indeed what you are suggesting.”

“Perhaps not,” she answered, “but you are cruel and vindictive.”

“Better that,” he shot back, “than arrogant, entitled, and filled with misplaced pride. You have no clue what the real world is like, having never worked a day in your life. All you do is sit about on sofas, sipping tea and reading poetry, yet you have the gall to think yourself better than the working man without whom you wouldn’t even have a pot to piss in.”

Infuriated by his rudeness, Rosamund gripped her whip and smacked it across her horse’s flank so she could rid herself of the odious man’s presence. The horse gave a short whinny and shifted its weight in agitation before breaking free from the group at a gallop.

A shout rose behind Rosamund, but she chose to ignore it. She did not care if she made a scene right now or what anyone thought of her racing across a field at breakneck speed, pushing her horse as fast as she could. All that mattered to her in that moment was getting away from Mr. Clarke and his horrible accusation.

It couldn't be true. Of course it wasn't. He was simply an awful man. He'd been so since the moment they'd met, denying her the chance to invest then insulting her as soon as their paths crossed again. He was not to be trusted. What he'd said was a lie. Rosamund knew it deep in her breast, and yet a niggling seed of uncertainty sat at the back of her brain, taking root and spreading until doubt began to creep in.

Hooves pounded against the ground as she leaned forward on her saddle, gripping the reins while galloping onward, heedless of where the horse was headed. She didn't care; it didn't matter. Not when the only thing she needed right now was the freedom of flight.

Another shout swept through the air. Rosamund kept her attention firmly fixed upon the horizon, her heart giving a slight jolt when she spotted the tall fence that seemed to rise out of nowhere. Realizing she did not have time to stop since her speed was too great and would risk the horse rearing back and toppling, she prepared to make the jump.

But as soon as the horse leapt into the air, she acknowledged the instability of her seat and knew with a rising degree of panic that she was destined to fall. She did so as soon as the horse's front legs hit the ground, her upper body jerking sideways until she lost her balance completely. Her shoulder connected with the ground first, sending a jolt through her bones all the way down her spine. Her hip

slammed into the ground immediately after, followed by her legs.

Everything hurt.

“Lady Rosamund. Good God.”

A horse snorted nearby and Rosamund drank in the air. The ground shook as someone landed beside her. Booted feet came into view. She tried to push herself onto her forearm but gentle hands stopped her, and she was suddenly being swept into a pair of strong arms.

She whimpered slightly as the bruised flesh along the length of her right side was pressed up against a solid frame.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Mr. Clarke’s voice shook as though her life hung in the balance and he was afraid he might lose her.

She clutched at the front of his jacket and held on tight. “I just...” Her head hurt too much to think, let alone speak. “Had to get away from you. Please leave me be.”

He tightened his hold and squeezed her to him. “I’m sorry, but I cannot do that. I must get you back to the house at once so you can be properly cared for.”

Had he not said the terrible things he’d said, she might believe he cared. It sounded as though he did, and yet she knew that couldn’t be true when he so clearly despised her family and everything it represented.

But she was too weak to argue or to walk unassisted, so she let him take her wherever he wished while she slowly slipped into unconscious bliss.



Matthew held Lady Rosamund carefully but firmly in his arms as he carried her to his horse. It was a long trek back to the house, so they would have to ride, however awkward doing so with an unconscious woman would be. Dropping his gaze, he considered the feathering of lashes against her cheeks, the softness of her lips, no longer pulled into an unhappy grimace because of something he'd said.

He winced and cursed himself for the millionth time. Lord help him but he deserved to burn in hell for causing her such distress and almost getting her killed. His chest tightened and he hugged her closer, wondering at the way in which everything had changed between them within the space of a few seconds.

He'd been angry and hurt by her accusation – as hurt as she must have been by all the things he had told her. And yet, when he'd seen her fall, it had been as though his world had ended. Never before had he felt so utterly helpless, so out of control and at the mercy of the fates.

He'd never considered himself to be very religious, but he'd prayed with all his might as he'd brought his horse next to hers, as he'd leapt to the ground and crouched by her side. Relief had swamped him when he'd realized she was not just alive but prepared to resist his assistance.

With a pang of affection spearing his heart, he'd sworn in that instance that he would make everything right between them.

“Merciful heavens,” Westhaven said as he and the rest of the party arrived on the scene. “Is she well?”

“I believe so,” Matthew said, “though I'm sure she'll be cursing that fall when she wakes. She's bound to have a few sore spots, I reckon.”

Westhaven gave a noncommittal grunt, his sharp gaze fixed on Matthew with an almost damning degree of accusation. “What happened?”

Guilt bit at Matthew’s conscience, but he was no coward, so he would be honest and face the potential ramifications of his actions. “We argued and she fled.”

“Perhaps it would be wise if the two of you refrain from spending time in each other’s company.” The earl released the reins of his horse and leaned forward in his saddle. “Please hand her up to me so I can return her to the house. She’ll need her maid as soon as she wakes.”

Matthew instinctively drew back. Never before had he been so reluctant to let a lady out of his sight. Then again, he wanted what was best for her, and mounting his own horse with her in his arms would be a clumsy task that might do more harm than good.

With this in mind, he reluctantly approached the earl and maneuvered Lady Rosamund into his arms. They shared a brief look and then Westhaven turned his mount and set off at a canter, leaving Matthew behind with a strange new sense of possessiveness squeezing his ribs.

Mine was the only word filling his head as he watched Lady Rosamund being rescued by someone else.

Everything hurt, but the soothing hot bath Mary prepared for Rosamund when she returned to her bedchamber helped. Rosamund had been surprised when she'd woken in Westhaven's arms. They'd been on his horse and for the longest moment she had pretended to still be unconscious while trying to come to terms with what had happened and how she felt. Because the strangest and most alarming thing of all was that she wished she were still being held by Mr. Clarke, even though he was the man who had driven her to stupidity.

It made no sense whatsoever unless she'd also hit her head.

Raising one hand, she felt the back of her head, expecting to find a massive lump there, but everything seemed to be perfectly fine. The only places where she truly ached were on her shoulder, the length of her arm, hip, and thigh.

With Mary's help, she climbed from the tub, dried off, and put on her nightgown. A tray had been brought up so there was no need for her to go down to luncheon. Instead, she got into bed and ate her food there, grateful for the rest and for the chance to ponder her feelings in private.

The bath had worked wonders for her body, but her mind was still in a muddle. She couldn't possibly have started to

like Mr. Clarke, could she?

Of course not. That would be too absurd.

“Try to get some sleep, my lady,” said Mary once Rosamund was done eating and she removed the tray.

“I’m not very tired,” Rosamund said only to follow her statement with a yawn.

Mary smiled. “Of course not. Just close your eyes then and try to rest until I return.”

Seeing as her eyelids were slightly heavy and her pillow the most comfy thing in the world, Rosamund had no choice but to heed the advice. When she opened her eyes next, the light in the room had dimmed, alerting her to the passage of time.

She turned her head until she found Mary. The maid sat in a nearby chair, mending Rosamund’s riding habit. A piece of black braiding had been torn loose from the cuff of her jacket, which was also missing a button.

“How long did I sleep?” Rosamund asked, drawing Mary’s attention.

“A couple of hours.” Mary set her mending aside and approached the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Much improved, just like you said I would.”

Mary’s eyes softened and her posture appeared to relax. “I’m very relieved to hear it.”

“In fact, I think I’d like to dress so I can return downstairs for afternoon tea.”

“Are you certain that’s wise, my lady? You took a terrible fall this morning. In my estimation you ought to remain in bed

for the rest of the day.”

“I’m not sick, Mary, so staying in bed for hours on end will only aggravate me.” When Mary gave her an uncertain look Rosamund added, “Nothing is broken. I’m just a bit sore on one side. And besides, I feel the need to move about, if only a little, and to get some fresh air.”

“Very well,” Mary agreed even though she didn’t look too convinced. “Just as long as you stay away from that Mr. Clarke fellow. According to Lord Westhaven, he was responsible for what happened to you, and I won’t have him making matters worse.”

“Thank you, Mary. I appreciate your concern and shall certainly keep your advice in mind.” It would be wise to do so, even though the strangest compulsion within made her eager to see him again.

It defied all logical explanation. Considering the terrible start to their acquaintance and everything that had happened since, he was without a doubt the very last man on earth whose company she should look forward to keeping. By contrast, Westhaven was a much better option. He was both kind and polite, which could not be said of Mr. Clarke.

And yet, it was Mr. Clarke she thought of and Mr. Clarke’s embrace she missed. It was him with whom she envisioned something that could not be put into words.

Irritated by her irrational way of thinking, Rosamund collected her shawl and left her bedchamber. Keeping a slow and careful pace since her right foot still hurt, she proceeded toward the parlor first because this was where she expected to find a few of the house party members. The room, however, was empty, so she continued her progress toward the far end of the house where a pair of glass doors led onto the terrace.

But before she reached the end of the hallway, the library door swung open and Mr. Clarke stepped into her path. He froze when he saw her, and Rosamund's heart gave a jolt in response to the hard look in his eyes.

“What are you doing out of bed?” he demanded, the low firmness with which he spoke vibrating around her until her skin started to tingle, even as reason reminded her she ought to quit his presence.

“I—”

He grabbed her hand before she was able to say one more word and ushered her into the library with him. The door closed with a soft click, alerting her to the fact that she now found herself in the very situation all young women were warned against.

This was unwise. She ought to leave at once, yet she could not seem to make her feet move. So she simply stood there, paralyzed, staring at him like a cornered rabbit, waiting to see what he would do next.

He swallowed and raked both hands through his hair before rubbing his brow. A couple of deep inhalations followed. He let the last breath out slowly and seemed to consider her overall appearance.

“How are you?” His voice had a low rumble that did all sorts of funny things to her insides.

She attempted a smile. “I could be better, I suppose.”

His eyebrows dipped, creasing his brow. “Did I hurt you just now when I—”

“No. I'm just a bit sore still, but all things considered, I am well. Thank you for your assistance. As I recall, you came to my aid first.”

He stared at her. “I am the reason you fell. Had it not been for me and the things I said you wou—”

“You’re right.” The words fell between them, much louder than she’d intended. “What you told me upset me beyond all reason. It hurt, but I said things as well – things I shouldn’t have – things I regret. I let emotion guide my actions.”

“It was still wrong of me to rile you.”

“Perhaps, but I’ve ridden my entire life, Mr. Clarke. I knew better than to send my horse tearing off at a dangerous pace over unfamiliar terrain.”

He closed his eyes briefly. A painful expression materialized upon his face, drawing his features tight. When he opened his eyes again, he looked at her with the same sort of desperate yearning she felt. Butterflies swarmed her stomach. Her pulse leapt in anticipation. His gaze held hers for what felt like a lifetime, and then, when she feared the air might snap between them, he finally pulled her into his arms.

Hesitantly, as though she were a wounded filly who’d bolt at his touch and hurt herself further, he raised his hand and pressed it to her cheek. It was unlike anything Rosamund had ever experienced – so achingly beautiful in its simple perfection. His thumb stroked over her skin and her eyes slid shut as a sigh shuddered over her parted lips.

“You are without a doubt the most confounding woman I’ve ever met.”

She opened her eyes and saw the burning intensity with which he watched her. “And you, Mr. Clarke, are without a doubt the most infuriating man I’ve ever encountered in my life.”

“You aggravate me to no end.”

“You irritate me beyond reason.”

“Bothersome minx.”

“Annoying cad.”

His nostrils flared and Rosamund felt the tension between them tighten. Something dangerous flashed in his eyes. He drew her closer, his breath ragged as his hand slipped toward the nape of a neck.

She too was breathing hard. Unable to resist the pull, the inexplicable need for something more – some means by which to reach a culmination to this constant arguing they were engaged in – she grabbed his shoulder and held on tight.

“We shouldn’t be here like this,” he whispered, his breath hot against her temple.

“Then leave.”

“I was here first.”

“And I wouldn’t be here if not for you.”

His gaze dropped to her lips. “Aggravating female.”

She did what she could to ignore the pulsating beats of her heart. “Pesky rogue.”

He raised an eyebrow. The edge of his mouth lifted with devilish mischief. “Pesky? Is that really the best you can do?”

“I could have used tiresome instead.”

“That’s hardly any better.”

“Then how about vexing, troublesome, provocative or—”

His mouth captured hers, silencing her with a hard kiss that threatened to light her on fire.

It was perfect and exquisite – utterly divine. The press of his lips against her own was like nothing else she'd ever experienced before. She'd never felt more alive. The passion he'd awoken within her was both relentless and invigorating. It made her crave more.

So she wound her arms around his neck, ignoring the soreness in her right arm and shoulder. Her fingers crept into his hair, holding him to her as she continued to savor each new sensation. His solid body pressed up against her and then her back connected with something hard – the wall, she realized with a slight wince.

He instantly loosened his hold and eased back a little. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s nothing,” she assured him. “No harm done.”

He searched her eyes briefly, then lowered his mouth once more for a slow and tender caress that made her toes curl in her slippers. His fingertips traced the curve of her neck, and she forgot time and place as he gently nipped her lips, prompting a gasp that invited him in.

What followed was a sensual exploration that threatened to be her undoing. It was, in a word, devastating, for there was both pleasure to be found in each touch and every heartbeat, but there was also the stark awareness of the man who instilled all these powerful feelings within her.

She did not like him. In fact, she loathed him. And yet, he made her want things she'd never wanted before, and in so doing, he made her hate herself too. For what sort of woman was she, to secretly hope a man she despised would touch her in the most intimate places? It was wicked beyond compare, completely sinful, and it had to stop now.

Before he became her ruin.



Who the hell would have thought a woman like Lady Rosamund, prim and proper and perfectly respectable by all accounts, would kiss with such unfeigned passion?

Good God. He'd kissed dozens of women over the years, but none had affected him as much as she. The fervor with which she approached the kiss, like an eager explorer embarking upon a grand new adventure, was both refreshing and thoroughly moving.

There was an innocence to her that made him want to be the man who gave her whatever her heart desired. And the taste of her was divine, decadent, and rich. It was the sort of flavor he knew he'd never tire of no matter how many times they kissed.

The eager touch of her hands caressing his hair, the tiny moans and whimpers that rose from her throat, and the way her back arched with abandon instilled a ravenous want within him. Hell, his body was more than ready to give her what she needed and then some.

"Mr. Clarke." A voice cut through his lust-filled thoughts. Her hand pushed him back.

Panting for air, Matthew stared at her in silent expectation. The dazed look in her eyes was confounding, her kiss-swollen lips an invitation for more. He dipped his head, prepared to resume where they had left off, but she sidestepped the advance and held up one hand.

“No. We should not be here. We should not be doing this. You must...” She shook her head and eyed the door. “My goodness, what was I thinking? What were *you* thinking? To take advantage of me like that is most—”

He barked a laugh that echoed around them. “Do not pretend you weren’t as invested in our embrace as I was, my lady, for I dare say the manner in which you gripped me, the way in which you returned my kisses, and those sweet sounds of pleasure you made would contradict such a lie and — Ow! What the hell was that for?”

She’d punched him in the shoulder with surprising force for a woman still suffering from a fall. He stepped back and rubbed the spot while giving her an accusatory look.

She stared right back. “You really are insufferable, do you know that?”

Matthew prepared to respond, but before he could manage another word, she’d swung away and opened the door. Seeing her limp a little, Matthew thought to caution her, but before he could speak she’d already stepped out into the hallway. A gasp followed.

“My lord,” Matthew heard her say, “What a surprise to find you here.”

“Is everything all right?” Westhaven’s voice held a hint of suspicion. “You look a bit flushed.”

Matthew, who’d retreated from the door with every intention of hiding behind an armchair, chuckled. Yes, she looked delightfully so, thanks to him.

“Oh?” Lady Rosamund said, her voice tightening as she spoke. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Given your recent fall and the fact that you seem to favor your left side due to some lingering pain,” Westhaven continued, “it might be best if you were to stay in bed for the rest of the day.”

