

*HE WAS HER LAST CHANCE.
SHE WAS HIS FIRST CERTAINTY.*

forever yours
ROGUE

ERIN LANGSTON

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For Pete:

Thank you for keeping my dreams until I was ready for them.

And for Adam and Claire:

My golden boy; my silver girl. Keep becoming.

CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Epilogue

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

About the Author

PROLOGUE

June 1818

Aldworth Park, Berkshire

IN CORA DANE'S ESTIMATION, this seemed the sort of occasion that called for whisky...or at the very least, the sort of occasion that called for the *pageantry* of whisky. To be sure, it was rather difficult to determine the proper etiquette for a moment such as this.

Only minutes ago, her butler had delivered a letter, its bland parchment belying the staggering news within. Her heart filled her throat as her fingers followed the scrawling calligraphy. She wanted to absorb the shape of the words, to press them against her bone-dry eyes.

Cora swallowed hard, trying to temper the cautious hope rising in her chest. She sensed herself standing at the edge of a precipice, peering over a strange, welcome landscape...

Yes. Whisky was undoubtedly in order.

Wordlessly, Cora stood, smoothed her skirts, and padded down the hall. She paused at the bottom of the staircase to listen for sounds from the nursery. It appeared her children were finally asleep. *Good*. She loved Tess and Leo to distraction, but she had no need for distraction tonight.

She reached the viscount's study and hesitated, rubbing the ornate latch with the pad of her forefinger. In a fog of incredulity, she entered the empty room.

The fire hissed and popped, sending flickering shadows over the trappings of her husband's private domain. At first glance, the study revealed nothing of his apathetic nature, but as she approached the desk, Cora saw the cracks in his façade. An unbalanced ledger, a slew of unanswered correspondence, a stack of unpaid account slips.

Lord Dane had always been adept at illusion.

Unhurriedly, she wandered the perimeter of the silent room, her hand trailing over bookcases filled with leather tomes her husband had surely never read. On the wall above her hung the massive, pompous portrait of Dane in his parliamentary robes. She peered around the dim study. There were no portraits of Cora, none of their children. She supposed it made sense, given there had been no room for them in his heart.

She abruptly recalled why she had come to the study in the first place.

The pageantry of whisky, indeed.

As she turned toward the tantalus in the corner, her eyes snagged on the broad, peeling spine of the Dane family Bible. Cora had never opened it, but given the content of the letter in her sitting room, she supposed she needed to update the family tree.

Cora carried the tome to the polished desk. She carefully opened the heavy cover, mindful of the frail, sticking paper.

The intricate family tree was on the second page—Dane's ancestors, his parents, his sister, Edith, and her insufferable husband and progeny. Next to Dane's own name was Cora's. And underneath—

Cora froze.

That can't be.

Leo's birthdate was wrong. Dane had the month correct, May 1815. But the date was five days off.

The louse hadn't even known his *own son's* birthdate.

Cora should hardly be surprised; Dane had paid less than no attention to the children. But still. His son, his heir. She had assumed that sort of thing mattered to him.

Sliding her finger down the page, expecting the same treatment for Tess, Cora blinked in confusion. There was no name next to Leo's.

Dane hadn't included Tess at all.

Fury clouded her vision. The uncaring, unbothered boor had left his daughter's name out of the family tree. He had been so disinterested in her birth, he hadn't even recorded it.

Cora thought of Tess, of her apple-cheeks and downy curls, hardly a year old and already the biggest personality in the house. She thought of Leo, so careful and concerned, always trying to do things exactly right.

Her golden boy, her silver girl. The brightest spots in every lonely, gray day throughout her disappointing marriage.

And useless Frederick Dane had all but blotted them out.

No, Cora vowed. Absolutely not.

Fuming, she found a quill, bent over the family tree, and heatedly corrected Leo's birthdate. She emphatically added Tess's, making it just a bit bigger than the other entries. Then, she turned to Dane's name. Cora hesitated—to be sure, it was a bizarre task—and next to his birthdate, she drew a small line followed by today's date.

25 June 1818.

She stared at the entry. Seeing her legacy, how she, Tess, and Leo would endure while Dane would not, felt more real than the pronouncement in the letter.

Cora was suddenly, shockingly, untethered from Lord Dane—thanks to a broken carriage axle, a rainy night, and her husband's fixation with an opera dancer. It was so laughably predictable. Cora hadn't needed to look at his appointment book or smell the perfume on his waistcoat to know Dane spent half his time with his mistress at her London residence. Frankly, she hadn't cared. Even tonight, when he departed in

the foulest weather, Cora had hardly looked up from her reading.

After all, in their four years of marriage, Cora had accepted there was no love between her and the viscount. They didn't share anything—not their home, not their dreams, not their lives. Cora had opened her door to him because she wanted children, and she had come to consider the children as hers alone. Dane brought nothing to the marriage except his unpleasant opinions, his odious expectations, and his cutting indifference.

With renewed resolve, Cora closed the Bible and practically floated to the tantalus.

She took her time finding the correct bottle, the liquid topaz and amber glittering in the firelight. Cora's movements intruded on the hush of the room—the clinking of glasses, the popping of a stopper, the hollow bubbling as her remarkably steady hand tilted the bottle to a rummer.

She had never before poured herself a drink.

But there were many things she could now do. Tonight's missive opened her shackles; tonight's missive unlocked her gilded cage.

It was a dull, obvious metaphor, Cora silently admitted, swirling her whisky, but an apt one, all the same. She *felt* like a bird, her sharp but useless talons gripping her perch as she stared at the unexpectedly open bars, the little door to her little life swinging on a rusty hinge.

She took a single, slow sip of her whisky, savoring the burn. Thus fortified, she turned to face Dane's portrait and raised her glass.

“To the viscount,” she murmured.

It was strange, but standing in his study, on this most inclement and auspicious of evenings, Cora found she truly wanted to raise her glass to Frederick Dane. He had been the lousiest sort of man, but in spite of all he took from Cora, he undeniably gave her the two most precious hearts to ever beat.

She was grateful for Leo and Tess.

She was even more grateful Dane had left nothing of himself in them.

Cora slowly pivoted, catching her own dazed reflection in the mirror above the mantel. For one long moment, she stared at her face. Then she raised a glass to herself in parallel.

“To the viscountess.”

Cora felt herself flexing, stretching, expanding into her space, her pinned wings desperately itching for wind.

She was *free*.

April 1819

Aldworth Park, Berkshire

Dear Mr. Travers,

My sincere apologies for writing to you so abruptly. I am sure this comes as quite the surprise. It's hard to believe it has been five years since we last spoke. Time flees, does it not?

You have likely heard—perhaps through your sister Tabitha, but assuredly through the gossip rags (oh, let's be honest, they're practically one and the same)—that my husband, the Viscount Dane, died ten months ago. Don't fear; this won't be a melancholy letter. My husband's death was not exactly an unpleasant upheaval.

Indeed, in nearly all ways, my life has greatly improved since his passing. Moreover, I take comfort in knowing Dane was certainly happy in the end, given that he died doing what he loved—carousing with an opera dancer from Covent Garden. May we all be so fortunate.

However, the last year was not without its difficulties.

The reason I'm writing to you is there has been a distressing development that has made my circumstances...well, I'm not one for hysterics, but it wouldn't be an exaggeration to describe my circumstances as dire, Mr. Travers.

My brother and I have devised a plan to make my situation a bit less calamitous. But I require your assistance with the execution. I know this is all rather vague and portentous; it would be most prudent if we could meet in person to discuss the matter.

I am planning to visit London at the end of June when my mourning period concludes. Please advise if there is an amenable date for us to have a little chat.

Most Sincerely,

Cora Dane



May 1819

Aldworth Park, Berkshire

Mr. Travers,

I see there has been no response to my letter sent at the end of April.

I confirmed with your sister. Tabby indicated I have the correct address.

I can only assume my missive was lost in the post. You are fortunate I am an excellent correspondent; I always duplicate my letters. (For posterity—how shameful would it be if one day my great-great-granddaughter finds my communications, but having only half of the letters, is unable to piece together enough of the story to write her memoir? We do not think often enough about such occurrences, in my opinion.)

Enclosed find a copy of my previous writing.

In short, please confirm our appointment. The whole matter is rather urgent.

Sincerely,

Cora Dane



June 1819

Aldworth Park, Berkshire

Mr. Travers—

Perhaps you have heard the old fairytale “Little Red Riding Hood”? About a girl in very real danger from an insidious intruder. In the end, the woodcutter managed to sort them all out. (I promise I tell it much better to my children.)

My point, Mr. Travers, if I could deal with the wolf on my own, believe me, I would.

I was rather hoping you could play the role of the woodcutter.

However, seeing as you are still choosing to ignore me, I suppose you are nothing but a log.

Sincerely,
C.D.



June 1819
Aldworth Park, Berkshire

Mr. Travers—

As I have previously intimated, I plan to be in London next week. I only have a few days in Town, and I have a number of errands to see to, including that of securing a pair of hunting dogs to sniff you out.

In all seriousness, we need to speak. Considering I have already underscored the urgency of the matter but you remain unmoved to action, I have now employed the assistance of your sister, who has taken the liberty of swiping your social calendar.

Tabitha has indicated you are otherwise unengaged on the afternoon of 26 June.

Until now.

If you please, Mr. Travers, consider yourself engaged.

C.D.



THE MORNING OF JUNE 25, 1819, found the nursery at Dane House in absolute upheaval. If any of the genteel residents of Mayfair, strolling along the elegant swathe of Park Street below, could hear the ruckus emanating from the third floor, they might assume the Dane children were reenacting Waterloo as opposed to playing hide-and-seek.

They wouldn't have been entirely off the mark.

“Watch the drapes—*careful*, sweetling, please!” Cora pivoted to catch Leo around the chest. “No running, absolutely

not, and in your stocking feet. Leo, you know you bruise like a peach—”

A conspicuous thud sounded from behind the toy chest, and Cora whirled around, immediately on guard.

“Tess...what are you doing?”

Tess frowned at her mother from where she squatted near a floorboard, her miniature fingers prying under one polished plank.

“I’m just fussing.”

“Well, don’t.” Cora put her hands on her hips. “There’s no telling what you’ll find under there—”

This riled Leo right up.

“Tess, that’s brilliant.” He scrambled over to his sister. “Good job. We could seek treasure instead of each other—like pirates!”

Heavens. Cora surveyed the nursery; it did appear as though a thorough ransacking had taken place. But she couldn’t fault her children’s exuberance. It had been months since they last visited London, and the temporary change of scenery promised abundant opportunity for mayhem.

Nevertheless, looting might be a step too far. Cora clapped her hands, wrangling the game into a semblance of order.

“Right then. No pirates, no treasure. Just hide-and-seek of the humdrum variety today. Now, it’s Tess’s turn.”

Leo sighed, his dreams of piracy waylaid as he closed his eyes and patiently counted over the backdrop of Tess’s feet stampeding to her cot. Cora cringed at the ensuing kerfuffle; Tess’s bed—previously neatly made up—was now a tangle of bed linens.

“Ah...” Cora started, then gave up. What was a mussed counterpane at this point?

To be sure, Annie would be none too pleased about the state of the nursery when she returned. Though judging by how long she was taking to see about the children’s lunch,

Cora suspected the nurse was using her sojourn to the kitchens to take a much-needed Moment.

For any other matron of the *ton*, Annie's absence would be filled with a cadre of additional nursemaids. It most certainly wasn't customary for a viscountess to spend her morning hours on her hands and knees, pretending to be the worst seeker in the empire. Cora knew it was dreadfully unbecoming for a lady of her station to keep such a light nursery, but when it came to her children, she didn't care one iota about convention.

Tess and Leo were her entire world.

"Ready," Leo announced.

Tess shrieked, diving under her blankets like a tiny, mad badger. A pillow barely masked her peals of hilarity, and Leo groaned at this blatant misdemeanor.

"Shh..." Cora held her finger to her lips and winked at Leo. Hands on her hips, she made a show of looking around the nursery. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Tess peeking from under the pillow, her little face shining with the barely suppressed delight that accompanies a threadbare secret.

"Now, Leo, have you seen your sister *anywhere*? Any sightings—any whatsoever—of that elusive Miss Theresa Dane?"

At the prospect of being on the grown-up end of the game, Leo beamed, his dark blue eyes crinkling above the rising moons of his cheeks.

"No...no, I'm looking, but I don't see her..."

"Did you check London Bridge?"

A squeal of laughter from the pillow.

Leo vigorously shook his head. "She wasn't there."

"The queen's skirts?"

He marched over to Cora and lifted her hem.

"No Tess."

“Here!” Tess hollered, jumping on her cot so wildly, Cora was afraid she’d burst the seam on her little mattress.

“Well, wherever did you come from?” Cora said, scooping her up. Tess was laughing hard, shaking her delicious little belly, and Cora had no choice but to burrow right in, tickling through Tess’s frock. “I couldn’t find you anywhere. I was so worried.”

“I’m tricking you,” Tess cackled, a bit maniacally, and pressed her pudgy hands to Cora’s cheeks.

“You’re an expert hider, darling girl.” Cora smoothed back her downy cloud of hair. “The absolute trickiest.”

“She’s middling at best.” Leo tugged playfully on his sister’s foot, then craned his head to look at Cora. “But you’ll find us, anyway. Right, Mama?”

Cora flinched at Leo’s earnest confidence. Her good spirits shifted as an unpleasant sensation unraveled along her spine.

There it was again, the loose, unwieldy thread of panic. Looping into her stomach, coiling into tight little tangles. An unsettling reminder of why she was currently in London.

Not today, she scolded herself. Don’t think of it today.

“Right,” Cora managed, her smile so tight her cheeks ached in protest. “I’ll find you both. I’ll find you every time.”

Cora shifted Tess and held out her free arm; Leo obediently wrapped his arms around her waist. At four years old, little Lord Dane was already taller than her navel. He’d been a weed this year, a lean boy stretching from the cocoon of baby fat. She had adopted the habit of measuring his enterprising height against her own, watching him pass her hip, her bellybutton, the bottom of her ribcage. Granted, Cora herself was laughably tiny—her brothers teased she was slight as a wren and every bit as loud—which only made it more appalling her children kept changing while she remained the same.

She permitted herself one last squeeze.

“Stop!” Tess predictably huffed.

Cora sighed and set down her wiggling, willful little girl. In truth, she could have used an extra hug today. Of course her children didn't know that.

"Find a book, dove." Cora shoved aside her blooming melancholy. "I have time to read a bit before you two are due for lunch."

"Say..." Leo's voice lilted in sudden surprise. "Mama?"

Cora looked down. Her son was staring quizzically at her skirts, running his small hands back and forth over the fabric in something akin to wonder.

"Yes?"

"It's only...your dress is *blue*."

"Ah. I was wondering when you would notice," Cora teased. She spun in a neat circle, her somber mood lifting as Leo laughed. She glanced at her gown, drinking in the sapphire muslin. She, too, hardly recognized the luscious color after a year in widow's weeds.

"So?" She held out her skirts for his inspection. "What do you think? A half year in black, a half year in gray. Everything was dull and muted, wasn't it? But as of today, I'm back to blue."

"Do you like blue?" Leo asked curiously, pinching the hem between his fingers.

"Do I like blue?" Cora cupped his cheek. "Blue for your eyes, yours and your sister's. Blue is my *very* favorite."

"Blue for your eyes, too." Leo wrinkled his forehead, studying his mother's face. "Well. A bit."

Cora ruffled his hair, laughing now in earnest. *From the mouths of babes*. Yes, her eyes were a bit blue...but they were also a bit hazel. Her irises shared the hues, a band of topaz ringed in blue. Two colors in one. It was her most notable feature, but she wasn't at all convinced it was a good one. Dane had once voiced concern the children would inherit her strange eyes, and ever since, Cora had felt self-conscious about them.

But not with Leo, of course.

“You’d best get used to the blue skirts, darling. I expect you’ll be seeing a lot more of them. And not only blue, but sage and rose and lemon—more colors than you know names for...”

She trailed off, embarrassingly overcome by nothing more than a new wardrobe. *No*. Overcome by what the new wardrobe represented: Cora had fulfilled her widow’s obligations. She was no longer beholden to anyone.

For one blissful heartbeat, she pretended it was true. She held her breath, her hopes high and tight inside her, a bubble filling her whole chest and crowding out her anxiety. For a half moment, Cora felt invincible and perfectly content.

And then her lungs burned, and Cora exhaled, deflating, firmly returning to her unfortunate reality.

The blasted Carletons.

Not today, she reminded herself fiercely. *Not today, not today, not today*.

At that moment, Tess stomped back over to them, clutching a battered copy of *Aesop’s Fables* to her chest.

“Again?” Cora sighed in mock protest. She lowered herself to the floor, leaning on Leo’s little bed and adjusting her skirts around her legs. Her children sprawled against her; it was a wonderfully squashed affair. Dodging elbows and feet, Cora managed to spread the book precariously across her knees. “You two always choose this one.”

“Because we like this one.” Leo mounted his defense. “And you said we could learn a thing or two—”

“Yes, yes, I know. And that’s all well and good, but we are not reading the same old fables as always,” Cora declared, thumbing through the pages. “Today is a significant day, and we are going to collectively embrace the new. We’re due for a fresh outlook, don’t you think?”

Leo silently sounded out the word *significant* but didn’t object to a new fable.

“Here we are. ‘The Farmer and the Snake.’ We haven’t done this one before.” Cora found a random page toward the back of the book and began to read.

“A Farmer walked through his field one cold winter morning. On the ground lay a Snake, stiff and frozen. The Farmer knew how dangerous the Snake could be, and yet he picked it up and put it in his bosom to warm it back to life—”

“That wasn’t very smart,” Leo pointed out.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Well, normally these parables aren’t about smart people.”

“What’s the end of this one?” he asked, peering up at Cora.

“The moral?” Cora corrected absently, trailing her finger to the bottom of the page.

Seeing the words, she grew faintly queasy.

How wretchedly on the nose. Another warning of what she was up against, of what she had to do tomorrow.

And *who* she meant to see.

“Mama?” Leo prompted.

She grimaced.

“Learn from my fate not to take pity on a scoundrel.”

Cora swallowed hard, but the word remained heavy on her tongue. Scoundrel, rogue, libertine—all synonyms for one man.

Nathaniel Travers.

The face that launched a thousand ships...right into trouble.

She had a sudden flash of a wolfish smirk sliding slowly into the cavalier dimple that had long ago turned her sideways. And most unfortunately, the cavalier dimple currently ignoring her missives.

Cora stared at the page until the words ran together in a stream of useless advice. She didn’t relish the admonishment that it was a fool’s errand to throw her lot in with a man like

Travers, a man who couldn't even be bothered to pick up his quill.

She hastily snapped the book closed and pushed it under Leo's bed, as if to keep all proverbial wisdom at bay.

"Learn from my fate not to take pity on a scoundrel," Leo unhelpfully repeated, testing the words.

Tess flopped across Cora's lap, sticking her feet straight up in the air.

"What's a scoundrel?"

Cora groaned and kissed Tess's toes.

Her entire world, indeed.

ANNIE RETURNED BEARING SUSTENANCE, and Cora left the children in her capable hands. She had managed to carve out some time for herself this afternoon, and she intended to spend it in a more adult fashion than playing nursery games. Namely, by eating *éclairs* and writing to Tabitha, her most steadfast and salacious friend.

"Good afternoon, Lady Dane," chirped Talbot, her lady's maid, as Cora swept into her dressing room. "Have you had a nice morning?"

Cora smiled halfheartedly, pondering Talbot's question. Had she had a nice morning? It had certainly started the same as any other—waking in her empty bed, stretching across her empty bedsheets, whispering a soft *good morning* to an empty room. Cora had always believed in the importance of beginning the day on a positive note, even if she had to do so alone.

But then Cora had remembered today was no ordinary day at all. The first blush of sunrise had roused her from her bed, her wrapper only half-wrapped when she raced to the window to greet the morning and the welcome anniversary it heralded: one full year since Dane had died en route to tumble a dancer in London.

Officially speaking, of course, Cora understood today signified nothing more than the end of her mourning period. But the truth ran far deeper. Today presaged a new beginning, the long-awaited onset of her agency, and the blessed end of her infuriating worries.

Hopefully.

Talbot was still smiling indulgently at Cora, who was acting like a loon, lost as she was in sentimental thoughts.

“I must say, Lady Dane, you *seem* as though you’ve had a good morning,” her maid said conversationally as she fussed over the tea tray. “You look very well today.”

“Do I?” Cora gathered herself. “I’ve spent the last hour crouching all over the nursery. I expect I look more winded than anything.”

She tilted her head, catching her reflection in the mirror over her dressing table. So much of her was the same as always—petite, fidgety, and just on the wrong side of composed. In the golden sunlight streaming through the window, her eyes appeared mostly hazel under her thick lashes. Her heavy mahogany hair had, as usual, slipped from its hairpins; she hastily tucked a loose wave away from her face. There was a dust mote on her shoulder—no doubt a souvenir from half crawling under the wardrobe—and her skirts were horrendously wrinkled.

Nevertheless, she could sense a difference. She was wearing color again, and it seemed to change her face, to change her outlook. Eschewing her mourning dress was delicious and necessary, like a butterfly shedding its chrysalis.