“Thank you for your concern, my lord, but the pain isn’t all that bad and I’m weary of resting. In fact, I came downstairs intending to take tea with the rest of the party, only I cannot seem to locate anyone. But now that you’re here, perhaps you’d care to join me?”

“I would be delighted to do so. The weather is pleasant, so if you agree we can call for tea on the terrace.”

“Oh yes,” Lady Rosamund said. “I’d like that.”

“Here, take my arm for added support.”

The pair headed off, leaving Matthew with the sinking awareness that Westhaven had, for the second time that day, made off with the woman Matthew desired.

Rosamund spent the rest of the day and the next doing her best to steer clear of Mr. Clarke. His kiss in the library had muddled her brain and left her more confused than ever. After all, she detested him, didn't she? And despite the care he'd shown her when she'd fallen, she knew he detested her too. Yet somehow they'd kissed and...

Lord help her, she could feel her cheeks flush at the mere memory of it. The passion, the need she'd experienced for something more – for added closeness between them – still shocked her.

It was absurd to want such intimacies with a man she did not get along with. And yet the memory of his embrace stayed with her. It left her heart beating frantically whenever she'd happened to glance his way and had found his heated gaze upon her, the intensity of his dark eyes piercing her to her very soul.

It would be dishonest to say she did not find him extremely handsome, but it was more than that. It was a gravitational pull – an inescapable magnetism that defied common sense.

“It's your turn, Lady Rosamund,” Westhaven said, snapping Rosamund from her reverie.

Blinking, she considered the arches through which she was meant to send her red Pall Mall ball rolling. Mr. Clarke, who stood near Mrs. Bishop at the far end of the circuit, waited with a considerable degree of expectancy. They'd paired up in teams, with Rosamund partnering Westhaven, Mr. Clarke playing with Mrs. Bishop, Ringwood with Halifax, and Mr. Stevens with Mr. Bishop.

With the soreness from her fall greatly diminished, Rosamund gripped the handle of her mallet firmly and narrowed her gaze on her ball. Glancing up, she caught Mr. Clarke's gaze and tightened her hold. Then, without further thought, she swung her mallet and sent the ball flying, not through the hoops as required, but straight toward Mr. Clarke, who barely managed to leap aside before the ball hit his shin.

"Well done," Westhaven murmured, his tone dry.

Mr. Clarke sent Rosamund a disgruntled look. "It would appear as though you need more practice," he called. "The ball is supposed to go under the arches, not over it."

"And it certainly shouldn't be aimed at your opponents," Mrs. Bishop said with marked disapproval.

"Perhaps Lady Rosamund has realized that the simplest way to win is by taking them out one by one." Ringwood grinned.

Rosamund pressed her lips together, angry with herself and with Mr. Clarke for making her lose her composure. "I'm sorry," she said. "Forgive me. It was not my intention to strike you, Mr. Clarke. My mallet simply caught the ball at the wrong angle."

"I'd say," he muttered, then took his turn with much less aggression than what Rosamund had displayed just moments

before.

The game continued with Rosamund and Westhaven losing on account of her ill-timed shot.

“Not to worry,” Westhaven said as they packed the game away later. “He gets on my nerves too.”

“It’s kind of you to say so,” Rosamund said. “But the truth is that I behaved badly and in so doing, I ruined the game.”

He studied her for a moment, then glanced toward the house. “Perhaps refreshments would be in order?”

Rosamund considered the earl. He looked especially handsome right now with the sun falling on his blonde hair. His eyes were bright with a sense of hopefulness that made her wish she felt just half the attraction toward him as she felt toward Mr. Clarke.

Why, oh why could she not want the earl with the same degree of fervor as she desired the devilish rogue who kept getting under her skin?

“Thank you, my lord. Perhaps a bit later?” When he arched a brow in question she said, “I feel the need for a brisk walk. If you’ll excuse me.”

She quickly turned and hurried away before he could offer his escort. All she wanted right now was to be alone with her thoughts, all of which centered on one annoying man.

Mr. Clarke had made insinuations about her and her family, her father especially. He’d done so without offering any details of what he believed had occurred. This prevented her from not only knowing if his resentment was well-founded but of giving her the chance to defend her father’s actions.

She hated him for it. What was worse was what had happened later in the library. He'd riled her with every comment he'd made, increasing the tension between them until the kiss had become an eventuality.

But because of her animosity toward him, she felt horrible for surrendering in such a way – for sharing with him what should have been saved for that perfect someone she hoped to one day marry.

No. It was more than that. It was because she'd enjoyed it that she felt so guilty about it. Mr. Clarke hadn't forced her to kiss him back. On the contrary, she'd welcomed the advance. Even when he'd paused to check on her wellbeing, she'd let him continue immediately after.

Frustrated, Rosamund hugged her arms around herself as she walked toward the pond where a well-trodden path led between a cluster of trees. The path turned up ahead where it followed the embankment toward a more densely forested area on the opposite side.

A gentle breeze tickled the nape of her neck. Bees buzzed among the wild flowers nestled between the path and the water. With no recent rain, the ground was comfortably dry and posed no risk to her slippers.

She took a deep breath and expelled it while idly wondering how her uncle, aunt, and cousins were faring. She would see them soon once she returned to London and they arrived there as well. With the Season well underway, Uncle Howard would expect her to participate in all manner of social events. He'd want her to look to her future.

Based on her choices, Rosamund preferred to marry since she dearly wished for a family of her own. She just didn't want to marry for the sake of marriage alone, so she was pleased to

have the income she received from her investment in Harrington Engines, along with the small compensation Westhaven had provided her with in exchange for her ideas. It gave her the freedom to delay an attachment until she met the right man with whom she could see herself spending the rest of her life.

A twig snapped and Rosamund started. She glanced around, searching for the source of the sound. A small rabbit bounded out from between the trees and raced away, disappearing from Rosamund's sight. She expelled a sigh of relief and took a deep breath, which caught in her throat when Mr. Clarke stepped onto the path up ahead.

"You should not be here." She stared at him, her stomach already turning itself inside out.

He stood before her, tall, broad shouldered, and much too intimidating for her liking.

Biting her lip, she glanced around and regretted not having asked Mary to join her. Or Westhaven, for that matter. She'd rather have the earl's company at the moment.

"Neither should you," Mr. Clarke informed her lightly. "Most people would think it unwise for a lady to risk being alone with the man she recently tried to murder."

"Murder?" Rosamund laughed. "I did no such thing."

"Is that so?" he asked and took a step closer, prompting hot little sparks to skitter across her skin. "You could have fooled me with that strike. After all, you had perfect aim and skill until you decided to launch the ball in my direction."

"It was no less than what you deserved," she countered, even though she knew riling him would be a mistake. But there was something about him that made her reckless and

argumentative. He bothered her and in so doing he brought out a devilish streak she'd not even known she possessed.

“You certainly caught me by surprise.” His eyes flashed as he moved toward her again. She retreated a step without looking away. “And here I was, thinking you and I had come to an understanding yesterday afternoon in the library. After the kiss we shared there can be no denying the attraction between us, however inconvenient it may be.”

The fact that he would bring it up so boldly infuriated Rosamund to no end. She raised her chin in defiance and straightened her back, heedless of what the repercussion might be.

Narrowing her gaze, she told him bluntly, “I’ve had better, Mr. Clarke, so whatever you think is between us is only a figment of your imagination.”

Before she could turn on her heel and walk away, leaving him there as she'd intended, he closed the distance between them. Grabbing her arm, he hauled her sideways, away from the path and between the trees. A gasp was all she had time for before she found herself pressed up against the hard trunk of a birch with his body looming over hers.

He gripped her chin with strong fingers and forced her to meet his gleaming black eyes, to note the firm set of his jaw and the unforgiving line of his mouth. And yet, despite his aggressive posture and the rough manner in which he'd handled her, Rosamund wasn't the least bit afraid.

If anything, she secretly thrilled at the idea of sharing additional kisses with him. However unwise, however scandalous and potentially ruinous, she could not resist wanting whatever Mr. Clarke offered, even though she knew she would surely regret her surrender later.

“My imagination has no bounds where you are concerned.” His voice was dangerously low.

A shiver raced down her spine. Stiffening, she steeled herself against the effect he was having on her and told him bluntly, “And yet, your previous kiss left much to be desired.”

“Is that so?” he growled.

Rosamund forced herself to hold his gaze, to not retreat, but to meet him with equal daring even though she feared she was fighting a losing battle.

“Yes,” she whispered, annoyed with herself for how weak the word sounded.

His gaze dropped to her lips, the tightness with which he held her jaw lessened. “Then I’d best make sure this kiss is more memorable than the last.”

She could protest, push her way past him, and leave. He gave her the time she needed to do so if that was what she truly desired. But she didn’t. She stayed. And slowly closed her eyes in anticipation.

A languid caress followed. The slow slide of his mouth against hers, the gentle press of his lips and the slight give-and-take as he deepened the kiss were different from the heated exchange they’d shared in the library, though no less exciting.

It was decadent in the extreme, like taking a bite of rich dessert, knowing each mouthful would add an additional pound yet lacking the strength to offer resistance. So she gave herself up to temptation and savored each moment, the slight touch of one hand creeping slowly along the edge of her jaw while the other hand found her waist before slipping lower.

Rosamund sighed with approval as he spread his fingers across her hip, pressing his hand into her flesh until she felt scorched and branded.

Sandwiching her securely between his strong frame and the solid birch, he drank from her mouth without restraint, tasting her as though she were the last drop of water on earth. And she reveled in the wild display of passion, matching his every caress with an answering need. Her arms wound around his neck drawing him to her while he let his fingers trail down the side of her throat and toward the edge of her shoulder.

“The fire burning beneath your prim demeanor is more intoxicating than anything else I’ve ever known,” he murmured, his breath tickling her skin as he scattered kisses across her flushed cheek. “It makes me want things I’ve no business wanting. Hell...if you only knew half of what I’ve imagined doing with you, you’d probably smack me.”

He followed this statement with a deliberate squeeze that caused her to arch up against him.

“Mr. Clarke,” she gasped.

“Matthew,” he amended with a low chuckle that vibrated through her while one daring finger slid over the edge of her décolletage. “Is this kiss more to your liking?”

“No,” she lied. “I still find it lacking.”

“Really?” He nipped at the spot where her neck met her shoulder, producing a shudder that swept the entire length of her body. “In that case I’ll have to try harder.”

Before she could figure out what he implied or where it might lead, the afternoon breeze cooled her flesh as he pulled down her bodice and lowered his mouth.

The kiss that followed was absolutely indecent and yet incredibly delicious. It prompted a thousand new sensations to build inside her, leaving her breathless. With each caress, he made her crave more of him, more of his touch, more of his wicked mouth doing unspeakable things.

“I could feast upon you forever and never go hungry again.” His hand roamed over her thigh, bunching the fabric of her skirt. Glancing up, he met her gaze and held it. A devilish smile pulled at the edge of his mouth – the sort of smile that could make a girl forget her own name. “Is this the sort of kiss you hoped for?”

“No,” she whispered, her voice breathy.

A rough growl emerged from his throat as he straightened to his full height. His hips pushed boldly into hers, pinning her against the tree. One finger slid over her lower lip. “Indeed, I must confess it doesn’t quite satisfy me either.”

For the longest most tortuous moment, he simply stood there, staring into her eyes, leaving her wanting and hoping for something she couldn’t define. And then, with the unpleasant force of dropping cold water over her head, he yanked her gown back into place, released her, and took a step back.

”Forgive me, Lady Rosamund, you make me forget myself.” He glanced around as though searching for something. When he looked at her again, the desire he’d made her privy to earlier was gone, hidden behind schooled features. He cleared his throat and gave a stiff bow. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Before Rosamund had time to blink, he’d walked away, leaving her standing there against the birch, feeling not only monstrously stupid but also completely and utterly unfulfilled.

Matthew spent the rest of the day and the entirety of the next one contemplating his most recent kiss with Rose, as he'd taken to thinking of her in the privacy of his own mind. She was without a doubt the most infuriatingly charming woman he'd ever encountered, and damn him if he'd not been seconds away from taking her, a gently bred woman, against a tree.

It had required tremendous restraint on his part to realize the danger he'd posed to her and for him to refrain from acting on impulse.

Standing near the parlor window after supper, he sipped his drink and stared at the darkness beyond while ignoring the rest of the room's occupants, including Rose. If someone had told him two months ago that he would encounter Stoneburrow's daughter again and that he'd be given the chance to treat her with the same disrespect her father had treated his mother, he would have welcomed the opportunity for such revenge.

Now, having spent some time in her company, having gotten to know her, having sparred with her and realized how sharp-witted she could be, having held her in his arms after she'd had a dangerous fall while panic impaled him, he found

himself incapable of causing her additional harm. Worse, he suspected he might even care for her on some level.

Focusing his gaze on the reflection in the glass, he singled her out. She sat on the sofa, conversing with Mrs. Bishop and Ringwood. About what, Matthew had no idea since he was positioned too far away. But he could appreciate the slight tilt of Rose's chin and the smile on her lips as she spoke with animated interest about some subject she clearly cared about. Steam locomotives, he wagered, or possibly cats.

The edge of his mouth twitched at the thought and she suddenly glanced toward him. Her attention, it would seem, upon his reflection. He allowed his smile to broaden while holding her gaze in the window. It was but the briefest acknowledgment – a fleeting connection that vanished as quickly as it had formed when her attention was pulled away by Westhaven, who'd chosen that exact moment to join the small group.

Matthew downed the remainder of his drink and set his empty glass on a nearby side table.

“If you'll forgive me,” he said, “I believe I'll retire. Thank you for yet another enjoyable day, Westhaven. I commend you on your excellent hospitality.”

He quit the room as soon as everyone finished wishing him a good night and went to prepare for bed. The alternative was to spend additional time torturing himself in the company of a woman he knew he didn't deserve.



When Westhaven found Rosamund the following afternoon, she was on the terrace taking tea with Mrs. Bishop. The pair

had been discussing the mechanics of combustion engines and how to make them more efficient – a delightful distraction from Rosamund’s chaotic thoughts pertaining to Matthew.

All day yesterday she’d half expected him to corner her and kiss her once more. Instead, he’d kept his distance, muddling her mind even more than if he’d tried to seduce her. Worst of all she kept hoping she would run into him, that he would press his advances upon her again, and take things one step further than before.

It was enough to make her go mad from the yearning he’d managed to build inside her, this need for something...more. Good Lord, even her dreams had become rife with promise, leaving her in a flushed state when she awoke in the morning.

“Lady Rosamund,” Westhaven said, interrupting her thoughts. “I was hoping for a moment of your time. Provided you’re able to spare it.”

“Of course. As long as Mrs. Bishop doesn’t mind.” Rosamund glanced at the older woman.

“Not at all, my dear.” Mrs. Bishop smiled. “I am perfectly content to sit here and enjoy the lovely view of Westhaven’s garden.”

With no excuse to deny the earl’s request, Rosamund stood and accepted his arm. Moving with confident steps, he led her down the wide expanse of stone steps and onto a graveled path then steered her toward a small pavilion. A couple of sparrows hopped around up ahead, pecking the ground before taking flight as Rosamund and Westhaven approached.

“I wanted to tell you that I’m extremely pleased to have you as my partner in this venture of mine.” Westhaven slanted a look in her direction. “I will admit I was skeptical at first,

considering you're a young lady with no significant experience in the area of engineering, but you've both surprised and impressed me with your extensive knowledge. My admiration for you has increased tremendously during the course of our brief acquaintance."

Pleased by his praise and recognition, Rosamund gave him a grateful smile. "You flatter me, my lord."

"On the contrary, I aim to tell you the truth and to convey the depth of my growing...ahem...affection for you."

Affection?