Cora was reclaiming herself.

Talbot caught her eye in the mirror and nodded in warm understanding. “I meant what I said, my lady. You look *well*. As you should, if I may be so bold. After all, today is—”

“A commemorative day,” Cora finished, returning the smile in force. “Yes, it is, isn’t it?”

“I have it all arranged for you,” Talbot said eagerly. “Your correspondence is here. And I know you said *éclair*s, but

sometimes you prefer the cream horns...”

Cora took in her beautiful dressing room, her beautiful tea tray, her mostly beautiful dress. “It’s perfect. Talbot, you are a dream. But I’m afraid my celebration will also need to include a repinning of my hair. Tess got to me, as you can see.”

She sat at her dressing table and sorted through the stack of letters as Talbot combed her frightfully disheveled waves. Cora knew it was futile, but she couldn’t help hoping for a response from Travers. No...still nothing. If she didn’t need him so desperately, she would throttle him the moment he crossed her threshold tomorrow.

If he crossed her threshold tomorrow.

Cora exhaled sharply. It was no matter; Tabby promised she would deliver her brother. There would be opportunity to deal with Travers soon enough.

There was, however, another note from Gavin, her favorite brother turned reluctant accomplice. A barrister by profession, Gavin Sinclair was renowned for his calm...except when it came to Cora, who had always been adept at rattling her brother’s placid façade.

With good reason, Cora admitted to herself, thinking of the harebrained scheme they had cooked up. *Rattled* was a thoroughly measured response, all things considered.

Cora opened Gavin’s letter as Talbot pinned up her thick hair. The afternoon was already warm, and with every hairpin, Cora experienced both a welcome cooling along her neck and an answering tightness in her skull, a not-so-subtle reminder that every reprieve had its sting.

“Right, then,” Cora murmured. “Let’s see what my dear brother has to say...”

These missives from Gavin always made Cora nervous—what if something was wrong with his case? But to her relief, her brother simply wrote to inform her he had finalized the contract and secured the necessary funds; he would call at Dane House tomorrow afternoon.

Good. Gavin's pieces of the plan were in motion. As if there were any doubt.

"Might we skip to Lady Tabitha's letter, my lady?" Talbot interrupted Cora's thoughts with a mischievous grin. "I've been wondering all week what happened with Mrs. Putnam."

"You and me both." Cora smiled, tucking Gavin's letter away. "Can you believe the stable hand was *engaged*?"

She pulled Tabby's thick missive to the top of the pile. Lady Tabitha Finch could spin Mayfair's gossip far better than even the most sensational scandal sheets. Cora and Talbot had been enjoying the ongoing saga of Mrs. Putnam all spring. It hardly mattered that Cora would be seeing Tabby tomorrow; all the more reason to be well-versed in the latest drama from the beau monde. Tabby would expect nothing less.

Cora was absently lifting a pastry from her tray, anticipating another positively lurid rehashing of the latest on-dit, when her hand slipped, knocking her mail askew and sending an unopened letter tumbling to the floor.

"Blast it," Cora muttered, licking an errant spot of cream from her forefinger. "Hang on..."

"Here, my lady." Talbot retrieved the letter, and her smile faded. "It's...oh."

Talbot's mouth pinched, and just like that, Cora knew. She always knew. The strands of panic returned with a vengeance, knotting ever tighter. One day they would form a noose.

"Don't say it," Cora warned, her pulse ticking faster at the sight of her maid's anxious expression. "Talbot, I don't care what you do with that letter, but if it's from—"

Talbot winced sympathetically. "Looks like another letter from Mrs. Carleton, my lady."

"*Again*?" Cora groaned, her *éclair* curdling in her stomach. "What could she possibly want now?"

Ever since the Carletons had announced they would spend the month of July at Aldworth Park, the Dane family estate where Cora resided with the children, Edith Carleton's

correspondence had increased tenfold. Cora hadn't thought her late husband's onerous, troublesome sister could become bossier, but there it was—nonstop missives regarding their preferred bedding, their preferred soap, their preferred reading material.

At least these recent demands were about the Carletons' creature comforts and not about Cora's children.

She stared unhappily at the letter, summoning her resolve to not dwell on her problems.

If only her problems weren't so remarkably talented at landing right on her doorstep.

All year long, Mrs. Carleton had penned one directive after another, month after month of patronizing criticisms, exacting demands, and more recently, veiled threats. Every correspondence pressed on Cora's bruised heart, the words keeping her awake at night.

"Perhaps if the children were with us at the vicarage, under more strict guidance, his lordship could engage in more appropriate activities than running amok in the wood..."

"I fear your focus on the material aspects of Christmastide is rotting their good hearts. Next year, they'll spend the holiday with the vicar and me to learn the virtue of charity..."

"It worries me how you coddle them. A mother's touch is too soft. They would benefit from the presence of a man; consider the example you are setting them..."

Cora should have a stiffer spine by now. The Carletons—Dane's sister, Edith, and her husband, the vicar—had adopted an immediate and lasting dislike of Cora the moment she ate a second slice of almond sponge at her wedding breakfast. Cora had been eighteen years old on her wedding day, dewy with hopeful possibility. How was she to know it was unbecoming to enjoy her own dessert? But Mrs. Carleton, the daughter of a viscount herself, possessed rigid ideas about how a lady should behave. And Cora fell consistently, woefully short of her judgmental standards.

Cora glowered at the letter in Talbot's hand, as though her maid were offering a catching illness.

"Perhaps..." Talbot waffled. "Perhaps you could save this one. For later."

"Excellent idea." Cora nodded resolutely, plucking the unopened letter from Talbot and tossing it to her dressing table.

She wouldn't permit Edith Carleton's scribbles to siphon her joy, not from her blue dress, not from her heart. The Carletons wanted nothing more than to use their unfair advantage to keep Cora under their nasty old thumbs.

But they underestimated her. And starting tomorrow, Cora could finally prove it to them.

As long as Nathaniel Travers left the bloody card table long enough to cooperate.

With an uneasy lurch, Cora recalled the warning from the fable: never trust a scoundrel. *Ha!* If only it were that simple. Cora would like to know what Mr. Aesop would do if *he* were in her situation.

She swallowed hard, forcibly blotting out the memory of Travers's teasing gray eyes. Instead, she envisioned the sweet faces of her children. Those little faces needed everything to be fine. And for those little faces, Cora would make it so. She wouldn't rest until she had fixed this mess.

That settled, she resolutely stuffed the remainder of her éclair into her mouth.

She was determined to enjoy today, even if it quite literally choked her.

June 1819

Dane House, London

Mr. Travers,

In fear of appearing crass, I refrained in my previous correspondence from reminding you that many years ago, you promised me a favor. Anything I asked, if I recall correctly (and I always do).

Since I have not yet heard otherwise, I expect you will call at Dane House at half past two in the afternoon this Sunday.

I look forward to seeing you then.

C.D.



NATHANIEL TRAVERS WANTED it known for the official record—for Raymond’s record since his elder brother was evidently keeping one—he had considered behaving himself tonight.

For a stretch, he made a halfway decent job of it, ambling into the Fordham House ballroom only nominally later than his sister-in-law, Rosalie, wanted. He’d signed his name to the otherwise blank dance cards of the Carrington sisters; he’d made small talk about the damn Corn Laws with Dr. Gleason.

Nate had even gone to the trouble of escorting dowager, ancient, surprisingly spry Lady Brooks for a perfunctory circuit of the ballroom, nodding as she waxed poetic about the

Fordham rose garden. He'd gone to far *less* trouble securing the whispered invitation of widowed, seductive, very unsurprisingly spry Isolde Simms for a rendezvous in said rose garden.

All told, Nate had flirted with three mamas, charmed four debutantes, and puffed a cigar with six disinterested fathers in the smoking room.

Not too poor of a showing, though he didn't think everyone needed to act quite so surprised about his sudden gentility. After all, Nate was his brother's heir presumptive; Raymond had no sons, which made Nate the future Earl of Fordham—it was hard to say which brother was more horrified by the prospect. On the whole, though, Nate *did* know how to conduct himself properly, even if doing so meant impersonating a soggy biscuit.

Besides, Raymond had intimated that if Nate played nicely tonight, he would contemplate playing nicely with his purse strings. His brother's thinly veiled coercion was both infantilizing and infuriating. But the unavoidable fact was that Nate was in sore need of a friendly purse.

He was also, as it were, in sore need of an exit. Surely, he had endured enough of this debacle to appease Raymond and Rosalie?

Nate surreptitiously reached into his waistcoat pocket and fiddled with his watch. He glanced at the time, blanched, and checked again.

It had only been a bloody hour?

He couldn't stomach one more minute of this. He hated these society functions—stuffy and stilted and chock-full of everyone acting as they ought and not as they pleased.

It wasn't helping, of course, that at every turn, Nate saw his brother surrounded by a simpering circle of acquaintances. Renowned for the manner in which he'd set straight their father's wobbling earldom, Raymond was the *ton's* archetype of dutiful peer. He all but radiated graciousness and prosperity.

Unless you happened to be his heir. In that case, Lord Fordham was a tightfisted, self-righteous prick.

Nate craned his neck, trying to see where Raymond was now. He needed to get the hell out of here, and he didn't need his brother to be privy to his exit. It both helped and hindered his cause that Rosalie, ever the romantic, had installed preposterously large flower arrangements all over the blasted place. Nate couldn't see Raymond at the moment...but that meant Raymond might not be able to see Nate either. To be sure, Nate was taller than most men in most rooms; hiding wasn't exactly his strong suit. But between the decor and the crowd...

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Across the way, Nate could see Mrs. Burns and her daughter staring at him, whispering in heated conversation. Miss Rhiannon Burns was eyeing Nate with supreme interest, her mother in outright alarm. Nate smirked as he sidled behind the string quartet toward the side door. At least one of the Burns ladies had correctly taken his measure.

No need to fear, Mama Burns, Nate thought, moving through the revelers and potted plants, nearer and nearer to the door. *I won't debauch your daughter.* He pondered his internal promise and reconsidered. *At least not tonight.*

He was ten paces from the ballroom exit—

“Oh no, you don't.” A hand clamped his shoulder in a vise, halting Nate's progress to certain freedom.

Damn it. Nate worked his jaw with an aggravated groan. Irritation ignited his extremities, rolling hard and fast along his forearm until his hand closed in a fist. There must be a hundred people in this bloody ballroom tonight, but the Earl of Fordham was, predictably, paying attention to only one of his guests.

“Fordham,” Nate drawled, jerking his head a quarter turn to meet the steely gaze of his elder brother. “What a lovely surprise.”