Rosamund's footsteps faltered. A clammy sensation swept over her skin, causing her to shiver. "Oh...I um..."

"It appears as though my feelings surprise you." His eyes crinkled around the corners as he led her into the pavilion. He released her arm so he could take her hand instead. Raising it to his lips, he placed a brief kiss upon her knuckles.

"I really hadn't considered..." She took a deep breath, casting about for some means by which to change the topic. She knew she was being dishonest, for the truth was she'd noted his high regard and had secretly been dreading this moment for some time.

"Then I would encourage you to do so." Holding her hands between his own, he gazed into her eyes with so much determination it made her uncomfortable. "Please know that I wish for our partnership to breach the professional bond we've formed and to develop into a far more personal attachment. To be clear, Lady Rosamund, I would like to court you with every intention of making you my countess."

It took great effort for Rosamund not to gulp on the heels of such a declaration.

“You do me great honor,” she said, and instinctively bit her lip.

He raised an eyebrow. “I sense some hesitancy within you. Do you not agree that we would make a phenomenal match?”

“Oh yes. I am certain we would, it’s just...” She struggled to find the right words. How could she possibly explain emotions that she herself had trouble untangling? More to the point, how could she turn down a handsome earl when he was every young lady’s dream without causing offense or looking as though she were cracked in the head?

As if sensing her distress, Westhaven proved himself to be as kind as always by saying, “Give it some thought, my lady. I merely meant to let you know I would very much like to call upon you when we return to London. Not as a business partner, but as a friend who dearly hopes to be more to you in due course, if you’ll simply give me the chance to prove myself worthy.”

Oh, how she wished her heart would start racing right now or that her stomach would tumble over with pleasure at hearing those words. Westhaven was the perfect gentleman suitor, a man she ought to consider as her future husband. He would be the wise choice, the sensible choice, the sort of man her father would have wanted her to end up with. He was titled, wealthy, clever, and kind, but to his detriment, he wasn’t Matthew.

That evening after supper, the rest of the party chose to play cards, but Rosamund preferred to play the piano, allowing Matthew to come and join her.

As soon as she finished playing a piece by Bach, he took advantage of the chance to address her directly.

“I saw you with Westhaven earlier.” He leaned across the glossy piano wood and pierced her with his dark gaze. “What did he want?”

Pretending indifference, she leafed through the sheet music as if attempting to find another sonata. She shrugged one shoulder. “To call upon me once we return to London.”

Matthew’s eyebrows snapped together. Creases appeared at the bridge of his nose. “He wants to court you.”

“Yes.” She dropped her gaze and kept it purposefully averted from his.

“And?” he queried, his voice intense.

“And what?” she hissed, darting a look toward the tables where the rest of the guests were thankfully keeping busy with their card play.

“What did you tell him?”

“That I’m flattered and honored.”

“Of course you are,” he muttered dryly. “You would be. After all, he is an earl.”

Matthew’s comment caught her completely by surprise. Her gaze shot toward his, allowing her to catch a brief flicker of insecurity, there one second, gone the next.

And just like that, she was forced to reevaluate everything she knew about him. The self-assurance he put on display, the arrogant look in his eyes whenever he spoke to others, the manner in which he seemed to command attention, even his physical strength and dashing good looks, all of it somehow seemed overshadowed by a keen sense of inferiority.

There was no denying the difference between him and everyone else in the room. He was by his own admission the

son of a maid while he himself had been in service. Not just any service, but in *her family's* service.

She wondered what this must mean to him after everything she had said, and it caused her heart to fill with a new sort of feeling – with a feeling not entirely of compassion or sympathy, but something far more dangerous.

It encompassed a need to reassure him, the desire to make him know how wonderful he was despite his humble beginnings. For although they might have started off at odds with each other, she could not deny the respect she had for him and the ingenuity of the engine he had developed. It took a man of great creativity and intellect not only to build a business like A&C Locomotive but to design such a piece of machinery.

Rising from the bench on which she sat, she then walked around the piano so she stood before him and, with an innate need to put him at ease, she chose to speak from her heart.

“You are correct. Lord Westhaven is an earl and as such he would make an excellent suitor for any young lady who’s looking to marry, but he’s not you.” Feeling heat rise to her cheeks she hastily added, “You are a self-made man who’s managed to thwart the obstacles in his path in order to rise above Society’s expectations. That, in my estimation, is not only impressive, but a far more admirable achievement than being born with a title.”

Before he could form a response, she quickly said, “You’ve yet to tell me how you did it.”

She was genuinely curious to know.

Matthew shifted his gaze as if to assess the rest of the room before returning his attention to her. “Take a turn with

me and I'll explain."

He offered his arm and she hesitated only briefly before accepting. That same jolt of awareness she'd experienced before when she'd touched him shot its way through her until her entire body hummed with energy.

His muscles tightened beneath her hand, alerting her to the fact that he'd felt it too. Fearful of what she might find if she met his gaze at that very moment, she took a steadying breath and allowed him to lead her on a stroll of the room's periphery, past a Chinese vase and a painting that looked to be done by Vermeer.

They were just circumventing a small side table with spindly legs and an ornate clock perched on top when Matthew drew her closer to his side and said, "When Mama left Stoneburrow House, she was forced to seek new employment. With a child to feed, she was desperate. I won't elaborate on what her desperation led to, but she was lucky to make the acquaintance of Mr. Reginald Anderson when she did. Thankfully, he turned out to be a good man who took an instant liking to her. As their acquaintance deepened, he developed a fondness for her that eventually led to an offer of marriage."

Rosamund suppressed a small shudder as she listened to Mr. Clarke's account. For a woman to face such hardship when she had a child to care for was utterly chilling. Especially if what he'd said about her father was true.

It couldn't be. She refused to believe it. Papa had been a pleasant sort, incapable of such malice. If he'd sacked Matthew's mother, he'd surely done so for good reason, even if Matthew failed to see this.

“Mr. Anderson started Anderson Locomotive,” Matthew continued. “When I developed an interest in mechanics and engineering, he offered me a position within the company, even though I was still just a child at the time, no more than fourteen years of age. But I was willing to work hard and to learn. With time, I proved myself so capable that Mr. Anderson chose to transfer the company to my name when he retired, at which point he changed the name to Anderson and Clarke Locomotive, or simply A&C.”

Rosamund squeezed his arm as they passed a tall window framed by green curtains. “Mr. Anderson doesn’t just sound like a good man but rather like a godsend. I’m glad he was willing to help you and your mother make better lives for yourselves. I’m also deeply sorry for whatever role my father played in all of this.”

“I must confess that I have always resented your father for what he did and for the struggle Mama and I were forced to face before Mr. Anderson came into our lives. But fate does work in an interesting way. Had events not played out as they did, it is unlikely that you and I would be having this conversation.” He sent her a meaningful look. “Indeed, there’s every chance that I would have stayed in service and that I would not have become the owner of a company as large and prosperous as A&C Locomotive.”

Rosamund considered this point for a second and decided she had to agree. Being turned out of her home had given Mr. Clarke a tremendous opportunity – one he probably wouldn’t have had otherwise. And so, in a strange sort of way, she was glad her father had done what he had, for in doing so, she’d had the chance to meet a remarkable man.

Unsure of exactly where they stood with each other at this precise moment yet irked by the thought of never seeing him again once the house party ended, Rosamund dared herself to be brave and to ask, “Perhaps when we return to London you would be willing to give me a proper tour of your company? I should love to see it in earnest.”

His hand settled over hers and his thumb gently stroked across her skin. “I would be honored to give you a tour, Rose.”

The low timber of his voice accompanied by the shortening of her name sent warm little ripples across her shoulders. She shivered ever so slightly.

“Can you forgive the abominable way in which I treated you when first met?”

“I believe so. You had your reasons and while I did not understand them at the time, I do now, even though I should still like to know what Papa accused your mother of in order to properly assess the situation for myself.”

“I’d rather not elaborate, but with regard to your visit of A&C Locomotive, you may rest assured that nothing would please me more than to give you a tour. Especially if there is some assurance of more heated kisses.”

This last part was said in a low whisper, so close to Rosamund’s ear his warm breath stirred the fine hairs at the nape of her neck while heat rushed to her cheeks.

“Matthew,” she gasped while darting a glimpse in Westhaven’s direction. Thankfully, he was in deep conversation with Halifax. “You should not say such things.”

“And yet I cannot seem to restrain myself when you are near.” Leaning in, he added, “I’m tempted to be reckless.”

Heat flushed her entire body. “You’ve certainly proven yourself to be quite the rogue.”

He chuckled with a wicked sort of undertone that instantly made her wish they could be alone behind closed doors.

“I’m beginning to think you like that,” he said. “You certainly seemed to enjoy it both in the library and among the trees.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” she told him, adding a deliberately haughty sniff.

This prompted a full-bodied laugh that banished any last traces of animosity as companionable comfort settled between them. “If that’s your honest verdict then I shall simply have to continue my attempts at changing your mind. And you may rest assured that I look forward to that with great fervor.”

Rosamund knew she ought not delight at the prospect of sharing more kisses with him. He wasn’t the sort of man she ought to have even the slightest interest in. Yet she could not help herself. For some inexplicable reason, he drew her to him with such magnetic force it would take tremendous resolve for her to resist. More importantly, she realized later that evening as she settled into her bed, she had no desire to try. Instead, she relished the prospect of giving in to his future advances.

As sorry as Matthew was to return to London and give up seeing Rose over breakfast and throughout the day as he'd done for the past week, he was equally excited at the prospect of taking her out for rides in the park, calling on her with flowers, and showing her his place of business. Of course, he also looked forward to the prospect of kissing her again.

He wasn't delusional, however. He knew he could never hope for more than a passing flirtation with her. Not so much because of the role her family had played in his life or what he'd lost because of them. He'd already acknowledged that Rose wasn't to blame. But that didn't change the fact that he himself was a nobody. Worse even, considering he had once been in her father's employ.

It did not matter what he'd made of himself since. Nothing would ever change his birthright. Or the fact that he wasn't her social equal and never would be.

She deserved to marry a man of her own station. Not Westhaven. His eager pursuit of Rose didn't sit right with Matthew. But there were other eligible bachelors to consider. Halifax, for instance, would make a phenomenal match.

He decided to tell her as much when he stopped by her townhouse a few days later. But when she arrived in the parlor to greet him, the sparkle in her eyes and the instant smile curving her lips distracted him completely and made him forget the words he'd rehearsed.

Instead, he found himself saying, "It's a beautiful day. I thought we might take a walk in the park."

"Oh, I should love that." She dropped her gaze and her smile deepened. "Are those for me?"

Recalling the bouquet of peonies he'd brought, he hastily shoved them toward her. "Yes. I went to the hothouse intent on purchasing roses, but then I smelled these and knew you had to have them."

She accepted the flowers and buried her nose between the pink petals for a deep intake of breath that filled Matthew's heart with warmth.

"They're perfect," she whispered. "Thank you ever so much. If you wait a moment I'll fetch my bonnet and we can be off."

"I must confess," he told her later as they strolled, "I wish we could be alone."

She glanced over her shoulder before telling him plainly, "I have my reputation to consider. Stepping out in public without a chaperone would be frowned upon, and besides, I promised my uncle I'd take Mary with me whenever I left the house so he wouldn't need to worry."

"Of course. I understand, and I even agree. It just limits what you and I are able to do together, that's all." He sent her a mischievous grin with every intention of weakening her knees, and was pleased by the blush that rose to her cheeks.

“Like sneaking behind some bushes to steal a kiss?” Her voice was light and teasing.

“Given the fact that you’ve challenged me to do better, I thought it might be prudent of me to get started as soon as possible.” This produced a delightful laugh that he wished with all his heart he could bottle up so he would be able to listen to it whenever he felt the need to lift his spirits.

“Not to worry.” Rose’s eyes sparkled while sunshine danced over her flawless complexion. “I promise you that you shall have the chance to prove yourself worthy. Not today, perhaps, but in the future. Like during that tour you promised to give me of A&C Locomotive. I’m sure I’ll be able to find some means by which to distract my maid while I’m there.”

Tell her she’s making a grave mistake. Tell her to set her sights on someone else. Tell her you have no interest in taking things further and that she’d do well to forget you.

He wanted to do the right thing and prepared to do so when she surprised him by saying, “Is it not incredible how all this color around us is caused by the reflection and absorption of light and by how we observe it? Most people take it for granted. They do not stop to consider how or why these aspects governing every part of the world we live in have come to be. They do not care to understand why objects fall to the ground rather than float in mid-air. It doesn’t interest them to know why the seasons change or why certain foods taste different from others or even why a ball set into motion doesn’t keep rolling forever.”

Lord help him if she were not the most glorious creature he’d ever encountered. He could listen to her forever and never grow tired. The same sort of questions that always intrigued him seemed to fill her mind too.

While he'd realized she had a keen understanding of science, it hadn't occurred to him that she saw the world much as he did, like a puzzle forming a picture made up of intricate pieces, visible only to those who sought a deeper level of understanding. To the rest of the world, it was just a pretty picture.

And it struck him in that moment while listening to her speak that there was no one quite like Rosamund Parker. She was unique in every conceivable way, and even if he had a million years, he'd never be able to forget her. More than that, he wasn't the least bit ready to push her out of his life forever.



"The Earl of Westhaven is waiting for you in the parlor," Rosamund's butler informed her when she and Matthew returned from their walk. She'd enjoyed their outing tremendously and regretted having it come to an end. She also regretted the shuttered look Matthew wore in response to the butler's announcement.

"Of course he's here," he muttered. "Why wouldn't he be?"

"I did give him leave to call on me."

"Yes. I know. I just..." He glanced toward the parlor door. "Be careful, Rose."

She gave a short laugh of surprise. "Of what?"

"Instinct tells me he has ulterior motives where you are concerned." He grabbed her hand and gave it a hasty squeeze before releasing it once more. A weak smile touched his lips. "I probably sound like a jealous fool."

“Maybe a little, but I wouldn’t like other women calling on you either.”

He cleared his throat. A quick nod followed. “I suppose I ought to take my leave so you don’t keep your guest waiting.”

“No,” she said, causing his eyes to widen with interest. “You should stay. In fact, I would very much appreciate your doing so.”

It would, she hoped, make her meeting with Westhaven less awkward and prevent the earl from pressing unwanted advances. There was also the added benefit of letting Matthew know she favored his company rather than the earl’s and of reassuring him that he was the man she preferred spending time with.

“Lady Rosamund,” Westhaven said when she entered the parlor. He glanced past her at Matthew and for a second his smile faltered, though it only took one split second for him to recover. “Mr. Clarke. What a.... delightful surprise.”

“Likewise,” Matthew replied and quickly stepped past Rosamund so he could extend his hand. The earl shook it. “Your house party has already yielded results. Ringwood and Halifax have both invested in my company, offering me some much needed funds with which to push it in the desired direction. So you’d best watch out, Westhaven. There will be competition on the horizon.”

Westhaven grinned. “I’ll welcome it since that is the natural road toward advancement.”

He turned his attention to Rosamund. “These are for you,” he said and offered her a bouquet of white roses. “I was hoping you might be free tomorrow evening. *The Marriage of Figaro* is playing at The Royal Opera House, and I would

dearly love to invite you to join me in my private box. Your maid is naturally welcome as well.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Rosamund gave him a friendly smile while taking a moment to gather her thoughts. “Ordinarily I would be most delighted, but I fear I’ve already accepted an invitation from Mr. Clarke.”

Much to her relief, Matthew’s face remained unchanged, though she was sorry to see regret pull at Westhaven’s lips. He gave a swift nod of acceptance before suggesting, “Perhaps the day after tomorrow then. Following the Harrington Engines board meeting. We could take dinner together at the Imperial Hotel.”

Rosamund stared at him. Was Matthew right to be concerned?

The earl did seem rather keen.

Then again, he had spoken of his intention to court her. To do so he obviously had to spend time with her. And with Matthew here, he probably realized he had competition. No reason to second guess him because of what Matthew had said. She just wished she’d accepted the first invitation since this would have saved her from a lengthy conversation with him. Now she would have to sit across from him for at least two hours.

She stifled an inward groan. Turning him down twice in a row wasn’t possible. She could not bring herself to do it, so she said the only thing acceptable under the circumstances. “Thank you, my lord. I would be delighted.”

His answering smile was immediate as his eyes warmed with so much pleasure it put her mind completely at ease. Matthew was wrong. Westhaven obviously liked her and

Rosamund once again regretted he wasn't the man to whom she was drawn.

"In that case, I shall look forward to seeing you again soon," Westhaven said. He looked more than ready to take his leave but hovered as if unwilling to depart before Matthew.

Appearing to sense this, Matthew gave a partial bow and straightened himself before saying, "I too should be on my way. Thank you for a lovely afternoon, my lady."

As soon as both men were gone, Rosamund collapsed on the nearest sofa and buried her face in her hands. Lord help her, this was a muddle. She was being courted by two men now, it would seem. For although Matthew hadn't spoken of his intentions, he'd made them clear by coming to call on her with a bouquet of flowers.

Only a determined suitor would make such an effort. She squealed with giddy contentment, her heart doing cartwheels at the prospect of him pursuing her in earnest and of where such a pursuit might lead.



Matthew felt as though he were floating on air the following evening when he guided Rose to the private box he'd rented the previous afternoon at The Royal Opera House. Dressed in smart evening black, he was very conscious of the fact that he had the loveliest woman in England on his arm.

Clad in a creamy silk gown, she looked absolutely radiant with her hair done up in an intricate style and adorned by a spray of diamond tipped pins. Catching the light illuminating the theater's interior, they sparkled like stars in the night sky.

At her neck she wore a collection of pearls that matched the ones dangling from her ears.

To Matthew, she looked like a lavish gift waiting to be unwrapped and explored. He quickly stifled that thought for the sake of decorum and ushered her into her seat before showing her maid, the ever present Mary, to a comfortable chair behind them. He'd deliberately brought it to the box earlier in the day with the hope of encouraging Mary to nap during the performance so he'd be allowed some privacy with Rose.

The fact that she'd lied to Westhaven regarding her plans for the evening and that she'd used him as an excuse to avoid spending time with the man made Matthew's chest expand tenfold.

Of course she would still have to dine with the earl tomorrow, but for now, she was Matthew's, and he meant to savor the evening as much as he possibly could. So he handed Mary a glass of champagne before offering one to Rose and settling into the seat beside her.

"I must confess," he said, leaning closer to her and dipping his head so her maid wouldn't hear, "I was surprised when you turned down Westhaven yesterday. It was fortunate for you that my schedule was clear so he would not be made aware of your fib."

She shifted in her seat and turned toward him, allowing him to see the frown on her brow. "It was very badly done of me. I shouldn't have been dishonest with him, and I shouldn't have used you to avoid his company. And now I shall have to sit down to supper with him instead. I feel terrible. He's such a nice man and yet..."

A perplexed expression filled her eyes. She gave her head a small shake.

“And yet, as you have said before, he’s not me,” Matthew whispered.

Her expression relaxed as she gave an unhappy smile. “No. He’s not.” She pressed her lips together as if in contemplation. “Do you think less of me for what I did?”

How could she possibly think so when he was the man she’d chosen to spend her evening with? “Not in the slightest. In fact, I am extremely glad to be here with you.” He noted the flush in her cheeks as the lights began dimming. She took a sip of her drink, and he followed suit before setting his glass aside on the floor next to his seat.

Notes from violins, cellos, and flutes drifted toward them, infusing the air with a harmonious melody that built toward a crescendo as the curtains parted to reveal the performers. A lyrical voice produced a lovely song, but it was the woman at Matthew’s side who held his attention. Despite having a couple of inches of space between them, he could feel the heat radiating off her body calling for him to move closer.

He took a deep breath, expelled it, and glanced at Mary, whose attention was fixed upon the stage with wide-eyed interest. Leaning back in his seat, he allowed himself to be entertained. The opera, after all, wasn’t bad. It simply wasn’t quite to his taste since he much preferred the livelier tunes played by fiddlers in one of the taverns he liked to frequent. That was the sort of music people could dance to and sing along with whereas this, while beautiful, didn’t appeal.

He couldn’t even follow the plot with the words being in an unfamiliar language. But he supposed it took some talent to produce many of the notes the soprano was presently singing.

Which made him ponder the inner workings of the human throat and why voices might differ.

Lady Rosamund's voice, for instance, was sweet and smooth while Mary's was slightly harsher and held a higher pitch. He instinctively looked at the maid once more and noted the way her body now slumped to one side while her head rested comfortably on the back of the chair. Matthew considered her for an additional moment, just to be sure she had indeed fallen asleep.

Once convinced, he turned and placed his hand on Rosamund's knee.

She immediately stiffened beneath his touch and gave a slight gasp before relaxing once more. Encouraged by her lack of rebuff, he rubbed his thumb back and forth a few times, smoothing her skirt.

"Mary's asleep," he whispered while leaning a little bit closer. "I thought we might take advantage."

He heard her swallow and knew she struggled to maintain decorum. But rather than shy away from his scandalous suggestion, she met him with a question of her own. "How so?"

"Kiss me," he told her while moving his hand slightly higher and pressing his fingers into her thigh.

"Here? Before all these people? You must be mad."

"It's dark. No one can see us, and besides, their attention will be on the stage."

"I really don't know," she hedged even though her voice betrayed a rebellious wish to accept his challenge and do something daring.

So he slid his hand higher still and dropped his voice to a low rumble. “Are you quite sure?”

“No,” she gasped as she grabbed the back of his head and pulled his mouth to hers in a frenzied display of need that threatened to make him forget time and place entirely.

“God, how I’ve missed you,” she whispered as he planted kisses along her jawline. “I’ve missed *this* in ways I can’t even describe.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” he murmured, kissing his way down the side of her neck.

Scoundrel that he was, he desperately wanted to take things further, but resisted the urge. They were in a packed theater. And since he knew he could never give Rose more than this, discretion was paramount. They couldn’t afford to get caught, no matter how much her small sighs of pleasure tempted him to be wicked. He had to put her best interest first.

With this in mind, he reluctantly withdrew his hand from her leg and pressed one final kiss to her mouth before adding distance. “We ought to stop though, before Mary awakens and realizes what we’ve been up to.”



Rosamund sat in stupefied silence while coming to terms with her present state of unfulfilled passion. She felt empty inside, bereft and discarded, like a boat without its mooring line, cast adrift in a violent storm.

Hands clutched in her lap, she turned her attention back to the stage and refrained from saying anything further to Matthew. He was proving to be as infuriating now as he had

been when they'd initially been at odds with each other. So when it was time for intermission, she quickly stood and went to find the ladies' retiring room, intent on escaping his company and the conversation she would have to engage in for the next fifteen minutes. She didn't return until after the break was over.

"Are you all right?" he quietly asked when she slipped into her seat beside him.

Rather than address him directly, she kept her gaze fixed on the stage. "Perfectly so. I merely have a slight headache. Nothing to worry about."

"Rose," he whispered, "if this is about me—"

"It has nothing to do with you," she hissed in frustration.

Oh, how she hated him for reducing her to a liar and how she loathed herself for wishing he'd not left her wanting.

The hour that followed was without a doubt the most torturous hour of her life, for although Matthew remained silent, she was acutely aware of his presence beside her, of how much she longed to reach for his hand and assure him all was well between them. But how could she do so when he'd reduced her to a madwoman, ready to toss aside every vestige of propriety for a potentially ruinous moment of pleasure?

And of course she blamed him. He was the one who'd instigated all of their kisses. Had it not been for him, she would still be living in blissful ignorance of the overwhelming sensations a man could stir in a woman with merely a kiss. Although to be fair, there was nothing 'mere' about Matthew's kisses. They were cataclysmic, the sort poets dreamed of using for inspiration: incendiary, smoldering, and utterly addictive.

And Rosamund wanted more.

But did he?

She wondered about this after Matthew had seen her and Marry home, puzzling over everything he'd said during the course of their brief acquaintance. At Westhaven's estate, they'd spoken of her visiting A&C Locomotive, of Matthew giving her a tour and of sharing additional stolen kisses, but since coming to London he'd made no further reference to it.

In fact, when they'd parted ways a few minutes ago, he'd made no arrangements to see her again. Instead, he'd thanked her for a lovely evening, informed her that he hoped she would enjoy her dinner with Westhaven, and wished her well before taking his leave.

Frustrated, Rosamund removed her cloak and gloves before heading to the library. There, she poured herself a large measure of brandy which she promptly gulped down before refilling her glass.

Matthew looked up from his desk at A&C Locomotive when Mr. Pinkerton entered his study. The secretary had been hired by Mr. Anderson and Matthew had chosen to keep him on since his knowledge of the company was second to none.

“Yes?” Matthew inquired. He’d been in the process of responding to an invitation he’d received from Ringwood the previous day, inviting him to an upcoming ball.

“Lady Rosamund Parker is here see you, sir. She’s waiting for you in the foyer.”

Matthew nearly jolted out of his seat. She’d come. Rose was here, intent on seeing him even though he hadn’t invited her out or even called on her since their evening at the theater. He realized he was a coward for staying away, but the truth was, he was frightened. Frightened of what she wanted from him, of what she expected, and where it would lead.

So he’d kept away deliberately, because he’d needed time to think things through. Which hadn’t really helped at all. He was no better off now than when he’d bidden farewell to her five nights earlier after dropping her off at her home. He still wanted her more desperately than he’d ever wanted any other woman before.

Pushing out a deep breath, he stifled a groan and ran one hand through his hair. The wise thing would be to have Mr. Pinkerton tell her he'd gone out. The secretary had made such excuses on his behalf before. But when it came to Rose, Matthew could not bring himself to do it. He *wanted* to see her. *Needed* to see her. And now that he had the chance to, the very idea of resisting her exhausted him to no end.

So he waved his hand and told Mr. Pinkerton to show her in.

She arrived within the next couple of minutes, sweeping into his office as though she were a regal queen, the coral taffeta of her skirts swishing against the doorframe as she entered. Despite her frustratingly high neckline, which had been adorned by a prim collar, her bodice was snugly fitted to show off her shapely figure and slender waist.

Matthew's pulse spiked and his mouth went instantly dry. It was a wonder he was able to circumnavigate his desk without stumbling.

"You're here," he uttered when he had finally reached her – the most foolish words ever spoken because of course she was here; he was looking at her at this very moment.

"When we were at Westhaven's manor," she said, her voice tight, "you spoke of inviting me to tour your company. Instead you took me to the park and to the theater, both of which were incredibly lovely. Except, I've had no word from you since. So I thought it best to stop by and see if you were deathly ill or if some other terrible fate was keeping you from calling on me."

Matthew's chest contracted, squeezing his heart. Despite her best effort to keep her chin up and look composed, her voice shook with emotion. There was no question he'd hurt

her deeply by withdrawing from her company without good reason. It wasn't fair to her. He owed her an explanation.

"I thought it best to stay away for a while." In truth, he'd intended to stay away forever, to allow enough time to come between them until she forgot all about him.

"And what good would that do?" Rose demanded, glaring at him as though he were the biggest inconvenience she had ever encountered.

He let out a weary sigh and resigned himself to facing additional anger.

"Where can our continued acquaintance possibly lead?" he asked. "I am not the sort of man a lady like you will consider marrying and—"

"What do you know of the sort of man I wish to spend the rest of my life with?"

"I know he ought to be titled and that he shouldn't be one of your former servants. You deserve better than me, Rose."

"And now you presume to tell me what I deserve." Eyes blazing, she crossed her arms and took a firm stance that made her look rather forbidding. He'd never found a woman more terrifying or alluring at the same time.

"Umm..." He took a step back just in case she decided to try and hit him.

"I suppose you also wish to tell me what I want and what I need and what my aspirations should be for the future," —she advanced while he kept backing away— "how I should spend my money and with whom I ought to associate?"

"I would make you an abysmal match." He forced the words out even though they weren't as true as he needed them

to be. In all honesty, he'd never wanted to kiss someone as much as he wanted to kiss her right now – to soothe away the frown from her brow, to force her stubborn mouth into a softer smile, to make her yield beneath this touch and sigh with pleasure.

“Possibly,” she agreed. “But I would be worse off with Westhaven.”

“Your dinner with him did not go well?” Oh, how he hated thinking of her with the earl.

“It was all right, I suppose. He’s charming enough. I just fear an attachment with him would revolve exclusively around work. We’ve little else in common. For heaven’s sake, I don’t even want to be near his dogs, to say nothing about the lack of a spark and...” She paused for a moment, then suddenly asked, “Tell me honestly, Matthew, if you could choose me as your wife, would you do it?”

He stared at her, his feet suddenly fixed to the ground, his breath caught somewhere between his lungs and his throat. He couldn’t move, he could scarcely even think. Her question had opened a box of impossible opportunities that ought to have stayed firmly shut.

Briefly closing his eyes, he reminded himself of his station. “That’s not a fair question, and you know it.”

Her eyes hardened and she leaned toward him with fury burning in every aspect of her expression. “I was fine before I met you. I was perfectly happy and content and then *you* happened.” She said this as though he were some sort of horrid disease. “I want things now, things I never considered before. I have longings only you can satisfy, yet you leave me wanting. Honestly, I have a good mind to strangle you for making me

feel as I do, like an irritable wreck of a woman constantly itching for something beyond my reach.”

Lord help him, he was in trouble because the things she was saying, the passion with which she spoke, and that flair of anger was what had drawn him to her in the first place. Having her scold him while practically begging for him to satisfy her was more than any man could be trusted to bear.

And yet, Matthew stubbornly forced his own desire under control and held his ground. Adding distance between them right now was critical lest he do something foolish, like toss her onto his desk and make sure she got the satisfaction she needed.

“I’m sorry, but I refuse to be your ruin.” He tugged at his cuffs, then straightened his jacket. “If you would still like a tour of the company, I would be happy to oblige. Should you wish to invest in it afterward, I’ll not turn you down again.”

Rose threw her hands up in a clear sign of exasperation and spun away from him. Her gaze dropped to his desk and she stilled. “I see you’ve been invited to the Ringwood ball.”

Matthew started. He’d forgotten about the response he’d been penning when she’d arrived. “Yes. He’s become my primary investor.”

She gave a thoughtful nod before sending him a pleasant smile. “I’m happy for you. It’s good to know that you’re doing well for yourself.”

Her accepting manner took him slightly aback since she’d looked ready to throttle him only moments ago. There was something too pleasant about her demeanor now. But before he could figure out what it meant, she turned to the door and

glanced over her shoulder. “That tour you mentioned. Shall we begin?”

Matthew hesitated briefly. He wanted to tell her he’d been an absolute ass, to shut the door and dedicate every second of the next hour to worshipping her. But he knew doing so would be a mistake. It wouldn’t be in her favor. So he shook off the foolish idea, gestured for her to precede him, then followed her into the hallway beyond.



Rosamund felt like screaming. She’d come here, intent on continuing where they’d left off at the theater. She’d even convinced Mary to remain in the foyer under some pretext of confidentiality involving her investments. And then when she’d finally found herself alone with Matthew, the blasted man had refused to act. Instead, he’d resisted her with a show of strength and control that completely undid her effort to goad him into another heated embrace.

She’d failed, she conceded, which left her with a deflated feeling of disappointment and with her heart in a painful knot. She glanced at him while he explained the different components to the locomotive they were presently admiring.

He spoke with animation and great enthusiasm, but it was more than that. While his knowledge was extraordinary, his ability to explain everything so the information was easy to follow and understand was incredibly impressive. So much so she had no doubt he could make even the least interested society miss fall in love with trains.