“Likewise.” Raymond’s mouth was tight. “It’s the funniest thing, but it *almost* looks as if you’re attempting to leave early.”

Nate raised an eyebrow.

“And it *almost* looks as if you are spying on me. Tell me, brother, have you come to turn out my pockets? Shake me down for candlesticks? Should I expect to be stripped and searched? If so, you may want to alert Miss Burns. From the looks of it, I’d wager she’ll want a front-row seat.”

Raymond’s chin jutted. It brought Nate no small pleasure to have three inches on Raymond, and the very act of looking up at his younger brother unfailingly set up the earl’s bristles.

“I advise you to remember our agreement, Nathaniel.”

Nate shrugged out of Raymond’s grasp and straightened his tailcoat, eyeing his brother darkly. The milling crowd parted, giving the pair curious if begrudging space.

“And if I don’t? You’ll what?” Nate’s lip curled rebelliously. “I’m afraid you haven’t left me much to lose, *my lord*.”

Raymond glared at the derision Nate slid into the honorific. At forty-six years, his brother retained a lean, athletic physique, but in the low candlelight, his once-dark hair glinted silver at the temples.

Stodgy old bastard, Nate thought ungenerously. Then again, he couldn’t exactly afford to be generous these days, could he?

“Don’t deflect, Nate. Surliness doesn’t become you.” Raymond’s nostrils flared. “And if you think for a moment that you’re absconding from this ballroom, I’ll...”

Nate rocked on his heels. This conversation had become tiresome. Every moment with his brother was tiresome.

“We said eleven o’clock, Nathaniel.” Raymond’s voice was taut with warning; he was clearly aware they were drawing attention.

Nate extracted his flask from inside his coat and sardonically offered it to Raymond, earning himself an irately ticked jaw. Nate cocked his head and took a long pull.

There was tittering from over his brother's shoulder. Nate lifted his gaze to catch sight of a group of staring matrons. He locked eyes with a tall brunette and took a second, much slower, swallow.

"I considered eleven more of a suggestion." He shrugged, grinning lazily at the group of gawking women.

"Nathaniel—"

"If you insist on being overbearing, might I suggest looking to your own daughter? Annalise and the Marquess of Stockton are getting rather cozy near the refreshments table."

Raymond's head jerked around, searching in vain for his eighteen-year-old daughter. Nate stifled a smirk; Annalise was by the chaperones, in animated discussion with her sister Viola and their mother.

Raymond's distraction was Nate's cue to exit. "Right then." He clapped his brother on the shoulder on his way to the doors. "Give Lady Fordham my best. Tell her the ball was stupendous. She outdid herself. Though if she expects me to stay longer than an hour, I suggest she add both a hazard table and a bottle of blue ruin."

"I won't have you embarrass my wife, Nathaniel. Rosalie worked tirelessly on this event, and she specifically requested the family be in attendance."

Raymond's scowl was so cold it burned—or it would have if Nate hadn't become immune to it by now. His brother, as usual, was vexed about nothing. Honestly, it was such a bore. As if Raymond, Lord Fordham, had anything to be worked up about.

Nate, on the other hand, hardly had a sixpence to scratch with, all thanks to his brother's pointless reformation crusade. Not, of course, that it would stop Nate from scratching all the same. Just one more winning night at Madame's Roost's card tables would see him through this month.

“Cheers, Fordham,” Nate called over his shoulder. “It’s been, as always, a pleasure.”

He strode to the exit, barely suppressing an arrogant grin at his brother’s consternation. Nate knew he shouldn’t enjoy frustrating Raymond, but he was asking for it by parading Nate in front of the *ton* in the feeble charade of a proper family. If his brother hadn’t learned by now that his interference in Nate’s life was both unwelcome and unnecessary, Raymond was the one in need of reformation.

Nate reached the ballroom doors and rotated slowly in front of the footman, holding open his tailcoat in a mock show of turning out his pockets.

“Nothing to see here, my good man.” Nate raised one casual shoulder. “Please inform the earl all of his valuables are accounted for.” He gave one last sarcastic bow, turned, and sauntered from the ballroom.

His brother could shove off if he thought Nate was going to play the well-heeled aristocrat in public while Raymond lambasted him behind the scenes. Nate was who he was; he had no need to convince anyone otherwise. His pride might be threadbare, but it was priceless.

It was just about all he had left, at any rate.

Nate fought a ripple of annoyance as he departed Fordham House, the heavy front doors engraved with the family crest. It wasn’t lost on him that his brother’s name was quite literally barring his way in every direction.

Raymond was two decades Nate’s senior and had always operated in the peculiar space between sibling and parent. Seven years ago, when the degenerate Old Earl died and Raymond became Earl of Fordham in name and not merely in practice, one of his earliest undertakings had been to finally assume official responsibility for Nate and Tabitha, his much younger half siblings and arguably two of the most notorious individuals in the *ton*.

At first, Nate’s situation hadn’t seemed so perilous. Raymond had been threatening to straighten him out for years.

It was such old news, Nate had stopped listening when his brother started pontificating.

But this spring, after Nate's latest misguided investment, Raymond finally made good on what he'd long and obnoxiously threatened: the earl would no longer pour funds into his younger brother's pockets.

Nate was only as financially solvent as the current state of his bank accounts. Which were...variable, at best. It was the sorriest of states. Nate was the son of an earl, the same as Raymond. Yet here he was, scraping for an allowance like a child.

It was indeed fortunate he was remarkably adept at making do.

He stepped into the balmy June evening. The light breeze carried a swell of promise; the night was now his. His family could take him or leave him. He suspected they would likely lean toward the *leaving* bit.

All except Tabby, of course.

"Nate!"

Speak of the bespoke devil.

At the sound of his younger sister's low timbre, a wry smile slid over Nate's face. He paused next to the line of carriages, turning to watch Tabitha sweep down the front steps toward him. Her lovely face was unpleasantly pinched.

"Come now, love. Even you can't pull off such a sour aspect," Nate joked as Tabby shook her head in exasperation.

"Really, darling? You couldn't manage *one* night? You do realize this escapade is only going to worsen matters for you?" Tabby checked for observers, then reached for the flask Nate was already handing her. Her tight expression lifted with the liquor.

"Ah, there she is. My sister." Nate smirked, the angry pressure in his chest lifting in Tabby's company. "The Defender of Decorum. The Custodian of Courtesy. The Proprietor of Politesse—"

“Are you finished?” Tabby drawled, pulling again from Nate’s flask.

He paused, thinking it over, searching for one more alliterative epithet to make an even foursome.

“The Mainstay of Modesty! *Now* I’m finished.” Nate pocketed his flask. “And so are you...lest anyone see you drinking with a reprobate.”

Tabby lazily waved a hand. Her jewelry glittered in the flickering torch light. Nate noted at least four coachmen trying not to stare.

“I’m a boring old matron, Nathaniel. Nobody here pays me any mind.”

Nate rolled his eyes. Everyone everywhere paid *all* mind to Lady Tabitha Finch, the wickedly funny, devastatingly beautiful, and wildly popular wife of Captain Caleb Finch.

“I’m not staying,” Nate said, rubbing his neck. “I put in my time...some of it, at least. But he’s insufferable, Tab. You know how he is with me.”

Tabby’s mouth twisted. “Yes...well. I also know how *you* are with him. And both of you are more horrid than you ought to be.”

Nate grimaced. Tabby was always on his side, but he wasn’t looking for a comrade tonight.

“Be that as it may, I’m off, sweetheart.” He dropped a kiss on his sister’s hand. “You behave yourself...or not. It won’t matter anyway. I, as usual, will remain the family dog.”

Tabby tutted. “Now, now. You aren’t the family dog,” she said with a devilish smile. “We both know old Chester is far more cherished than that.”

With a merry wink, Nate turned to find his hackney.

“Don’t overdo it tonight, Nate. As I’ve repeatedly reminded you, we have to be at Dane House tomorrow,” Tabby called after him, revealing the real reason she had followed him out of the ball. “Half past two. *Do* be on time. Cora isn’t pleased with you.”

Nate swung into the carriage, but Tabby was right behind him, her willowy figure half-blocking the door. His sister's expression was surprisingly grave.

"I mean it, Nate. You cannot be tardy or in shambles. I promise there is no trouble you could find for yourself tonight worse than what Cora is facing."

Nate seriously doubted that as he considered what awaited him at Madame's Roost, his favorite gaming hell.

"I've vouched for you." Tabitha stepped back to give the coachman access. "And now I'm feeling a bit queasy about it. You *know* I loathe second-guessing myself. It's so pedestrian —"

Nate waved as the coachman slammed the carriage door, effectively cutting off Tabby's lecture. Alone in the hack, he sank against his seat and groaned.

Fuck. He'd completely forgotten he was due at Dane House tomorrow.

Nate cracked his knuckles, frowning over his sister's warning. Just what he needed, another person disappointed in him.

He reflected on the stack of unanswered correspondence in his bachelor's apartments. He'd let it all pile up...mostly because he hadn't wanted to deal with one more thing. He had enough trouble of his own, without adding Cora Sinclair to the mix.

Not Cora Sinclair, he hastily corrected, forcing himself to remember she was now Cora Dane.

But it was impossible to picture the feisty girl he remembered as Lady Dane. He hadn't seen her in five years, not since she went and did the predictably boring thing and married her predictably boring viscount.

Now that he thought about it, he had never actually *seen* her as Lady Dane. When Nate knew her, she had simply been Cora.

Nate took another pull from his flask, the liquor singeing the edge of his memories.

Damn, what a time that had been.

The spring of 1814 had marked a low point in Nate's topography of disappointments—twenty-two years old, fresh off Lent term at Cambridge, where he had failed every one of his lectures apart from mathematics. Raymond had been incensed at Nate's utter lack of ambition, and the passing weeks curdled into the first sour notes between the brothers. As the spring unfolded, Fordham House became so unpleasantly tense, Nate started to inquire about bachelor lodgings.

Until the afternoon he first came upon Tabitha and her lovely friend, slinking about with Rosalie's sherry in her gloveless hands.

Nate spun his flask, experiencing a begrudging tug of nostalgia.

Cora Sinclair, as Nate quickly learned, was a proper lady with a buried mischievous streak. Unearthing her good humor had somehow made those heinous months nearly enjoyable. Though nothing untoward had ever passed between them, vexing her became a game Nate positively savored. The manner in which she pretended to care about behaving had been rousingly appealing.

Unfortunately, Nate eventually learned she hadn't been *pretending* to behave. To his disappointment, it turned out there was nothing more important to Cora than doing as she ought.

Now, as the carriage lurched beneath him, Nate shook off a queer fog of guilt. What's done is done. And he and Cora were done. In fact, they hadn't even started. She was a relic of the past. Or at least she had been until she started penning him letters like an irascible little harpy.