And it was in that moment that Rosamund’s heart gave a hard thump as she realized she not only wanted this man on a

physical level, but on an intellectual one too. No, she wanted more than that. She wanted to spend the rest of her life exchanging scientific views with him, sparring with him, and enjoying his kisses.

Against all odds, he had become the person she thought of first every morning when she woke and last every evening when she went to bed. He was her sun, the center of her universe, and somehow she had to convince him that he was just as worthy of her as any earl, duke, or marquess.

So what if he'd been employed by her family in the past? So what if his mother had been as well? None of that mattered when he was the one she loved beyond all reason, the only man she could ever envision spending her life with.

“The connecting rod then goes back and forth,” he said, gesturing to a long metal bar, “and makes the drive wheels spin.”

She forced herself to focus on the subject at hand as he went on to explain how the water in the boiler created steam that would flow into cylinders, push a piston, and rotate the wheels. She studied the elegant piece of engineering while asking questions and ferreting away every answer so she could bring it up later in conversations she hoped to have with him.

When they returned to the foyer where Mary sat waiting, Rosamund turned to Matthew. “Thank you for taking the time to show me around.”

The maid sent Rosamund an inquisitive look accompanied by the tiniest frown of disapproval. Rosamund ignored her while adding, “My funds are presently tied up with Harrington Engines, but as soon as I make a profit on those investments, I'll stop by to purchase some stock in A&C Locomotive.”

“I look forward to it, my lady.” He offered her a short and infuriatingly polite bow. When he said nothing further, Rosamund accepted her cue. She left with a lump of lead pressing into her breastbone while tears stung her eyes.

The only thing that kept her spirits from being trampled completely was the knowledge of seeing him again soon, at the Ringwood ball.

Matthew felt completely out of place when he entered the Duke of Ringwood's ballroom ten days later. Marble stretched as far as the eye could see while pillars held up a ceiling adorned by intricate lacework molding and shimmering chandeliers.

Jewels worn by every woman in attendance reflected the light to produce a dazzling sparkle while colorful feathers bobbed and swayed. Music rising from the opposite end of the room, played by four violinists, accompanied the country dance presently underway.

Footmen milling about offered glasses of champagne to the guests who sipped and chatted with a comfortable ease Matthew decidedly lacked. This was not his world, he acknowledged. It hadn't been at Westhaven's estate either, but at least they'd been in the countryside where he'd been less stifled by etiquette and all the rules that went along with it. There those present knew who he was and appreciated him for his accomplishments.

Here he was faced with inquisitive eyes as soon as he stepped through the door. The majordomo announced him and curious gazes immediately sharpened. He could see there were those who did not feel as though he belonged among them.

There were also those who showed interest – men who saw their chance to make money and women looking for something of an entirely different nature.

He shuddered and was glad when Ringwood approached him. “Mr. Clarke! So good to see you again.”

Matthew shook the duke’s hand. “Likewise, your grace. Thank you for inviting me.”

The duke grinned. “But of course. I’m looking forward to introducing you to some of my friends. I’ve already told them great things about you and several are eager to match my investment.”

Matthew’s eyebrows rose. This he had not expected. “That is most generous of you.”

“With my own money heavily invested in your business I must confess to being keen on ensuring it’s a success. Come. Let’s start with Viscount Rutherby.”

The viscount was a newly minted peer, having recently inherited his title and fortune from his uncle.

“As it turns out, my predecessor was something of a spendthrift,” Rutherby said. “He left behind a great deal of debt which I am now charged with digging my way out of. It would be wonderful if such things would vanish along with the person who caused it rather than be left behind for the heirs to deal with. Hardly seems fair, if you ask me.”

Matthew agreed. “It should please you to know, then, that A&C Locomotive has had its most profitable year to date and that I expect these profits to grow exponentially over the course of the next five years.”

“I like the sound of that,” Rutherby said.

“The sound of what?” someone else inquired, prompting Matthew to turn and face an older gentleman. Introductions weren’t needed for Matthew to know who this must be since the man bore a startling resemblance to his departed brother.

“Stoneburrow,” he muttered, the word falling more flat than he’d intended.

The earl raised an eyebrow and gave Matthew an assessing look. “Forgive me, but have we met?”

“I don’t believe so, though I did know your brother.” Intent on avoiding an incident that might put Rutherby off, Matthew schooled his features and extended his hand. “Matthew Clarke, owner of A&C Locomotive.

The earl’s eyes widened a fraction before he accepted the handshake. And then he said the most surprising thing. “I’m glad to know you’ve done well for yourself. I always hoped you would.”

A tortured expression entered his eyes and then he suddenly took a step back and disappeared into the crowd before Matthew could figure out how to respond.

“Well, that was quite—” Rutherby began, only to stop mid-sentence, his gaze on a spot somewhere behind Matthew. “Oh my...”

Matthew turned and felt as though he’d been knocked off his feet. For there she stood, the woman filling his every thought, right at the top of the stairs, dressed in a shockingly snug gown made from red silk and swaths of black lace. It was without doubt the most provocative garment Matthew had ever laid eyes on.

The neckline was cut daringly low, the bodice so tightly fitted it pushed her breasts into delectable swells of utter

perfection. The sleeves, which could not be called sleeves at all since they were merely fashioned from frilly strips of fabric, hung loosely around her arms so her shoulders were left entirely bare.

It did, Matthew thought with a sudden surge of desire, appear as though no more than the slightest tug was required in order to strip her completely.

Without even thinking, he started toward her, determined to reach her before any other man in the room was able to do so. Which was of course impossible, seeing as he had a crowd of people to fight his way through.

By the time he arrived at her side, she was already deep in conversation with three other gentlemen.

“And should you need refreshment,” one of them told her, “you simply must call on me to assist you.”

“Me too,” another man said while gazing at her as though she were a feast he hoped to devour.

Matthew’s entire body tensed with absolute disapproval. How dare these men insert themselves as though they deserved her attention when she was obviously his?

Suddenly angry, he pushed his way past them and spoke to her in a rigid tone. “Lady Rosamund, I do believe our dance is about to begin.”

Mouth set in a firm line, he extended his hand and willed her to accept while giving her the most forceful look he could muster.

The smiling young man who’d been pressing attentions upon her instantly backed up a step and seemed to hold his breath while waiting to see how the next few seconds played out. Matthew didn’t flinch even though his heart was

frantically hopping about his chest. Instead, he held Rose's gaze with intense determination until her fingers connected with his.

Without hesitating one more second, he swept her away from her admirers and straight toward the dance floor where, as luck would have it, a waltz was beginning.

"What the hell do you think you're wearing?" he demanded as soon as she was where she belonged, securely in his arms as he led her about the floor.

"You don't like it?" she asked, her voice tight as though with carefully controlled anger.

"I love it," he confessed and noted the flicker of happiness in her pretty blue eyes. "The problem is that I'm not the only man seeing you in it."

"Is that jealousy I detect? Or possessiveness?"

"Certainly not," he lied while guiding her between two other couples. "I am merely concerned for your reputation."

"I daresay that's what was on your mind when you kissed me in Westhaven's library and later between the trees, or that one time at the opera for all the world to see."

"Rose," he warned.

"Considering your lack of interest in forming a permanent attachment with me," she continued, "I've decided to re-evaluate my feelings for Westhaven."

"What?" Matthew spit the word as he stepped forward with too much force and lost his balance for a moment. He recovered with an awkward movement that must have looked strange to anyone watching and managed to say, "When last we spoke you complained about the lack of a spark."

“True, but he is, as you yourself have said, perfectly suited for a lady like me. And after spending additional time with him this past week when he visited me for tea and took me to Vauxhall to see the fireworks, I—”

“You went to Vauxhall with him?” This could not be happening. Then again, what the hell had he expected?

“The point is,” she blithely went on as though the sky hadn’t just come crashing down over his head, “I have decided, upon reflection, to encourage his courtship.”

“The devil you will,” Matthew told her between gritted teeth while drawing her scandalously close. The very idea of that man or any man for that matter inviting her into their bed was so appalling, he started breaking into a sweat. His pulse raced, his heart hurt, and he could barely think or breathe at the thought of potentially losing Rose to another.

So as soon as the dance ended, Matthew caught her hand and hurried her from the dance floor.

“Where are we going?” she asked while he pulled her along, through the ballroom doors, along a series of hallways, and into what looked like a parlor.

Matthew gave the room a quick sweep with his gaze, noted that it was vacant, and swiftly shut the door. Without missing a beat, he spun Rose into his arms, pulled her flush up against him, and kissed her as though he were dying and she his salvation.



When Rosamund had prepared for the ball earlier that evening, she had done so with careful consideration and with every

intention of making Matthew see reason.

Now, caught up in his strong embrace and with his mouth once again upon hers, she had to acknowledge that her plan had worked much better than she had hoped. She hadn't thought they'd reach this point so quickly, but she had clearly underestimated the effect other men's interest in her would have upon him.

The possessiveness with which he'd held her while they'd danced had been thrilling, but the heated passion with which he now kissed her was positively delicious and she, wanton that she was, could not get enough.

She welcomed the rough desperation with which he plundered her mouth and the welcoming feel of his hands gripping her waist as he guided her onto a nearby sofa. The need he conveyed was intoxicating beyond compare, and it compelled her to match him with equal fervor. Eager for added contact, she shoved her hands under his jacket and started exploring the contours of his muscular back while he pressed her into the yielding seat cushions.

It wasn't enough, though. With him she doubted it ever would be. What she wanted was skin on skin contact, and with that thought she yanked his shirt free from his trousers and slipped her fingers beneath the fine linen.

He stilled on a sharp inhalation and broke the kiss, his sparkling dark eyes meeting hers as he hovered above her. Without saying a word, he moved one hand to her ankle and, holding her gaze, allowed it to slide beneath the hem of her skirt and along the length of her stocking-clad calf.

An unspoken understanding, more intimate and honest than what could be put into words, passed between them as his hand crept higher, past her knee and over her inner thigh.

Blood thundered through Rosamund's veins, sending her pulse racing in anticipation of what was to come.

She needed him more than she needed her next breath, the hunger he'd stoked in her since they'd first met so tormenting she'd surely die if he walked away from her now.

She could not allow that to happen; she could not permit him to gain control of his senses and do the honorable thing. Not this time. This time, she meant to have more. So she kept her gaze locked with his as she slipped her fingers beneath the waistband of his trousers and placed her palm over his firm buttock.

His eyes darkened, his nostrils flared, and then his mouth was on hers again and his hand precisely where she needed it most, teasing and exploring, increasing her pleasure until she became a whimpering mess.

The sensations she experienced were far too powerful to control. She felt as though she were climbing and falling all at once, as though she were being torn apart and put back together. There was desperation, pain, and anxiety, a need for something she couldn't put into words. So she clutched at him while he continued his ministrations, taking her higher and higher until...

Ecstasy ripped through her, forcing a gasp from deep within as her body contracted and shuddered with convulsive pleasure. Her grip on Matthew tightened before relaxing as the tremors subsided. His kiss gentled along with his touch. He removed his hand from beneath her skirts and slowly leaned back. Meeting her gaze, he smiled at her while brushing a few strands of hair from her cheek.

“I—”

Whatever he'd meant to say was interrupted by the door being thrust open. The pause that followed felt like an hour to Rosamund. It was certainly long enough for her to reflect on everything that had led to this moment, what the moment meant, and what would likely happen next. It was also long enough for her to accept the outcome and for her to find joy in the knowledge that she and Matthew would now have to marry.

She looked up at the man she loved, not the least bit concerned by the frown creasing his brow as he stared over the back of the sofa. It was normal for him to be unhappy with the abrupt interruption and with the prospect of anyone seeing her rumpled state. Good lord, her bodice was slightly askew, she noted, and one of her slippers had fallen off.

"Wrong room," she heard Westhaven say from the opposite side of the sofa.

"What's that? Let me see."

Heat flooded Rosamund's face at the sound of Uncle Howard's voice. Her heart stopped dead in her chest. *Oh no.*

She sucked in a breath but it was no use. Her nerves still felt frayed as she watched Matthew's frown deepen. He stood without so much as glancing in her direction, quickly tucked in his shirt, and rounded the sofa while she did her best to set herself to rights.

"You?" Uncle Howard's voice held an undeniable hint of surprise.

"I was... having a brief reprieve from the festivities," Matthew said. "May I be of service?"

"Sorry to intrude," Uncle Howard said. "We were looking for my niece, Lady Rosamund, but it doesn't appear as

though—”

“Come,” Westhaven said. “We will continue our search elsewhere, Lord Stoneburrow. If you will please...damn it.”

Before she could take her next breath, Rosamund found herself peering up into her uncle’s familiar face. His eyes widened. “Rosamund?”

Accepting the inevitable accusation and censure she knew were bound to follow, yet determined to defend herself and Matthew, Rosamund straightened and sought the man with whom she meant to spend the rest of her life, only to realize he wasn’t there. She blinked in rapid succession. Surely her eyes deceived her. He’d been there a second ago, yet now when she needed him most, when she depended upon him to do the right thing, he’d vanished without a trace.

And that was when she heard other voices – female voices – approaching from the hallway. She sent the door a frantic look while rushing to straighten her bodice. Uncle Howard followed her gaze, his expression hardening with resolve as he seemed to realize trouble would soon be upon them.

Westhaven gave her a quick head to toe perusal and then, to Rosamund’s everlasting dismay, the earl quickly closed the distance between them and hauled her into his arms, kissing her soundly as Lady Merriweather and Lady Bafron entered the room.

“Good heavens,” Lady Merriweather squeaked, so loud there was no doubt she wished to be heard and to draw attention. “Mrs. Bishop did say she believed a romance might be brewing between you two.”

“Indeed,” Westhaven said, his voice tight as he held Rosamund to him, his arm a secure band of strength around

her waist. "I have just asked Lady Rosamund to be my wife and she has most graciously accepted."

Matthew had never loathed himself more than he did in the days following the Duke of Ringwood's ball. He wanted to toss himself off the nearest cliff, run himself through with a sword, and walk barefoot through glowing coals. And even then he didn't believe it would be enough to make up for what he had done to Rose.

The problem was he'd acted on instinct. As soon as he'd seen Stoneburrow enter the room, everything Rose's father had done to his mother had come rushing back. He'd remembered the pained look in her eyes. The defeat with which she'd told him they had been sacked and were forced to leave their place of employment. The struggle she had faced afterward when she tried to find work, only to fail.

Nobody wanted to hire her, which left her with no choice but to lower herself to the most unworthy profession. The only blessing was that she'd finally met Mr. Anderson, who'd appreciated her for more than what she was able to offer while lying on her back.

Wracked by shame and guilt, Matthew had needed to distance himself from Rose. He'd needed to think, not to rush into marriage with the daughter of a man he so vehemently hated. And so he'd left, his only plan in that instant to get

away from everyone and everything related to the former Earl of Stoneburrow.

He'd deal with Rose later he'd thought as he'd made a hasty exit and rushed home to drown himself in several glasses of brandy. First, he'd needed to be completely certain that marrying would be the right thing to do, not just for him but for her as well. In order for them to be truly happy, he'd have to tell her precisely what her father had done and risk hurting her deeply.

Except now, thanks to his atrocious lack of good sense and a terrible stroke of fate, Rose was engaged to Westhaven, and Matthew had by all intents and purposes lost his chance with her forever.

Bleary eyed, he stared at the newspaper headline announcing their upcoming nuptials. He took a large gulp of freshly brewed coffee and nearly spat it all over the table when it burned his tongue. With an angry curse, he grabbed the paper, scrunched it up, and tossed it into the fireplace where it turned into a bright blaze of orange.

"Sir," his butler spoke from the dining room doorway. "Forgive the interruption, but the Earl of Stoneburrow is here to see you."

"Please show him into the parlor," Matthew grumbled. Honestly, could his day get any worse? "I will join him there momentarily."

"I hope you can forgive the intrusion," Stoneburrow said when Matthew eventually came to greet him. A maid had brought a tray with a pot of tea and some biscuits for them to share. "I thought I would give you a few days to recover from the other night's events before stopping by. In truth, I ought to

call you out for what you did to Rosamund, both before and after my arrival in that parlor.”

Appalled by the apt accusation, Matthew dropped his gaze to the carpet, his shoulders slumped in shame. “How is she?”

“As one might expect a woman to be when the man she’d hoped to marry abandons her in her hour of need. She will do what she must to safeguard her reputation, but you should know that you hurt her deeply.” His voice was stern and accusatory. “Considering what transpired between my brother and your mother, I must know if this was intentional.”

Matthew felt as though he were being strangled. Words, too many to count, lodged in his throat to produce an aching knot. He shook his head and eventually managed a low whisper. “It was not.”

“You care for her?” Stoneburrow asked.

Matthew nodded. “More than words can say. She is everything to me – more than I ever dreamed possible and... It was never my intention to cause her pain. My plan was always to keep her at arm’s length, but then I got to know her and I fell utterly and irrevocably in love. I just...”

“You just?”

Matthew raised his gaze to Stoneburrow’s. “I want what’s best for her.”

Stoneburrow tilted his head. “And does she get a say with regard to what that might be?”

“Of course, but...” He shrugged one shoulder.

“Yes?”

Matthew narrowed his gaze on the earl. “Why are you trying to help me?”

A slow smile pulled at Stoneburrow's lips. "Would it surprise you to know that I also happen to want what is best for my niece?"

"It surprises me to know that you are willing to let a man you know to be her inferior, court her."

Stoneburrow gave a loud snort. "I think you need to reevaluate your position, Mr. Clarke. And once you do so, I believe you will realize that you are only her inferior within the confines of your own mind."

"How can you say such a thing when I was in her father's employ, not as a secretary or even his valet, but as a hall boy? My mother was his maid and he—" Matthew deliberately cut himself off. His muscles were tight, his hands bunched into fists, and somehow, he'd stood and was now towering over the earl, shaking with pent up fury as he thought back on what the man's brother had cost him.

"I will agree the situation is not ideal," Stoneburrow told him softly, "but if you want to make Rosamund happy, if you yourself wish to be happy, then I will lend my support."

Why, Matthew could not for the life of him understand, and before he could ask about the earl's reasoning, the man stood.

Facing Matthew with a calm degree of dignity that made Matthew feel as though he'd wronged the earl most grievously with his outburst, Stoneburrow said, "My brother and I did not see eye to eye on all matters. As for Rosamund's future, I merely want her to choose what's right for her. Marriage isn't a passing flight of fancy, but a lasting commitment. It is just as important to me that she end up with the right man as it would be for one of my own daughters. Now, I think we can both agree that I've taken up enough of your time this morning. If

you will excuse me, I must be on my way. Please think about what I've said."

He left Matthew standing in his parlor, feeling not only foolish and helpless but also confused. The anger and hatred that had motivated him to succeed and to never again find himself at the mercy of men like Rose's father had just been torn apart and obliterated by kindness.

Befuddled, Matthew sank to an ottoman right behind him and stared at the door while trying to figure out what to do next. He wanted Rose in his life forever. He wanted her by his side, to meet her gaze over breakfast each morning, to walk with her in the garden while mulling over scientific explanations. He wanted to share his innovations with her and hear her thoughts on how to improve them. He needed her guidance, her friendship, her endless support, and he knew that as far as he was concerned, there would never be anyone else like her. She was unique, both in the way her mind worked and in the way she responded to his advances.

But how on earth would she ever forgive him for what he had done? How would she get past him walking away as though he didn't care?

Lord have mercy. From her point of view he must appear the worst sort of scoundrel while Westhaven had become her knight in shining armor, ready to save the day. Damn! There was no doubt in Matthew's mind that Rose must surely hate him more than she'd ever hated anyone else in her life, and he wasn't the least bit sure of how to make it up to her.

Until he thought back on the reason she'd entered his life in the first place. She wanted to invest in his company because of what it stood for and what she believed it capable of. A&C Locomotive was also the only thing he'd cared about before

meeting her. The business mattered to him enormously. It was his life.

And so it made sense that he should sacrifice it in order to win Rose's heart.

With this in mind, he set off for Mr. Anderson's residence right away. He arrived within half an hour and knocked on the door. A young butler, who'd recently replaced his much older predecessor, admitted him without any fuss and showed him directly to his master's study.

"Mr. Clarke, to see you, sir."

"Oh good," came Mr. Anderson's voice.

The butler gestured for Matthew to enter the room, and as Matthew did so, he couldn't suppress a grin upon finding his mentor busily working on some sort of motor. "You simply can't stop yourself, can you?"

"I wouldn't think you of all people would expect me to," Mr. Anderson said. He chuckled, a boyish gleam in his eyes as he straightened and came around his desk so he could shake Matthew's hand. "According to the updates I've been receiving, things are going exceedingly well for the company. Congratulations on acquiring those investments last month. They will be able to take A&C Locomotive in its desired direction."

"I certainly hope so," Matthew said, "although I must confess I've come here with an idea that may not be to your liking. Still, I do hope to gain your approval."

Mr. Anderson gave him a short look before going to pour them each a glass of brandy. He handed one to Matthew. "When I turned the company over to you, I did so with the understanding that it would be yours to run, that every

decision from then on would be yours to make. You do not need to ask my approval for anything, Matthew. If there is something you wish to do, a change you desire to make, then that is your decision and your decision alone.”

“Nevertheless, I feel as though I owe it to you. And to be honest, I would appreciate any advice you might have.”

Mr. Anderson finally smiled. “Now that’s an entirely different matter. Please have a seat.” He gestured to one of the chairs and Matthew lowered himself to it. “So tell me, what’s got your nerves all in a jumble?”

Matthew took a sip of his drink before proceeding. “I don’t suppose you’re acquainted with Lady Rosamund Parker, the Earl of Stoneburrow’s daughter?”

“I know her reasonably well.” Mr. Anderson returned to his spot behind his desk. “She recently invested in our competitor. A pity she didn’t offer to buy shares in A&C Locomotive instead.”

Matthew twisted uncomfortably in his seat. “Well, therein lies the rub. She did in fact offer to invest with us first.”

Mr. Anderson was silent a moment, his gaze holding Matthew’s before he finally nodded with understanding. “You turned her away because of who her father was.”

“I must confess I wanted nothing to do with her or the money she inherited from him. All I wanted was to get her out of my life as quickly as possible, but then I went to that blasted retreat at Westhaven’s manor. She was there and...” Matthew blew out a heavy breath. “The fact of the matter is that as I got to know her, I realized we have a great deal in common. I hold her in the highest esteem, the result being that

I should very much like to pursue a more serious attachment with her.”

“You wish to marry her?” Mr. Anderson regarded Matthew with an intense degree of scrutiny. “To be sure, the girl has no fault in what happened to your mother, but are you certain you won’t come to resent her, that there is no doubt in your mind this is what you want?”

Matthew didn’t flinch. “Yes, I am certain. I love her with all my heart and can think of no other woman more perfectly suited to me than she. The problem is, I’ve made a mess of things and now she’s betrothed to the Earl of Westhaven instead. I need to make things right. I need to apologize for hurting her and for failing to offer for her when she needed me to. As such, I must prove my worth and my love. I must convince her that I care for her to such a degree she’ll be willing to risk the repercussion of breaking off her engagement.”

“You mean to make a grand gesture, do you?”

“That’s right.”

“And you’re certain she is deserving of you and your heart?”

“She is more deserving than anyone I’ve ever known.”

“Then I shall offer you a piece of advice, Matthew. Tell her the truth. Tell her everything and give her the chance to make an informed decision.”

“I have your support then?”

“Of course. If that is what you feel you require.”

With this reassurance, Matthew downed the remainder of his drink and thanked the man who’d raised him. It was time

for him to do something drastic if he was to win the woman he loved.



Rosamund blew her nose for the seventeenth time. She knew this because she only had three handkerchiefs left.

With a sniff, she dabbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand and prayed for the tears to subside. She'd grown weary and exhausted by the misery consuming every corner of her body. She hadn't cried this much since her mother died. But the loss she felt right now was equal in measure and so overwhelming she simply wanted to sink into bed, pull the covers up over her head, and never face the world again.

According to Mary, Westhaven had called on her every day since the Ringwood ball. She ought to face him but could not bring herself to do it. How could she when instinct told her he'd taken advantage of the situation. He'd not minced words the last time they'd spoken. Indeed, he'd pressed her to voice her thoughts on becoming his wife. And the more she reflected on what had transpired, the more she realized she'd had enough time to put herself to rights before Lady Merriweather and Lady Bafron arrived in that parlor. It wasn't like she'd been alone with Westhaven. Surely an explanation could have been made.

She gave a weary sigh.

To actually marry him, a man who'd practically coerced her and for whom she felt nothing, when her heart beat for another, was like being sentenced to lifelong imprisonment. It wouldn't be fair to either of them, not to him or to her. And so she remained upstairs in her room, hoping she would soon

have the strength and courage to do what would be expected of her without feeling as though she were on her way to the gallows.

A hollow ache filled her breast. She hoped to God she would never lay eyes on Matthew Clarke ever again. He'd done the unspeakable, had made her fall in love with him only to leave her stranded. The man was a rogue, a cad, a seducer of innocent women. He did not deserve a single thought. In fact, if she could have him shipped off to Australia, she would happily do so. It would serve him right to know what she would feel like henceforth, trapped in a life not of her choosing – a fitting punishment for the man who'd made her believe in a dream that had never existed.

She blew her nose again and tossed her handkerchief aside before expelling a ragged breath. The dinner Mary had brought up remained untouched on her vanity table.

Rosamund glanced at it. She considered the pile of potatoes and the tasty piece of roast beef Cook had prepared. None of it appealed. Not even the trifle, her favorite dessert.

A clink against the window pane drew her attention, and she paused momentarily, arrested by the sharp sound. It came again and she reluctantly approached. When she heard it a third time she parted the curtains and peered into the darkness. There, standing beneath the window, was the source of her torment.

She gave him a withering look she doubted he could see, and pulled the curtains shut before turning her back on the offending view. But the stones kept falling against the glass, like persistent jabs to her ribs.

Annoyed, Rosamund yanked the curtains apart once more and pulled the window open.

“Go away,” she hissed.

“Not until you’ve heard me out,” he said.

She stared at him. “You had your chance to speak five nights ago and you chose not to use it. I no longer wish to hear what you have to say.”

She started closing the window again, but another stone fell on the glass, followed by yet another. Exasperated, she leaned through the window and told him sternly, “Stop bothering me, Mr. Clarke.”

“In my experience, bothering you can be tremendously rewarding.”

Rosamund rolled her eyes. “Not anymore. You made your choice and you’ll now have to live with it.”

She shut the window, pulled the curtains tight, and crossed her arms before huffing a breath. How dare he come here like this, as though he had any right to speak with her at all after what he had done? She wanted to shake him, throw things at him, wring his pompous neck and—

There was a knock at the window. What on earth?

Rosamund pulled back the curtains and took a sharp breath when she found Matthew peering back at her through the glass, his one hand firmly gripping the stonework between this window and the next while the other held onto the sill. She narrowed her gaze while wondering how he'd managed to scale the wall so quickly.

“Can you please let me in?” he asked.

She considered her options. After everything that had transpired between them, she should leave him hanging. But what if he fell? What if he got seriously hurt? Would she be able to excuse that and more importantly, would she be able to forgive herself for playing a part in his injuries? To be sure, *he* was the one who'd decided to climb all the way up here and risk his own safety. She'd had no part in that whatsoever and yet—

“Please, Rose. My fingers are starting to slip.”

She blew out a breath and threw her hands up in utter exasperation. “Oh, very well,” she muttered and opened the window so he could scramble inside. “You should not be here. Even if I were keen on your advances, which I most certainly am not, your coming to my room like this is entirely inappropriate.”

“I know and I’m sorry. In fact, I’m sorry for a great many things.” He ran his fingers through his hair while meeting her gaze with a sheepish expression, and it occurred to her that he looked as miserable as she felt. To her surprise, this did not make her feel the least bit better. If anything, it only compounded her own wretchedness.

Irritated, she crossed her arms tightly around her middle and glared at him. “What do you want?”

“To offer my sincerest apologies. I acted deplorably the other evening. Instead of standing by your side and requesting your hand in marriage, I ran. Partly because I didn’t want you tied to someone who isn’t good enough for you and partly because I feared I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I married into the family I have hated for most of my life. I’m sorry, Rose. It was wrong, but in the moment, when I saw your uncle walk through the door, looking so much like your father, I just couldn’t bring myself to ask for your hand.”

“You would let another person’s actions interfere with our feelings for one another and dictate our future together?” Anger vibrated through her. “A person who isn’t even alive anymore?”

“I realize it sounds ridiculous, but what your father did shaped my life in ways you cannot begin to imagine. I have hated him for so long that—

“Because he sacked your mother and you along with her?”

“He didn’t just sack her, Rose. As I’ve explained before, he took advantage of her.”

“Or so she claims,” Rose said, unable to think the worst of the man who’d built her a puppet theatre when she was little,

who'd told her grand adventure stories, and who'd always set aside time for afternoon tea with her.

“Rose—”

“Papa probably caught her stealing or—”

“She was pregnant,” Matthew gritted, his words sending an icy chill down Rosamund's spine.

She blinked and took a step back. “What?”

“Your father abused his position and made demands, demands my mother was too weak to thwart. And when he got her with child, she became an inconvenience to him, a shameful secret that had to be gotten rid of. So yes, he sacked us both without reference, forcing us into a life of poverty since no one will hire a woman in such a condition.”

Rosamund shook her head. “I don't believe you. My father would never do such a thing.”

“He may have been a good father to you,” Matthew said, “but he was a terrible human being: selfish and arrogant, with no consideration for others.”

“You're wrong.” She clenched her jaw while glaring at him. “How dare you come here and make such baseless accusations? It's tasteless and heartless of you when you know how much I miss him.”

“I am sorry for the loss you have suffered, but what I'm telling you is true. Had it not been for Mama encountering Mr. Anderson, I would probably still be living in squalor, or worse.”

“And your mother?” she asked him bitterly.

He stared into her eyes with such intensity she actually shuddered with sudden foreboding.

“She died in childbirth,” he finally said, his voice low and filled with the sort of pain that could not be falsified.

Her shoulders slumped. “I’m so sorry, Matthew. That’s a terrible thing for a child to endure.”

“You would know,” he murmured, “having suffered the loss of your own mother at a young age.”

“I still don’t believe my father was capable of what you suggest. It could have been someone else. A footman perhaps or even the valet. I mean, your mother may have been too ashamed to tell you the truth. After all, you were her son, so it stands to reason that she would attempt to cast blame upon—”

“Rose.” The firmness with which he spoke her name silenced whatever else she’d been meaning to say. “Your uncle will confirm what I’ve told you, should you ask him to do so.”

This caught her off guard. “You’ve met with him?”

“He called on me this morning and when I told him how I feel about you, he urged me to do what I could to make things right.” He took a shaky breath. “Rose, you are the most important person in my life. You are the spark of hope I’d long since given up on, a chance at the happily ever after I didn’t think possible. You’ve made me second guess who I’ve been for most of my life. More importantly, you’ve opened my eyes to the truth – you’ve made me see that the grudge I’ve been holding should not have extended to you. I am so incredibly sorry for letting the anger I harbored toward your father cloud my judgment. It was stupid and irrational when all I truly want is to make you happy. Please, allow me to prove myself to you. Let me fight for us and convince you of my worth.”

Her poor heart, already broken, shattered completely, yet she somehow managed to keep her composure. “I’m afraid it’s

too late for that Matthew. I'm engaged to Westhaven now, so even if I wanted to give you another chance, I can't."

"Do you?" he asked as he moved a bit closer. "Wish to give me another chance?"