"Where to, Mr. Travers, sir?" the coachman called.

Nate shrugged off his atypical agitation; this was tomorrow's problem. *Sorry mate*, Nate apologized to his future

self. That poor bastard always got the worst end of the staff.

“King Street, my good man,” he thumped the roof of the hackney.

Right then. Onward and upward.

Or at the very least, sideways.

“SIR?”

“Mmph.”

“*Sir*. Mr. Travers.” A slight shake of his shoulder. “It’s nigh on two o’clock, sir.”

Nate pulled his pillow over his head. “Then go back to bed, Barnes.”

A sigh. “In the *afternoon*, Mr. Travers.”

Still twisted in fragments of sleep, Nate rolled over and considered his valet’s words. He felt certain they were important, but they seemed removed from reality.

Until the sentence fell heavily into place.

Nate struggled to sit, bleary and cotton-mouthed; his headache walloped him, as if standing at the ready with a cricket bat. Nate peered groggily up at Barnes and blanched at the midafternoon sunbeam, slicing through the room to illuminate Barnes’s unruffled, russet brown countenance.

Shite.

“Quite, sir.”

“Did I say that out loud?”

“You didn’t have to, sir.”

Nate stumbled to his feet, and then very much wished he hadn’t as every part of his body screamed in protest.

Barnes appraised him. “Shall I draw up a tincture?”

Nate grimaced. Tabby’s accusing voice rang in his ears. He had somewhere to be today. *Why?* What good had an

obligation ever done anyone?

“I don’t have...time...for a tincture, Barnes.” He stretched, the coiled muscles along his back and deltoids tightening. *Christ*. What had he gotten up to last night? His jaw was aching in dim recollection—a dank alley, a pair of fists.

Nate checked his knuckles...bruised. He’d held his own. *Cheers to that*. But he would have another brawl on his hands if he didn’t hasten.

He winced, looking over at his valet. “It’s Sunday?”

“Yes, sir,” Barnes confirmed.

“I’m to be at Park Street at half past two?”

“Yes, sir.”

Nate pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I need to look...presentable.”

It was a testament to the strength of Barnes’s amenable nature that he did not outright laugh at this announcement.

“We can manage either a clean shirt or to salvage your face, sir. But even I can’t accomplish both in the next ten minutes.”

Nate turned, catching a glimpse of his rumpled appearance in the mirror. His light brown hair curled over his bloodstained collar. His jaw was shadowed by a bruise. A thin cut laced his brow but was no longer bleeding. His shirt, however, was beyond redemption.

If Cora Sinclair didn’t kill him, Tabitha most certainly would.

Nate chanced a grin. A spasm of pain, but his dimples remained intact. He’d wager his dimples could distract a woman from most complaints. Indeed, he’d won that exact bet many times over.

“Right. Let’s do the shirt then, mate,” Nate called to Barnes, who nodded sagely. Nate blinked; Barnes was already holding out a clean shirt in tacit support of Nate’s dimples. *Good man*.

As he hurried to dress, Nate foggily tried to remember what had happened last night at the Roost. *Win or lose?*

Lately, still flush from his legendary triumph the week prior, he'd had a risky habit of going all in. The gossip rags had reported the event rapaciously: an overindulgence at the faro table had sent a certain Mr. Nathaniel Travers on a madcap midnight visit to a pawnshop in Jermyn Street, where he posted the shirt off his back for nine shillings, returning to Madame's Roost in only his waistcoat and going on to win an implausible twelve hands in a row before buying everyone in attendance breakfast at the Finish. Nate had considered issuing a correction—it had been eight shillings and fifteen hands—but he wasn't one to boast.

Nate dug up a gin-soaked memory from the night prior... an excitable crowd, a pair of aces, a damn good streak. He cast about on the floor for his discarded clothing. Sure enough, the pocket of his crumpled tailcoat confirmed a win. The problem, it seemed, was he had perhaps gotten a bit *too* cocky. He winced, the alleyway brawl becoming a bit sharper in his recollection.

Eh. All's well that ends well.

Nate shrugged into a fresh waistcoat while Barnes tackled his over-long hair with a comb, even as it flopped rebelliously forward. Nate's hair, much like the rest of him, was resistant to discipline.

"You need a trim, sir."

"Unless you can manage that on the walk to Park Street, it'll have to wait," Nate replied, ducking away. "Admirable work, as usual, Barnes. I can't thank you enough, you're a marvel, old chap."

"I need a raise," the valet called after him.

"Undoubtedly." Nate grinned. "My next stack of winnings has your name on it, Barnes."

It was a scant twenty-minute walk from his bachelor lodgings at the Albany to Dane House on Park Street, and Nate should almost make it on time. He didn't typically

engage in the business of hurrying, but a brisk walk would be good for him.

He could use a bit of bracing.

Hmm.

Nate considered this meeting as he sidestepped a cart unloading along Piccadilly. Precisely how grievous had his lapse in judgment been, ignoring Cora's letters all spring? He had *intended* to write to her. But every time he deliberated putting quill to paper, he wasn't sure what he would be getting himself into. And Nate had quite enough people screeching at him in person, never mind via the post.

He involuntarily prickled as Cora's neat handwriting floated back to him. *Many years ago, you promised me a favor.*

Yes, he did owe her a boon, didn't he? Granted, as the seasons passed and she hadn't called to collect, he'd conveniently forgotten about it.

But now...

The unpleasant cloud of culpability he had felt last night returned in force. Nate cut through Berkeley Square, grimacing in dim recollection of the long-ago night Cora referenced in her final letter. The debacle had been a long time coming. Throughout all of 1814, he had been a man with one foot on the edge of a dangerous abyss. A ne'er-do-well who always, somehow, did well.

Except that night, he hadn't.

Nate could remember little of that warm spring evening. He knew he'd foolishly eschewed his usual, friendly haunt for a gaming hell with a rougher crowd and higher stakes. He knew he had amassed a debt so large he experienced real terror for the first time in his life. He knew he had stumbled into Fordham House with torn, empty pockets and a torn, broken face.

And he knew Cora had been the one to find him.

Nate turned onto Park Street, barely able to conjure her worried face, a blurry sense of pleading for her help. Whatever

had transpired, she had certainly come through on his behalf. The following afternoon, a courier had delivered a satchel of carefully wrapped jewels and a tautly scripted note.

It seemed Cora never disappointed anyone. Not even a bedraggled rogue.

In a shroud of relief, and with no small amount of shame, Nate had used her jewelry to pay off his debts. He vowed to remain clear of the more depraved hells but otherwise promptly returned to a life of unbothered debauchery.

There were long stretches of time he forgot about the entire mess.

But now it seemed she was coming to collect.

Nate slowed, fishing for the hastily-scrawled address in his pocket. He had arrived with—he checked the watch he hadn't even noticed Barnes fastening; really, the man *did* deserve a raise—two minutes to spare.

He angled his hat and readied his dimples, surveying the wide brick edifice before him. Lush flower boxes, an elegant sweep of steps, a row of tidy windows overlooking Park...

And a slim silhouette, framed in the front window, staring straight at him.

Nate blinked, all at once utterly and completely poleaxed.

Jesus Christ.

Even through the glare of the window, she was almost exactly as he remembered her. The entire effect was eerie, disconcerting.

Cora, with her maddening tumble of hair never pinned quite as neatly as it should be.

Cora, with her full mouth pressed in a disapproving line.

Cora, with her unfailingly expressive eyes...skewering him with unobliterated disgust.

Grievous, Nate realized, his stomach sinking. His lack of response had been a grievous lapse of judgment.

Nevertheless, for a singular, brilliant moment, five years evaporated. Nate was two-and-twenty again, loafing about Fordham House, flirting shamelessly with the beguiling Cora Sinclair, working for the moment she would reward him with her irreverent smile.

But her mouth wasn't budging now.

And, Nate remembered for the countless time, she wasn't Cora Sinclair.

She was Lady Dane.

Ten feet between them, in the middle of Park Street, in the middle of Mayfair.

Ten feet and five years.

June 1819

Barrister's Chambers, Gray's Inn, London

Cora,

I know today will be difficult for you. Asking for help has never been your strong suit, let alone asking help of a man like Travers. But you can handle this. You've already handled far, far worse.

I'll be there at half past two.

Let's get you sorted, shall we?

With love,

Gavin



CORA FIDDLED with the filigree locket case of her watch, unclipping it from the ribbon on her bodice before carefully setting it on her rosewood escritoire.

The minute hand wavered at half past two.

“He’s going to be late,” Cora muttered.

“Yes, I’d imagine so,” Tabitha said, fishing a fan out of her reticule. “But really, darling, what did you expect?”

What did I expect? Cora’s expectations for the future could fill a novel. But when it came to Travers, she had tried to be

measured. The only expectation she had was that he agree to her proposition.

Well, she also expected he act respectably. And that he be prompt, appropriate, and apologetic for his rudeness this spring.

Fine. Perhaps she had a few expectations. Nevertheless, he could surely meet her minimum requirements. Travers was the son of an earl, after all.

But Cora was now reminded Travers had been the son of an earl the last time she had seen him, and it hadn't prevented him from getting into an atrocious mess. She shuddered compulsively; for one fractured moment, she recalled his hand gripping hers so tightly he curved her knuckles into a comma of fear.

She could only pray he had improved himself in the last five years.

"Truly, Cora." Tabby appraised her. "You need to compose yourself. I adore Nate, but if he catches even a whiff of nerves, there goes your upper hand."

Cora put her hands on her hips. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

Tabby smiled sympathetically. "Come now. Surely you remember how he relished provoking you."

"There was no *relishing*." Cora straightened. "Nor was there provoking. We were acquaintances...nothing more."

"Oh, my mistake," Tabby said lightly. "My memory must be deceiving me. As must be my eyesight. You do, in fact, appear thoroughly unprovoked."

Cora belatedly realized she was spinning her necklace into a tangle. She hastily fixed her jewelry and her composure. Above all else, she must remain in control of the situation today.

Her butler appeared at the threshold of the parlor. "Lady Dane?"

“Yes?” Cora whirled around so fast she nearly tripped. “Is he here?”

“Mr. Gavin Sinclair, my lady.”

Cora sagged in temporary relief. There was no one better versed in her problems than Gavin. He’d been tirelessly working on her case, somehow managing to squeeze it in around his established workload. Cora could never adequately explain the intricacies of her situation without her brother’s measured expertise.

Gavin strode into the parlor, looking even more harried than usual. His handsome face was drawn, his navy blue eyes bleary.

“Apologies, Cora. I didn’t mean to be tardy. I was confirming all the paperwork is in order.”

“Still crossing all the Ts, I see.” Tabby’s throaty voice curled from where she was elegantly draped in a chair near the window. “Good on you, Sinclair. You know I appreciate a tight ship.”

Gavin’s ears turned red as he stiffly turned to Tabby. “Lady Tabitha,” he said tightly, spearing Cora with a questioning glance. “I didn’t realize you would be joining us this afternoon.”

“Tabby is familiar with my troubles as well as her brother’s,” Cora clarified. “I thought she might...smooth matters along.”

“Yes.” Tabby lifted her hand and idly examined her fingernails. “I’m quite handy at smoothing matters.” She winked at Gavin. “As the Captain will attest.”

“Tabitha!” Cora scolded as her friend laughed. Honestly, Tabitha was as bad as her brother. Sometimes, Cora feared she was worse. Travers wore his roguish nature on his sleeve; Tabby hid hers in her décolletage.

Gavin ignored this exchange as he set his valise on Cora’s *escritoire*. “No Travers, yet?”

“Not yet.” Cora bit her lip. “I’m sure he’s just fallen behind.”

“Fallen behind a skirt, most likely,” Tabby chirped unhelpfully.

“I was nearly late too,” Gavin pointed out, nodding encouragingly. “It’s no matter. We can review the plan one more time.”

“You have the contract?” Cora whispered hoarsely. “The first payment?”

“I have it all. Let me find my spectacles,” Gavin muttered, rifling through his valise while Cora tried not to peer out the window.

As Gavin began expounding on terms and logistics, Cora felt her apprehension begin to lift.

Her brother was a good egg, the best egg. An egg worthy of the golden goose itself. He was risking his reputation as a barrister—his very livelihood—for Cora, and his staunch support fortified her.

It will be fine, she reminded herself. She had a plan, and it was as methodical as it was madcap.

First Travers. Then the Carletons. And finally His Majesty’s Chancery Court.

Heaven help her.

“Tea?” Cora offered by way of distraction, gesturing to the low-slung table. “Or would you prefer to wait for the ices?”

“Ices?” Gavin looked temporarily cheered. His spectacles slid endearingly down his nose. “That’s rather fancy of you.”

“My cook did a raspberry preparation,” Cora explained. “I thought it might bolster my proposition. You know, entice Travers to cooperate.”

“Now why didn’t I think of that?” Gavin tapped the dimple in his chin in mock-consideration. “Travers hasn’t responded to a single letter in three months. But of course! He was simply waiting for a raspberry ice.”

“You laugh, Sinclair.” Tabby looked outside, her sleek coiffure shining sable in the midafternoon sunlight. “But Cora might be onto something.” She glanced at Cora, arching one dark brow. “He’s here.”

So much for being unprovoked. Cora’s stomach dropped right to her feet. She scrambled to the window as though her skirts were on fire. Travers was here, it was time, she could finally...

Oh for goodness’ sake.

“I know,” Tabby muttered next to Cora, both women staring out the window. “Positively revolting. He looks like a barkeeper.”

Cora managed to grunt an agreement around the crush of dismay ransacking her speech.

Travers was impossible to miss as he idled outside Dane House. Cora had forgotten how tall he was, though he was no longer quite so lanky. She could see he had broadened, his physique a languid length of muscle.

But his admittedly appealing stature only called more attention to his appallingly disheveled state. Cora winced as he reached up with a severely bruised hand to doff his hat, pushing back the hair curling unfashionably over his brow.

He exuded masculinity and ease and...absolute shambles.

Blast it!

Cora lifted her hands to her cheeks; even through her gloves, she could feel the flush of emotion coloring her face. She felt so unexpectedly assailed by seeing him again, she didn’t quite know what to do with herself.

Her movement must have drawn his attention to the window, for just then, Travers lifted his gaze. He tilted his head, his gray eyes lazily flickering over the window pane, and Cora’s chest squeezed. She wasn’t convinced he could see her clearly; there was a glare from the sun, and she was fiercely glad for it.

“Cora?” Gavin asked apprehensively. “Is something amiss?”

“Oh, yes,” Tabby said lightly, lowering to her chair. “I’d say so.”

“Tabitha.” Cora turned to her friend with a strangled whisper. “You told me he had straightened up a bit, that he had changed. It doesn’t even look as though he’s changed since last night!”

Tabitha shook her head in disgust.

“I saw him last night. I assure you, he didn’t have a black eye.”

“What am I going to do?”

Tabitha smiled grimly. “Give him another one. At least he’ll match.”

Cora’s footman must have opened the front door, for Travers turned away, loping to the steps out of sight.

“Would one of you ladies care to explain what the problem is?” Gavin still nervously stood on the far side of the parlor. He glanced between Cora and Tabitha.

Cora opened her mouth, then shut it again. “I don’t think this is going to work,” she said faintly. “Look at him! I can’t ask him to...he can’t possibly...”

“He’s under the hatches, darling.” Tabby grew serious. “More in debt than he’ll ever admit. He needs this too, Cora.”

“What he needs,” Cora hissed, “is a bath.”

“But he’s *here*.” Gavin nodded. “He’s here, and he’ll hear you out. At least, he will if he wants to be compensated,” he added emphatically.

Cora perched on the carved chair adjacent to Tabitha’s and took a deep breath. *Right*. Never mind that five years ago, Travers had been preternaturally proficient at making himself quite comfortable under her skin. That foolishness was in the past, wasn’t it? No longer did it matter how girlishly off-kilter she used to feel when faced with his dimples...or his disasters.

Cora was five years older now. Five years wiser. Five years stronger.

“Listen, both of you,” she hastily instructed Gavin and Tabby. “I will handle this appointment. I know the stakes and what needs to be done about them. Gavin, I might need a bit of help with the legal explanations, but otherwise, you two are to leave it to me. Are we clear?”

Gavin and Tabitha exchanged a glance, but before either could protest, the butler appeared, Travers towering behind him.

“Mr. Nathaniel Travers, my lady.”

For a moment, Cora could do nothing but stare. Implausibly, he looked both better and worse at this proximity. A bruise marred his square jaw, a cut laced his forehead. But he still had those dark gray eyes, that Grecian nose, a face possessed of far too much symmetry for that otherwise crooked, easygoing grin.

“Mr. Travers,” Cora finally managed. She gestured to the sofa opposite her chair. “Please, do sit.”

A footman appeared, bearing a tray of ices in dainty little *tasse à glaces*. Cora watched him fussily arrange the refreshments on the table in front of the sofa. She couldn’t believe she had thought dessert would be enough to help her cause.

“Is that raspberry?” Travers surveyed the tray, pleased as Punch. “Most excellent. It’s hot as blazes outside.” He winked conspiratorially at the footman. “And you wouldn’t believe the headache I’m wrestling with.”

Cora’s throat closed over an indecorous squeak. She knew Travers was no gentleman—she’d known it for years—but she had nevertheless hoped he might be chastened when he appeared today. She considered her unanswered correspondence and felt a sharp stab of fury. He was lucky she didn’t dump one of the ices right over his feckless head!

“Please, help yourself.” Cora narrowed her eyes. “I would hate to keep you *waiting*.”

Travers hesitated at the bite in her voice. His relaxed smirk twitched, clearly suspicious of her hospitality.

Enjoying his uncertainty, Cora gestured to Tabby and Gavin. “Your sister, of course. And my brother, Mr. Gavin Sinclair.”

Travers’s gaze jerked away from Cora to land on Tabitha. For a moment he looked startled; apparently, he’d forgotten Tabby was going to be here.

“Hello, love.” He twinkled at Tabby, expeditiously recouping his confidence. “I hope you enjoyed the rest of the ball, though I imagine the situation deteriorated without the aid of my flask.”

Tabby pursed her lips as Gavin cleared his throat.

“Good afternoon, Travers.”

“Sinclair.” Travers nodded distractedly as he attempted to situate himself in his seat. Cora permitted herself one uncharitable moment of glee watching him discover there was no virile way to sit on a chintz sofa.

But her triumph abruptly dissipated when Travers slowly turned to face her, his mouth tilting into a brilliant, arch smile.

“Co—”

Her hand came up faster than he could speak. “Watch yourself, *Mr.* Travers.”

He had the gall to chuckle.

“My apologies. *Lady Dane.*”

Travers’s voice dropped as he raised an eyebrow. Historically, this move had ensured Cora’s softening, and they both knew it. She lifted her chin defiantly; he could raise that eyebrow to the rafters, for all she cared. Today, there would be no softening.

Travers leaned forward in his squashed seat, apparently unperturbed by this frigid reception. “So, Viscountess,” he started nonchalantly. “It’s been...”

“Five years.” Cora nodded curtly. “Yes.”

“And you’ve been...?”

“Marrying. Mothering. Theoretically mourning.” Cora clenched her folded hands. “All information that could have been exchanged via *letter*.”

Travers’s smirk tugged wider. “Ah, but a piece of parchment is so formal, don’t you think? I much prefer to hear from you face-to-face.”

Cora inhaled sharply, which was a mistake. Underneath the shroud of last night’s liquor, she caught the woozy scent of *him*. She was viscerally reminded that Nathaniel Travers had always smelled indecently good—pine and leather, fresh and outdoorsy, a little bit *dark*.

She corralled these troublesome thoughts behind a scowl.

“Well, you’ll have to hear it from a distance of several more inches, Mr. Travers. I could do without the stench of your irresponsibility crowding me.” Cora viciously shifted her own chair two inches to the left, closer to an amused Tabitha. “If you were going to show up smelling like a public house, you could have at least had the courtesy to arrive on time.”

“Uncalled for, Lady Dane.” Travers slid a dish of ice across the table, then scooped a generous spoonful, his eyes pinned to Cora. “I was two minutes early, I’ll have you know.”

Cora grit her jaw.

“Well then. This is turning out to be quite pleasant, isn’t it?” Tabby looked at Gavin. “No rush with your refreshments, Sinclair. I’d imagine the ices will last a good long while, considering the chill in this parlor.”

Travers was still eyeing Cora expectantly. To be sure, they had both once enjoyed the way he could tease her right out of a bad mood.

But these days, Cora wasn’t in a bad mood. She was in a bad life. And she had just about had it.

Seeming to sense the storm cloud brewing inside her, Travers cleared his throat.

“Right. About your letters. I really did *mean* to write...” His placating smile stretched, finding a dimple.

“You *meant* to write?” Cora repeated, a hard glint in her eyes.

“I did.” Travers nodded. “When you sent the first letter. But...it slipped my mind. There was a whole debacle with my brother, a terribly tedious affair, and your letter fell to the wayside.”

“And the second letter? The third? The *fourth*?”

“Well, you see, each letter got a bit angrier.” Travers shrugged affably. “So I...didn’t want to.”