His hand came to her cheek and then his thumb was brushing over her skin and oh, it felt as though she was once again safe and secure.

"It's impossible," she said.

"That is what I told your uncle as well, but he has assured me that's not the case. Not until you've actually spoken your vows."

"Matthew, I honestly don't know what to say. Your accusation against my father aside, what you have put me through these past few days is more than what I am willing to stand. You broke my heart and—"

"I love you." He drew her closer, into his strong embrace. "I love you with all my heart, with every last piece of my soul. You are my everything, Rose, the only woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I want to be by your side forever. Please, let me make this right."

"How? What you did destroyed my faith in you, Matthew. You abandoned me, left me to face scandal and potential ruination alone, without support, without your name to rely on. How can you possibly hope to make that up to me?"

"By giving you this," he said and removed a piece of folded paper from his jacket pocket. He handed it to her and took a step back, releasing her in the process. "I realize it may not be enough, but I'm hoping you'll consider it a good start since I'm placing my fate entirely in your hands."

Puzzled by what he was saying, Rosamund knit her brow and unfolded the paper. The neat script followed by signatures and seals intrigued her, so she proceeded to read and finally took a sharp breath.

“You cannot be serious,” she murmured and raised her gaze to Matthew. He was staring at her with quiet intensity burning so hot she feared he might set her ablaze. She shook her head. “This cannot be real.”

“I assure you it is. I met with Mr. Anderson today and from there I went straight to my solicitor who helped me draft this.”

“I...” She swallowed. “This is too much. I cannot possibly accept.”

“Consider it a token of my everlasting love and appreciation for you, as well as a promise to do better in the future and to never cause you additional pain.”

“But this is your company.”

“Not any longer. A&C Locomotive is yours now, as of four o’clock this afternoon.”

She shook her head, incredulous. “And you?”

“I will remain in charge unless you choose to replace me with someone else.” He held himself perfectly still while adding, “You have the power to do that now.”

Rosamund could scarcely believe what he’d done. He’d taken control away from her and was now giving it back. More than that, he was providing her with the means by which to destroy him if she so wished.

Emotion overwhelmed her and fresh tears filled her eyes.

“You awful, foolish, impossibly irresistible man,” she sobbed, her vision blurring as the paper crumpled between her fingers. “I love you too.”

No sooner had she spoken the words than she was swept into his arms, his mouth settling firmly over hers as he kissed her with wild abandon. The document he’d given her slipped from between her fingers as she wound her arms around his neck and kissed him back with all she was worth.

Despite making a terrible mistake, he’d come for her and had proven himself. And if what he had told her about her father was indeed true, then he had every right to the anger he had harbored toward her family for so long.

“Marry me, Rose,” Matthew murmured against her lips. “Be mine forever.”

Oh, how she wanted to accept, but there was still the problem of Westhaven.

Oh God. Westhaven.

Leaning back in the circle of Matthew’s arms, she gazed upon his handsome face – a face she longed to see every day for the rest of her life. But how could that happen when she was engaged to somebody else?

“I have to meet with Westhaven first, in order to break our engagement.”

“Of course. I’ll gladly come with you and lend my support,” he said with a firm degree of certainty that made her believe anything might be possible as long as she had Matthew by her side. And so she allowed herself to forget the problems for the present as he dipped his head once more. Pressing his mouth to hers, he drew her firmly against his hard frame.

Rosamund gasped, her lips parting beneath his and letting him take the kiss to a whole new level. His hands were in her hair, then he moved them up and down her spine, hugging her to him while she pressed closer.

“I should not be here,” he murmured against the curve of her neck, kissing a path that left her skin sizzling.

He wasn’t wrong. They were in her bedchamber and she, having been in the process of preparing for bed, was dressed in nothing more than her nightgown and robe.

“Then leave,” she told him with a sigh as he pushed her garments aside so his lips could roam over her collar bone.

“Is that what you want?” he asked, his large firm hands pulling her flush up against him. His palms slid over her bottom and held her to him.

“No,” she confessed. “What I want is for you to stay with me forever.”

He answered with a deep growl of pure satisfaction, and then the belt holding her robe in place was being unfastened. The garment slipped open and Matthew took a step back. His eyes darkened, his breath became an uneven rasp in the otherwise silent room, and then he came toward her with predatory conviction. Before she could figure out his intent, he’d pulled her back into his arms, his mouth plundering hers as he pushed her robe from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor.

His hands were suddenly everywhere, pulling and tugging, drawing her nightgown upward with frenzied movements until she was utterly bare. Self-conscious and uncertain yet loving the feel of his hands roaming over her naked skin, Rosamund went to work on his clothes, her trembling fingers undoing his

annoyingly tight cravat. Pushing his jacket off his shoulders, she wrestled him out of it so she could get to the waistcoat beneath. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons while Matthew touched her in ways that fogged her brain and made her movements more sluggish and awkward.

How was a woman with zero knowledge of men's attire to properly undress a man while he kissed her senseless and weakened her knees?

"I want to touch you too," she chastised as soon as she had a chance to speak.

He answered with a guttural roughness that made it sound like he was in pain. Before she could figure out what it meant, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Another series of kisses followed before he laid her on the mattress, leaving her feeling bereft as he straightened above her and let cool air sweep between them.

For a second, Rosamund meant to protest, but then Matthew shucked his waistcoat and swept his shirt over his head, and all she could do was stare at his glorious body where well-toned muscles, caught by the glow from a dimly lit oil lamp, were emphasized by golden light and shadow.

Her breath caught as he stood gazing at her as though he were starving and she a magnificent banquet he meant to devour. His fingers went to the buttons holding his placket in place, and he slowly began undoing each one in succession.

"I am by all accounts a roughened, working-class man. I am not gently bred, so I'll make no excuses about how much I want you." As if to underscore this, he pushed his breeches and smalls down over his hips, bending at the waist as he shoved the garments aside. His hose were unceremoniously

removed and then he straightened, allowing her to finally see him in all his powerful glory.

Rosamund took a sharp breath and stared, allowing herself to fully appreciate his strength and virility.

“You’re the most magnificent thing I’ve ever seen,” she said with breathy awe. “And I want you too.”

Sparks flashed in his eyes and his nostrils flared as he took a step forward, closing the distance between them.

She knew she probably ought to be shocked and outraged by what she’d said. Instead, she thrilled in anticipation of what was to come.

“Are you certain?” he asked as though with carefully guarded control.

She nodded. “I love you. I want to share this with you and only you.”

His features softened. “I love you too and shall do my best to make this experience as pleasant for you as possible.” Upon which he sank between her thighs and proceed to keep that promise.

Bedding Rose was the most incredible experience of Matthew's life. Her sounds of approval, the way in which she responded to his touch, and the warm welcoming glow of appreciation in her eyes as he joined his body with hers were beyond compare. It left him humbled and weak and completely at her mercy.

This was a woman with the power to slay him. She held his heart in her hands and could easily crush it if she so desired, which was only fair considering the hurt he'd caused her. How it had come to this, he could not say, but he was incredibly glad he'd accepted the invitation to Westhaven's house party and that Rose had been in attendance.

Reveling in the afterglow of their coupling, Matthew drew her into his arms and held her close while she drifted off to sleep. Tomorrow they would face the problem of her engagement, but they would do so together – a prospect that not only eased his concerns but made him look forward to fighting for what he wanted.

“Are you ready?” he asked when he called on her the next day.

Having slipped from her window at dawn, he'd spent the last six hours anxiously waiting to see her again. He'd been

nervous, truth was, worried he might discover their night together had been a one-time occurrence she had no intention of ever repeating – afraid she did not have the strength to face the potential scandal of breaking off her engagement.

But the moment he saw her, Matthew chastised himself for allowing such doubts. The joy in her eyes when he stepped into her parlor assured him she was his and that she always would be.

“Yes, I am ready,” Rose said. A pretty flush brightened her cheeks and the smile curving her lips was so adorable Matthew could not resist the temptation to kiss her.

Mary, who’d been keeping her mistress company when he arrived, took a sharp breath and instantly turned away, pretending ignorance. Matthew chuckled while Rose’s blush deepened.

“You truly are the most incorrigible man there is,” she scolded, though her voice held a hint of amusement.

“I would apologize if I were sorry, but I can’t say I am. And you, my dear, had best become accustomed to the fact that I have no qualms about public displays of affection.” He paused for a second while considering this and eventually had to ask, “Do you mind?”

“I won’t once you are the man I’m engaged to.” The serious edge to her words reminded him that she wasn’t his quite yet. “Shall we be off?”

“By all means.” He waited for her to collect her bonnet and reticule then led her toward his awaiting carriage while Mary followed behind.

The drive to Berkeley Square was quick despite the congestion on Oxford Street, so it wasn’t long before they

were shown into Westhaven's study. The earl promptly stood from behind his desk to greet them.

His gaze landed on Rose with warm approval, sending a flash of annoyance through Matthew. He suppressed it to the best of his ability and reminded himself that he was about to steal away the man's fiancée. The least he could do was show some respect and do his best to avoid a jealous outburst. After all, Rose was picking him over the earl.

"Lady Rosamund. What a delightful surprise." Westhaven's gaze shifted to Matthew. "And I see you have brought Mr. Clarke with you. How positively unexpected."

"Yes, I imagine it would be," Rose said. She glanced at one of two vacant chairs. "Would you mind?"

"By all means, make yourselves comfortable. I'll ring for some tea."

Westhaven crossed to the bell pull while Rose lowered herself to the nearest seat. Matthew, too fidgety to sit, remained standing until Westhaven returned to his own chair.

The earl looked at them each in turn before saying, "It was my intention to try calling on you again later this afternoon, Lady Rosamund. We have much to discuss, you and I. Preparations need to be made. But I must confess your coming here with Mr. Clarke has me at a loss, unless there's a business matter you wish to discuss."

"Possibly," Rose said, catching Matthew off guard. He slanted a look in her direction, curious to know what she might be referring to.

"Go on," Westhaven urged. He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

Rose took a deep breath. “You have always been exceptionally good toward me, my lord. I consider you a fond friend and ally, but I’m afraid that is all we ever will be. I do not feel for you what I feel for Mr. Clarke. I love him, you see, and—”

“Forgive me one moment while I come to terms with this declaration,” Westhaven said, his voice no longer as amiable as it had been moments before. “Is this not the man who took advantage of you in a public setting only to leave you stranded with every prospect of ruin? Had it not been for me stepping in to save you, you would have been branded a trollop. And this is how you repay me? By coming here and tossing my honorable gesture in my face? By informing me that you are willing to throw me over for someone who does not deserve you? That you, a woman too easily led astray by a scoundrel, are telling me, an earl, that *I* am not good enough? Is that correct, *Lady Rosamund?*”

“I’m sorry,” Rose said, the slight quiver in her voice conveying her troubled state. “It was never my intention to hurt you in any way.”

“Hurt me?” Westhaven scoffed. “I am not so much hurt as I am offended.”

Matthew prepared to step in and argue, but a knock at the door gave him pause, and a maid arrived, offering a brief reprieve from the increasingly awkward conversation they’d landed themselves in. Cups and saucers were distributed and tea was poured while Westhaven scowled from behind his desk.

He managed a clipped, “Thank you,” as the maid departed, shutting the door with an ominous click that snapped at Matthew’s nerves.

“I realize you think the worst of me,” Matthew tried.

“Do you?” Westhaven raised a condescending eyebrow. “You’ve taken advantage of a lovely woman whose naiveté has clearly—

“I beg your pardon,” Rose said, straightening in her seat. A quiet sort of fury burned in her eyes now – the kind a wise man would know to back away from.

Instead, Westhaven leaned toward her with matching ire. “He’s a nobody.”

“At least I am able to build the engines I sell,” Matthew said. “The same cannot be said of you, my lord. All you have is money to throw around at engineers and factory workers. I bet that’s the only reason you’re also set on marrying Lady Rosamund, so you can lay claim to her ideas and prevent others from benefiting from them.”

Westhaven gave Matthew a scathing look before telling Rose, “By your own account, he refused to let you invest in his company and now you want to marry him?”

“He and I share a deep connection that cannot be put into words. I am sorry, my lord, but marriage is a lifetime commitment. I do not want to spend it with the wrong man just because I was too afraid of the repercussions a broken engagement might have on my reputation.”

“Ah, so you have considered as much,” he mocked, “and yet you are still determined?”

“As indebted as I am to you for your help and support,” Rose pressed, “I have come here with the hope that you will release me from all obligation toward you and that you will give Mr. Clarke and me your blessing.”

Matthew's jaw dropped. Good God, the woman had courage and gall, and he loved her all the more for it – for her unrelenting pursuit of the marriage she wanted.

If Westhaven was equally impressed, he did not show it. Instead, his features tightened. “You ask too much of me, my lady. More than what I am willing to give. The wedding will proceed as planned.”

“You cannot force me,” Rosamund said, her voice firming.

“While I'm not the sort of man to drag a woman to the altar, there are other ways to gain your compliance. For instance, I doubt your cousins' prospects would improve if your indiscretion during the Ringwood ball became public knowledge. Now, if you would please excuse me, I have a great many things to attend to and you have kept me from them too long already.”

Matthew didn't budge. His mind raced in the wake of the earl's threat. Instinct told him to lean across the desk and grab the bastard by the throat, but he resisted the urge. Violence would only escalate matters. There had to be another way out of this tangle. One thing was certain: If he left this room his quest for Rose's hand would be over and she would marry the earl.

Unthinkable.

He'd rather risk Westhaven running A&C Locomotive into the ground, so he stayed where he was and told his competitor grimly, “Release her from the engagement without any fuss, and I shall provide you with my latest invention.”



“No.” It was all Rosamund could think to say in the moment since she was still coming to grips with the length to which Westhaven meant to go in order to make her his. “You cannot do that.”

She’d no idea what Matthew might have come up with, but based on the sharp gleam of interest in Westhaven’s eyes, she got the impression that he did and that he wanted the rights to whatever was in Matthew’s head.

She couldn’t allow that. Not when she knew how important the company was to him. After all, he’d inherited it from the man who’d raised him as his own, a man who had given Matthew everything. Yet here Matthew was, willing to give it all up for her when he’d already signed the company’s ownership over to her yesterday afternoon.

She paused on that thought as an idea struck.

“I—” Westhaven began.

“Want your company to be profitable,” Rosamund said, searching for words as she went along. “And what better way to accomplish that than by joining forces?”

“Precisely,” Westhaven said, his voice slightly irritable. “Which is why Mr. Clarke’s suggestion may have the power to sway me.”

“Hear me out first,” Rosamund said.

Westhaven gave her a quelling look, the sort one might expect from a parent who wished to humor their overly eager child. There was no getting around the fact that she’d gravely misjudged him. Matthew had been correct to warn her. Westhaven wasn’t the kind gentle soul he portrayed himself to be, but a ruthless businessman willing to put on whatever façade was needed for the purpose of getting what he was

after. And when she'd finally started to question his motives, it had been too late. He'd trapped her.

Knowing this truth about him gave her strength.

She swallowed, straightened her spine, and pushed back her shoulders. "What would you say to a merger?"

She heard Matthew's shocked intake of breath and did her best to ignore it while keeping her gaze firmly trained on their adversary. "By joining Harrington Engines with A&C Locomotive, the stock value will rise. Gaps will be filled within both companies since each provides what the other lacks. Progress will be quicker as ideas are combined."

Westhaven sank against his seat and took a slow sip of tea. He glanced at Matthew and set his cup aside. "Would you be willing to approve such an idea?"

Matthew grinned for the first time since their arrival. "This may surprise you, my lord, but the choice is not mine to make."

"What the devil does that mean?" Westhaven demanded, his gaze returning to Rosamund.

She too allowed a smile on account of having caught the earl off guard. "Mr. Clarke signed his company over to me yesterday."

Westhaven's eyes lit up. "What an intriguing turn of events." He suddenly laughed.