Cora spiked with fresh ire. She’d been a wreck for months, and he had the gall to ramble in here to *tease* and *joke* and *cajole*.

“Travers,” Gavin warned, glancing at Cora.

She leaned forward to snatch an ice of her own. “I see.” Cora’s tone was as cold as her dessert. “I suppose you *have* been moderately busy this spring, what with losing your shirt at the card table and whatnot.”

“Now, now...” Travers’s gray eyes gleamed. “No need to be jealous you missed out.”

“Jealous? Of what?” Cora glared, her blood boiling. She reflexively tapped her spoon against the side of her *tasse à glace*, the staccato matching her own racing pulse. “Of your uncanny ability to make a fool of yourself? Of your having to beg your brother for pin money? Of the gore oozing over your face? Congratulations, Mr. Travers. You have remained *frozen in time* for five years.”

Travers’s nostrils flared, his good humor retreating. “How clever,” he drawled, tilting his head. “So was the purpose of this meeting to lecture me, or...?”

Cora began vigorously stirring her ice. Travers’s gaze fell to her rattling spoon.

“Perhaps you would know the purpose of our meeting if you had taken time from making a mockery of your life to

read my correspondence.”

“Cora,” Gavin whispered cautiously. “Let’s not forget why you invited Travers here.”

Stir, clank, slosh. Cora’s bright purple ice, now melted, splashed onto the white doily covering the sofa table.

“That’s rich.” Travers’s dimple had been replaced with a hard-set jaw. “Considering you didn’t provide one iota of information in your letters. And yet *I’m* supposed to jump to attention, as though I don’t have any business of my own.”

Cora jabbed her dessert spoon at him like a tiny javelin. “From what I hear, that’s an absolutely accurate assessment.”

“And *I’m* the one who hasn’t changed?” Travers laughed humorlessly. “If I had known I was coming here to be criticized, I would have skipped this meeting altogether. And will you *quit* waving that spoon around? You’re going to put out someone’s eye.”

“I don’t know what I was thinking.” Cora directed her words to the room at large, even as she stared down a still-smoldering Travers. “Tabby, Gavin, I apologize for wasting your time. This was a terrible idea, a complete lapse in judgment. I can’t believe I thought, for even a moment, I could depend on someone so completely, unforgivably *obtuse*.”

Travers scoffed. He reached forward, grasping Cora’s still-pointed spoon between his thumb and forefinger, halting her gesticulation midjab.

“I think that’s quite enough dramatics, Lady Dane. Let’s put this down, shall we?”

The thought of Nathaniel Travers, of all people, feeling the need to calm *her* down was the ultimate slight. Cora yanked the spoon away from him and slammed it to the table herself. She stared at the now-resting cutlery, breathing hard.

“Would you say this falls under the category of *handling it*?” Tabby murmured to Gavin. “Or shall we intervene?”

Travers leaned in, his lips twitching.

Cora immediately bristled. Tabitha might have had a point about provocation.

“You’re exactly the same,” he murmured, his voice low. “Too proud to accept help from anyone.”

“Oh, such a decorous man, saving me from my own dessert spoon. I expect His Majesty will be here momentarily with your order of chivalry—”

“Will you two stop it?” Tabitha finally hissed, sliding Cora’s dish of ice away from the edge of the table. She scowled at their equally irritated faces. “And here I thought the children were in the nursery upstairs. Both of you have reason to benefit from this meeting. Unlike me, who is drawing no advantage at all from this debacle.”

Tabby had aimed for a joke, but Cora could find no amusement in the situation. Travers had arrived exactly as he had been when she knew him—unserious and dangerously carefree. His shoulders might have broadened, but his gravitas certainly hadn’t; she could see no trace of maturity anywhere.

This had been a mistake.

“I don’t need him for anything,” Cora rasped, her throat constricting in a high, desperate ache. “Not like this. Absolutely not. I’ll figure this out—”

“On your own.”

Travers, Tabby, and Gavin finished her sentence in unison, like a little triangle of traitors.

At their knowing expressions, Cora’s eyes and cheeks burned. But she would be *damned* before she’d fall apart in front of them. She swallowed, lifting her slipping composure onto the scaffolding of bravado. It was the shoddiest construction work in London.

Travers, meanwhile, was shaking his head. He pushed up from the sofa, clearly meaning to take his leave.

“Well, seeing how well you managed the *spoon*, I’d say there’s not much you can’t handle, Lady Dane. So if you’ve finished insulting me, I have a respite to return to.”

“Nate,” Tabby warned, glancing at Cora in soft apology.

With a shock of panic, Cora realized Travers *couldn't* leave her parlor. Despite her childish insistence to the contrary, she couldn't manage this by herself.

She'd tried. God, had she tried.

But *she* wasn't enough.

For the first time this afternoon, Cora slid behind her outward barricade to consider her children. Her heart twisted painfully. What had Leo said yesterday, as he innocently played hide-and-seek?

You'll find us, every time.

But Leo had it wrong. Cora would never lose them in the first place.

“Wait!” Cora grabbed Travers's sleeve, as though two inches of coat could physically keep him at the table despite him being nearly twice her size.

His eyes slid to where her fingers clutched the wrinkled fabric of his sleeve. She hastily dropped his arm.

“Wait,” Cora repeated, her voice hushed. She stared up at Travers in beseeching frustration.

If this appointment didn't go in her favor, she had no options left. What other man would possibly agree to help her? In her life, Cora had bailed exactly one man out of trouble. She knew exactly one man down on his luck enough to consider her terms.

She had exactly one last chance to keep her family together.

“Travers...I might point out that you *owe* me. You owe me, at the very least, a conversation.”

Tabby inclined her head in interest, and Travers shot an irritated glance at Cora. There was a new stiffness to his shoulders.

Tabby doesn't know, Cora realized. Even after all this time, Tabitha was none the wiser about the help Cora had given her

brother. And judging by the careful expression on his face, Travers wanted to keep it that way.

Armed with this knowledge, Cora held his gaze, her eyes bright with warning.

Travers cracked his knuckles and reluctantly sank back on the sofa.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “I’ll hear you out. But only if you start bloody *saying* something. Why the hell am I here, Lady Dane?”

Cora nervously licked her bottom lip and glanced at Gavin, who nodded. She closed her eyes.

She couldn’t look at anyone while she did this.

“As I previously intimated, Mr. Travers—and rest assured, this is not an easy request—I have a proposition for you. A... business arrangement, if you will.”

She chanced a peek at him. Travers’s stare had darkened, boring into her. For a moment, she was eighteen years old, back in his brother’s study. This time, their roles were reversed; it was Cora who was in desperate need of help.

“Go on...”

Cora took a deep breath, holding it as she practiced forming the words in her mind. Finally, she managed it, the most absurd sentence she would ever say.

“I need you to marry me.”

June 1819

Fordham House, London

Nathaniel,

I expect you think last night's stunt at my wife's ball clever, but let me assure you it was anything but. At some point, this family will stop cleaning up your messes, and then where will you be?

I advise that you look in the mirror, Brother. You're seven-and-twenty. Do you know what I was doing at your age? Marrying Rosalie, yes. Keeping our father in line, yes. Managing the earldom on his behalf, yes.

But I was also taking you and Tabitha, fresh off the loss of your mother, into my home, away from our father's influence. I was doing my damndest to give you half a chance at a decent upbringing.

Sometimes, I wonder why I bothered.

Please present yourself this evening. You owe your sister-in-law an apology.

Fordham



NATE MET Cora's stunning pronouncement—her *proposal*, for Christ's sake—by recoiling so rapidly, his knee banged the table and sent a dish of uneaten ice careening into Tabitha's lap.

Nate swore, seeing stars as he rubbed his splintering kneecap. Holy hell, that hurt.

But his injury was apparently less concerning than Tabby's wardrobe. His sister was shrieking for a handkerchief as though she were bleeding out on Cora's pristine carpet.

A flurry of activity followed. Two maids and a footman rushed to the parlor to sort out the spill while Tabitha bemoaned the state of her skirts. Sinclair, meanwhile, seemed most concerned with rescuing a sheaf of papers from the widening pool of melted ice.

Cora—Nate would acquiesce to calling her Lady Dane only to her face—ignored the chaos. She was staring at Nate with an air of nervous conviction, as though she had challenged him to a duel and was afraid she would win.

Nate was certain he was gaping. This hadn't been quite what he'd had in mind five years ago when he had panic-promised her a boon. To be sure, she had done him an unspeakable kindness, but he'd always considered it more of a singular event. Was the eternal vow of holy matrimony really the same as paying off a debt?

Nate absently tossed a handkerchief to his screeching sister. He was astounded that he had so underestimated this appointment. So far, he'd endured a scolding, a near-decapitation by cutlery, a marriage proposal, and, he suspected, a forthcoming bill for a frock he couldn't afford. *Wonderful.*

"This stain is going to set." Tabby was hysterical. "Nate, I'm going to strangle you!"

Cora still watched him with her arresting, multihued eyes. It was bloody unfair for her to be so distracting when he was already under duress. It had taken Nate the better part of the 1814 Season to grow accustomed to Cora's stare. He had found her eyes to be a puzzle he couldn't stop solving. Indeed, in the last five years, he'd found every pair of doe-eyed browns and twinkling blues to lack...*something.*

Their other half, he supposed. Cora's gaze was perpetually two parts, just like the rest of her.

Even now, he could see her, both brazen and abjectly terrified.

As damn well she should be. Proposing marriage of all things...and after her supercilious little tirade. Hell, she'd practically threatened to tell Tabitha about his long-ago mistake. Not the best way to ingratiate herself, was it?

The maids finally finished mopping—really, the spill hadn't been *that* calamitous—and Tabby gave up dabbing at her skirts. She tossed aside Nate's handkerchief and huffed in disgust at the purplish splotch marring her pale peach gown.

"I'll need to return home to change, Cora. I'll meet you later, after I pay a call to my modiste. I'm suddenly in need of another walking gown. I expect Madame Lavigne will be delighted."

Her scowl was pointed.

"Have her send the bill to the Albany," Nate grouched. "Not that I'm flush, these days, Tab—"

"That's not *my* problem," Tabby said savagely, snatching up her reticule and fan. Nate ducked, lest she get any ideas from Cora's dessert spoon. "I'm finished here. Stop being such a cretin and listen to Cora."

And with that, she stalked out of the parlor so menacingly, the retreating footman seemed afraid to bow. Gavin Sinclair hesitated. When it became clear Nate wasn't going to see his sister out, Sinclair anxiously followed Tabitha to the door.

For a moment, Nate and Cora were alone in the ringing silence left by Tabby's admonishment.

"My goodness." Cora winced, placing one slender hand against the slight swell of her breasts. "And to think, she accused *us* of acting childishly."