"Before you get too carried away," Rosamund said, "I should warn you that the offer is only good if you rescind your threat and let me break our engagement without repercussion. Should you decide to thwart my wishes and press on with the wedding, I'll sell A&C Locomotive back to Mr. Clarke for the sum of one pound. *Before* you and I marry. And once that

happens, you can forget all about the chance of a merger or of gaining access to the innovations Mr. Clarke has created.”

Westhaven froze and eventually snorted. His eyes, however, remained bright, this time with a vast degree of respect. “I was right to make you a shareholder and to listen to your opinions, Lady Rosamund. You are shrewder than most men of my acquaintance, and I am honored to do business with you. So, if you truly wish to marry this man, then I shall release you from our engagement without issue. Provided you uphold your end of the bargain. As for you, Mr. Clarke, as much as I look forward to our joint venture and where it will lead, I should warn you that I will personally beat you within an inch of your life if you dare to hurt this woman again. Is that understood?”

The man was a conundrum, Rosamund mused, going from blackmailer to protector in under five minutes. She wondered if she would ever fully understand him.

“You needn’t worry, my lord,” Matthew assured him while sending Rosamund a loving glance. “But yes, I understand you perfectly.”

“Good.” Westhaven punctuated the word by pushing his chair back and standing.

Rosamund and Matthew followed suit. They shook Westhaven’s hand, bid him farewell, and departed with the assurance that a retraction pertaining to the engagement would be placed in the following day’s paper.

Despite knowing she would be getting what she wanted, Rosamund could not suppress the small shiver of trepidation stealing over her shoulders as Matthew helped her into their waiting carriage. Breaking off an engagement to an earl was no small thing, and she very much feared they would have to

pay a significant price before they found the happiness they so dearly wanted.

“I would recommend leaving town,” Uncle Howard said when he met with Rosamund and Matthew one week later.

They had come to his townhouse for luncheon so Matthew could get to know her relatives better. Much to Rosamund’s relief, Uncle Howard and Aunt Harriet had both welcomed Matthew with pleasant smiles and a genuine eagerness to get to know him. And Rosamund’s cousins had wasted no time in pestering him with questions about the future of railway travel. They’d been so persistent Matthew had ended up promising each of them a private tour of what would soon be known as British Rail and Transport Services, plus a ride on the newest train.

“With the Season well underway, escaping the gossip will be impossible,” Aunt Harriet said. They had retreated to the parlor after the meal and were now enjoying some freshly brewed tea.

Rosamund sipped hers and glanced at Matthew, who sat beside her on the sofa. They’d married by special license the day before, but if either of them had thought this would lessen the scandal, they had been seriously mistaken. Both had received notes that morning, uninviting them from various

parties and get-togethers. Most hurtful to Rosamund had been the letter she received from Mrs. Bishop in which the lady voiced her disapproval and made it clear she no longer counted Rosamund among her friends.

“We are well aware,” Matthew said. He reached for Rosamund’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Neither of us expected such a severe response, though we probably should have.”

“It will pass,” Uncle Howard assured them. “Once I provide my public stamp of approval and I convince Westhaven to follow suit, others will do the same. That being said, I hope your exclusion from social events, however long it may last, was worth it.”

“Without question,” Matthew said and raised Rosamund’s hand to his lips for a tender kiss. “I would face much worse for this woman. She is my world and I cannot wait to spend every second of every day loving her as much as she deserves.”

It being a sunny day, they finished their tea and moved outside to the garden.

“I trust you are happy?” Uncle Howard asked Rosamund as the two of them walked between two flowerbeds filled with snapdragons and calendula.

There, somewhere off to one side, Rosamund heard Matthew’s laughter as he joked about with one of her cousins. She smiled with fondness and with the warmth of knowing she’d made the right choice. Whatever obstacles in their path, they would now face them together, and that alone bolstered her spirits.

“Incredibly so,” she said. “Thank you for lending support.”

“Of course.” Uncle Howard smiled at her fondly. “I’ve never known two people more deserving of happiness than you and your husband.”

His words prompted Rosamund to halt her progress. As soon as Uncle Howard had come to a stop as well and turned to face her, she quietly said, “Matthew told me something recently. It pertains to his mother and to Papa. He said I should come to you if I doubted his words, but the sincerity with which he spoke, the anguish and the pain, made me realize that he told me what he believes to be true. I was just wondering if he might be mistaken.”

Uncle Howard’s eyes dimmed and he dropped his gaze to the ground. When he looked up again, regret was etched in his every feature. “I’m sorry, my dear. Your father was a good parent to you, but he was terribly flawed as a person. What happened to your husband’s mother and my brother’s subsequent handling of the situation were unforgivable. He should have been there for that poor woman and for Matthew. Instead he turned them out and pretended they never existed. So I understand Matthew’s anger and his resentment toward the Stoneburrow name. I only hope that in meeting you, he has realized it is unfair to judge an entire family on the basis of one man’s deplorable actions.”

She wasn’t sure how she managed to smile after what he’d just told her. Matthew and his mother had been horribly wronged. As much as she’d always loved her father, she had to acknowledge that she hadn’t known him as well as she’d thought and that part of her would resent him forever.

With this in mind, and with a sudden need to remind Matthew of how much she loved him, she excused herself and crossed the grass to where Matthew stood.

Her cousins ran off as she approached, chasing each other through the garden, allowing her to catch Matthew's hand and turn into his warm embrace. "Let's forget the past, the present, and the future for just one moment while you kiss me."

His eyes came alive with wonder as he drew her closer and tightened his hold.

"Nothing would please me more," he said, his voice soft as he lowered his head and pressed his mouth to hers in a kiss containing the same degree of assurance she offered him.

It spoke of a promise to lend each other support, to stand together against every obstacle thrown their way, and to love each other until the end of time.



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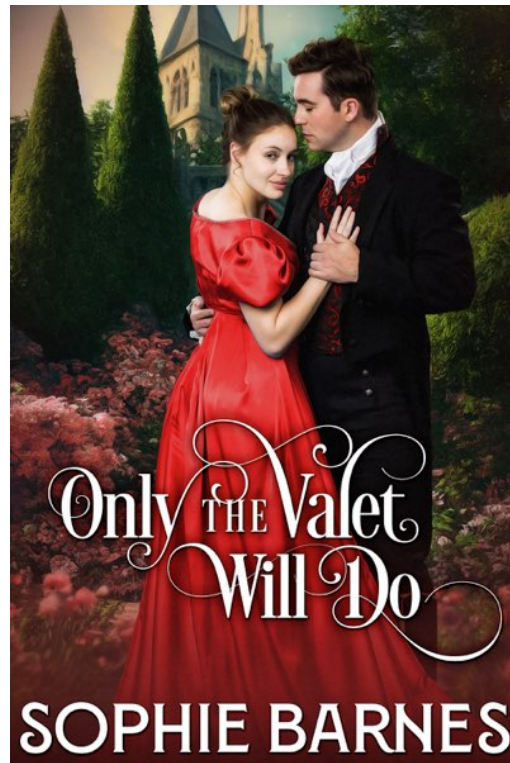
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CHAPTER ONE

Lady Lilliana Enshaw, known to her friends as Lilli, gazed at the translucent piece of quartz in the palm of her hand. The delicate chain attached to one end slid over her fingers like liquid gold.

“Thank you, Eva.” Excitement coursed through Lilli’s veins as she spoke to her cousin, the Countess of Somerset. “You cannot imagine how long I’ve looked forward to wearing this.”

“You’ve had to wait the longest, which can’t have been easy.” Eva offered a soft smile and sipped her tea. “But with three successful weddings as proof of the stone’s matchmaking powers, I’m sure you’ll meet your future husband soon.”

Lilli prayed Eva was right, for she yearned to fall headlong into her own romantic adventure. As happy as she was for her cousins, Eva, Annie, and Henrietta, who’d all gotten married within the past year, it was difficult not to be envious of the loving glances and sweet endearments they frequently shared with their husbands.

“I hope so.” She carefully fastened the chain around her neck so the stone hung snugly against her skin, immediately above the décolletage of her lilac gown. “Unfortunately, my parents and I will be leaving London for Stratham House next

week. I don't anticipate forming any attachment while I'm there since no one else will be joining us besides Henry. So I fear I may have to wait until next year's Season to find my true love."

One would think that by being the daughter of the Earl and Countess of Stratham and the sister of Viscount Islington, one would have every chance in the world of meeting one's intended. Not in Lilli's experience.

"I doubt that will be the case," Eva said. "Don't fret, Lilli. I'm sure the stone will surprise you as much as it did me. Perhaps with a duke who's passing by or maybe a friend of Henry's."

Lilli appreciated Eva's encouragement though she failed to see how one of the last unmarried dukes in England would suddenly come knocking when none of them had familiar ties with her family. As for her brother, Henry's, friends, she'd met them all and hadn't been impressed.

Besides, Henry had specifically informed Mama that he would be coming alone. Which meant there would be no one to make Lilli's heart beat faster for some time yet.

She expelled a breath and accepted this truth. As eager as she was to get on with a courtship, she didn't feel the same sort of urgency as had her eldest cousin, Annie, who'd almost been on the shelf by the time the rose quartz crystal – and what it could do – had been discovered in their grandmother's attic.

With regard to marriage, Lilli had time. She was only nineteen, so things weren't too dire yet, but that didn't make her less impatient. She'd always been the sort of person who craved activity and action. She disliked having to sit still and wait for any reason. Worst of all, she hated feeling as though

she lacked control – the ability to get things done through her own force of will.

“Thank you for stopping by,” she said when Eva prepared to leave, “and for giving me the pendant.”

“You mustn’t fret,” Eva said, taking Lilli’s hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. “The stone will see you happy before you know it.”

Rather than voice her concerns, Lilli nodded and saw her cousin out. She then climbed the stairs to her bedchamber where she began compiling a list of all the things she would have to take with her to Stratham House next week. Between her science journals, the edition of *Much Ado about Nothing* she planned on re-reading, a few new adventure novels, her diary and correspondence, she hoped to distract herself from the cravings of her heart.



Seated in the well-sprung carriage belonging to his employer, Viscount Islington, Tristan Henley reviewed the tasks he’d jotted down for himself in a slim, leather-bound, pocket notebook. Number one, purchase a new bottle of sandalwood oil to replace the nearly depleted one he’d packed for Islington.

Next, he had to remember to write another response to the Earl of Fretmire on Islington’s behalf, turning down the invitation to visit him. Islington had answered the first letters himself, politely declining. But when the earl had grown more persistent, Tristan had promised to step in and handle the situation since Fretmire, who wanted a match between his daughter and Islington, refused to take a hint.

Tristan considered how to best phrase the letter, then paused to reflect. Perhaps, before seeing to tasks one and two, he ought to inform the cook at Stratham House of Islington's newfound fondness for crêpes, which he preferred for breakfast instead of eggs, bacon, and toast.

"You're very quiet today." Islington spoke from the opposite bench, his voice pensive. "I hope there's nothing troubling you."

"Not at all," Tristan said. "I'm only making some mental notes."

He closed his notebook and gave his employer his full attention. He wasn't so much troubled as wary and determined. Because he needed this job and the impressive salary it provided.

Many men in his position would think it beneath them to work, but beggars couldn't be choosers and Tristan sorely needed the money. And since he'd grown accustomed to handling his own clothes and shoes as the family budget tightened and servants departed, he'd been prepared for the unusual position Islington had sought to fill. His only regret was the lie he'd told in order to secure the job. But if Islington had any inkling of who his valet truly was, Tristan feared he'd have turned him away.

Instead, he'd enjoyed three months of employment with a man he might have called a friend had his own situation been different. But fate had dealt a rough hand from which Tristan could see no immediate escape. Not that he minded. Serving the viscount had provided him with a new purpose along with the means by which to enjoy a visit to Cornwall.

"You work too hard," Islington said, his firm voice scattering Tristan's thoughts once more.

“I’d have thought that a welcome trait in an employee,” Tristan said.

Islington tilted his head. “For some, perhaps, but I am not the sort of man who enjoys working others to the point of exhaustion. And besides, you’re my valet, which literally makes you my closest confidante. I’d not mind having a leisurely chat with you on occasion. Least of all when we’re stuck together for several hours without other form of distraction.”

Tristan answered Islington’s warm expression with a smile. “My apologies. Is there a particular subject you’d like to discuss?”

“Let’s start with my sister.”

Tristan almost choked on his own tongue. “Pardon?”

Schooling his features, Islington locked gazes with Tristan. “Lady Lilliana is as spirited as they come, and while I adore this about her, it’s a characteristic destined to land her in trouble. In London, friends and family have always been kind enough to help keep her out of it. In Cornwall, however, she has more freedom. While there’s little for her to get up to in the ways of causing a scandal, I fear for her safety.”

“How so?” Tristan asked, his posture rigid and his mind in sudden turmoil. Babysitting what sounded to him like a willful hoyden had not been part of the job description.

“For starters, she has a history of getting wet, damaging her clothes, climbing into high places, sneaking off to secret hideouts and...” Islington grinned. “Don’t take me wrong. She’s a gently bred lady, but there is an adventurous streak to her that could use some taming.”

“Sounds like she needs to get married,” Tristan remarked before he could think better of it. He blinked. “My apologies. I did not mean to suggest—”

“That’s quite all right. Papa and I have already discussed it. In fact, part of the reason I’m going to Stratham House instead of to Bath as initially planned is so I can help talk some sense into her. And since you’ve been introduced to most of my social circle by now, I’m hoping you’ll advise me on the most suitable prospects. After all, Lilli is my sister, so I want her to be happy.”

Tristan wasn’t sure how he managed to smile at the idea of playing matchmaker to a young woman he’d never met – an earl’s daughter, no less. Teeth gritted behind stretched lips, he wondered if he’d been too hasty in appreciating his position. Clearly there was more to it than he could ever have dreamed possible. And rather than look forward to reaching Stratham House as he’d done when they’d set off that morning, he now dreaded it with every fiber of his being.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

It's been a busy year for me, moving homes and adjusting to a new location. I knew it would be hectic from the get go, which was why I thought I'd try and save some time by dictating this book. I did so in March and was then forced to let the book rest until September. When I began revising, I immediately thought, "This doesn't look right. Hmm..."

Turns out, dictating a book is not as simple as one might imagine. The manuscript was riddled with errors - many of which took a great deal of effort to untangle. I managed to do so over the course of two weeks. Reading aloud helped me hear what I had intended to say.

But I thought it would be fun to share a few of the mistakes with you here - just for laughs :)

Spark of a woman's -> spark of awareness

He'd stirred her eye -> he'd stirred her ire

Her hard meeting Frank tickley -> her heart beating frantically

Tomatoes frame of mind -> To Matthews's frame of mind

I couldn't agree with you more, I hear shorter -> I couldn't agree with you more, he assured her

So he decapped away -> So he'd kept away

And my own personal favorite:

She was being quartered by two men -> she was being courted by two men

As always, thank you for reading my stories. I hope you enjoyed *Mr. Clarke's Deepest Desire* and look forward to sharing more adventures with you in the future.

Sophie

xoxo

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I would like to thank the Killion Group for their incredible help with the editing and cover design for this book.

And to my friends and family, thank you for your constant support and for believing in me. I would be lost without you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY bestselling author, Sophie Barnes, has spent her youth traveling with her parents to wonderful places around the world. She's lived in five different countries, on three different continents, has studied design in Paris and New York, and speaks Danish, English, French, Spanish, and Romanian with varying degrees of fluency. But most impressive of all – she's been married to the same man three times, in three different countries and in three different dresses.

While living in Africa, Sophie turned to her lifelong passion – writing.

When she's not busy dreaming up her next romance novel, Sophie enjoys spending time with her family, cooking, gardening, watching romantic comedies and, of course, reading. She currently lives on the East Coast.

You can contact her through her website at www.sophiebarnes.com

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