Nate looked at Cora in disbelief as he rubbed his still-throbbing knee. "You know, I can't even remember the last time she called me a cretin."

"April 1814," Cora said promptly.

Nate raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Is that so?"

“Yes.” She eyed him sideways, as though this admission was against her better judgment. “At the Rutherford Ball. I distinctly recall Tabitha quite vehemently accusing you of being a cretin that night. And for good reason.”

“That’s *right*,” Nate mused, the memory coming back to him. “The Rutherford Ball. I almost forgot.”

“I didn’t,” Cora said with a small, hesitant smile. “It was just after we were first introduced. You had filled Tabby’s dance card with an *array* of suitors.”

Nate grinned wickedly. “I was trying to liven things up for her.”

“Sir Grant’s hobby was entomology.” Cora pressed her fingers to her lips, halting her traitorous laugh. “He wanted to show her his preserved moth collection.”

“She could do with a bit of intellectual curiosity.” Nate waved casually. “It would have been good for her.”

“Lord Rossford was so decrepit, he could hardly stand.”

“Tabby handled it with aplomb.” Nate chuckled. “Anyone could have tripped over his cane.”

“But not while wearing a new lace hem.” Cora’s face finally opened in mirth. “She nearly took out the entire refreshment table.”

Nate’s gaze hooked on the curve of her smile. “Come, now. I caught her before she toppled into the ratafia.”

He stretched his leg under the sofa table, narrowly avoiding Cora’s primly crossed ankles. She jumped slightly at his proximity.

“Rather heroic of me, I’d say.”

“Yes.” Cora sighed, nodding thoughtfully. “Against all odds, *you* managed to save the day.”

The cloud of irritation hanging between them shifted, lifting Cora’s cool façade enough for Nate to glimpse the impish girl he remembered. She was a decidedly welcome addition to this otherwise confounding appointment.

Sinclair, now wavering in the threshold of the parlor, cleared his throat. “Are you two...sorted?”

Nate cocked his head toward Cora, silently repeating the question. She swept her eyes over him, as if peeling back his bluster, trying to find the long-ago lad she had almost been friends with.

Slowly, she nodded. “We’re sorted,” she announced. “At least for now. No bickering, no throwing food.”

“No eye-gouging via dessert spoon,” Nate added.

“Nor that,” Cora allowed.

Her full lips twitched, but her levity was only confined to her mouth. Beneath her eyes, Nate could see bruises of fatigue, the tender skin dusted lilac. There was a frayed, sagging quality to her, like a sail without wind. It was strange to see her this way. When he had known Cora before, she had been buoyant with possibility.

Under Nate’s inspection, her tentative smile grew pinched.

“Speaking of saving the day...” She fidgeted with her skirts. “I suppose we should return to the topic of my request.”

“About that,” Nate agreed. “It would be splendid if you cared to start making sense.”

Cora nodded and waved Sinclair forward. “Go on, Gavin. You’re the barrister.”

Sinclair walked ponderously to Tabitha’s vacated seat. He removed his spectacles, slowly polishing them with a handkerchief, as if considering the best way to broach the subject.

“My sister’s situation is a fairly convoluted legal knot, but I’ll do my best to explain.” He paused, donning his spectacles. “Now then, Travers, are you familiar with the laws of coverture?”

“Coverture?” Nate frowned, taken aback. “Well, yes. I mean, not *intimately*, of course.” He gestured blithely toward himself, as though his very existence served as proof he wasn’t the marrying sort. “But theoretically.”

Cora seemed to find his knowledge of the concept suspect.

“Coverture is the legal binding of a woman to a man through marriage. It’s the law by which she becomes his property, by which she ceases to exist as a separate person.” Her mouth twisted in distaste. “When I married Lord Dane, Cora Sinclair was no more.”

Nate grimaced.

“It’s the way of things,” Cora said simply. “My case is not unique, nor should it warrant your sympathy. But I *do* need your help.”

Nate considered. He hadn’t known Dane well, but what he did know, he didn’t like. The match hadn’t ever made sense to him. Cora was vivacious and warm; Dane was snide and weak. But it apparently made sense to everyone else. The marriage had been unequivocally favorable in the eyes of the *ton*.

He sensed Cora’s marriage hadn’t remained quite so favorable.

Nate pushed his hair off his brow. He had an idea where this conversation was headed, and he needed to correct course.

“Listen, love.” He sank further into the damnable sofa and crossed his arms. “I believe I know what you’re on about—Dane was a cold bastard who left you nothing. You need to dig your way out of destitution, and you think a Fordham ring would make a damn fine shovel.”

Sinclair started to interject. “Er...that’s not quite—”

“Unfortunately, I must dash your hopes, Lady Dane.” Nate shrugged. “I’d be of no help in recouping a fortune. You see, I’m not on solid financial ground, at the moment.”

Cora blinked impassively.

Nate leaned forward, grinning cheekily. “If, however, you require assistance filling other gaps your husband left, then—”

“There’ll be none of that!” Sinclair snapped. “Not another word, Travers.”

“Apologies.” Nate raised his palms. “I simply wanted Lady Dane to be clear about my strengths and weaknesses.”

Cora colored at Nate’s rough insinuation, but she didn’t flinch. “You’re not entirely wrong,” she said flatly. “My husband *was* a cold bastard. And there *was* a problem with the will. But it has nothing to do with my finances.”

“Cora is a wealthy woman in her own right,” Sinclair clarified, still eyeing Nate distrustfully. “Our eldest brother took good care with her marriage settlement—her dowry, portions for her children, a surprisingly favorable jointure. Moreover, though the entailed estate is held in trust by Dane’s solicitor until Leo reaches the age of majority, the solicitor is content to leave the overall management to Cora and her steward.”

“He’s old and useless,” Cora added.

“So what’s the trouble then?” Nate raked his gaze over her. “Funds, property...it seems as if you have it all, Lady Dane.”

Cora’s eyes shuttered. “Mr. Travers, I hardly have it all. I don’t care a *fig* for my pension. And believe me, I’d find a way to sell the estate, entailment be damned, if I thought it would do me any good. But it won’t. Because there are only two things in the entire world I wanted Dane to leave me.”

Her voice grew hoarse. “And he didn’t.”

She fell silent, staring at her lap.

Nate frowned, a very bad feeling creeping over him.

“What...didn’t he leave you?”

Cora slowly lifted her eyes—blue, amber. Unspeakably sad.

“My children.”

Shite. Nate flinched, regretting his teasing.

“Now, Cora,” Sinclair interrupted cautiously. “We need to be very precise. I know it might not feel like it, but you *do* have the children...in a fashion. You just have to share them. Which”—he held a hand up, forestalling his sister’s

interjection—“is not acceptable. I agree. Especially given the increasing threats from the Carletons.”

He turned to Nate. “Because of the laws of coverture, Lord Dane was the only person on earth with legal rights to my sister’s children. He could designate, upon his death, any guardian for them he wished.”

Cora made a small sound of disgust.

“A guardianship customarily is handled thusly.” Sinclair was now really warming up to his task. “A mother is often named the *guardian of nurture*—that means she can see to the daily care and wellbeing of her child. The father’s will may also name a *testamentary guardian*, who oversees the child’s personal finances and makes legal decisions, including matters of education and marriage. Both the guardian of nurture and the testamentary guardian have claim to the child’s physical custody.”

Nate was still staring at Cora. Her slim shoulders rounded forward. For the first time, Nate appreciated how slight she was. Cora normally vibrated like a tuning fork, stirring up the air around her until she seemed to take up an inordinate amount of space.

But right now, she was *small*.

Nate didn’t like it.

“Cora is, indeed, Tess and Leo’s guardian of nurture,” Sinclair continued matter-of-factly. “It’s why she can remain at Aldworth Park as long as Leo is in her physical custody. Now, if Dane’s will had been typical, I would have been named the testamentary guardian. I’m Cora’s closest brother, and I can’t inherit from Leo.” He smiled sadly at his sister. “Though in truth, I would have very little to do. Cora is an exceptional mother.”

“So...” Nate still couldn’t follow the thread to its end, to the part where Cora Dane was proposing marriage out of the clear blue sky.

“Dane, of course, did not select Gavin.” Cora’s voice was brittle. “Instead, he named his brother-in-law—his sister

Edith's husband—as my children's legal guardian. I can't imagine why, except to slight me. He always found it distasteful, how I doted on the babies.”

She paused, collecting herself. “Ronald and Edith Carleton are overbearing and unlikeable at their best, openly hostile at their worst. It's unconscionable that they have access to my children. But access seems to be exactly what they want.”

Nate had an abrupt memory of his own mother, rocking him when he was very small. He was by no stretch of the imagination a sentimental man, but Cora's children had to be *young*. Surely, not yet five years old.

Dane had been more of a bastard than Nate suspected.

Sinclair spoke again. “Over the course of the last year, it's become increasingly clear the situation is untenable. Edith Carleton, in particular, has been relentless in her demands and criticisms of Cora. She believes an unwed, independent young woman is...what were her exact words?”

Cora huffed. “*A danger to society and a moral impediment to the children.*” All at once, her spirit returned in force. “Never mind that Dane—Mrs. Carleton's own brother, mind you—was tugging his mistresses all over London. No, *I'm* the bastion of the depraved simply because I've found myself a widow.”

Sinclair reached across from his chair and gently laid a calming hand on his sister's forearm.

“All right,” Nate mused. “So you're bitterly embattled for your children's welfare. That's rotten, all around. But I still don't see where my involvement is warranted.”

“Well.” Sinclair stood and paced the length of the room. “We believe the Carletons intend to exert their power as testamentary guardians to eventually force Cora out entirely. If they ever manage to be named sole guardians, they would have custody not only of the children but Leo's estate as well. And time is of the essence. They have decided to visit Aldworth Park this summer. Ostensibly, it's to spend time with the children, but in reality—”

“They want to catch me out,” Cora seethed. “They’re coming to check up on me, to prove I’m a poor choice to raise the children.”

Sinclair sighed.

“We don’t know that for certain, but yes. I can’t say this upcoming visit doesn’t make me exceedingly uncomfortable. However, it’s also an opportunity. If the Carletons are indeed planning to eventually make a case against Cora, we need to deflect while we make *our* case against *them*.”

Nate’s mind raced, trying to estimate the final play here.

“Think of it this way, Travers.” Sinclair ticked off his fingers. “Most of the year, we were stuck on the defensive, simply appeasing the Carletons. Cora was in mourning. She couldn’t squash their complaints about her independence because she didn’t have any other recourse. But this spring, we started building an offensive strategy, just waiting for deployment.”

Sinclair squared his shoulders. “I have been preparing to petition the Court of Chancery to revoke the Carletons’ rights, instead naming Cora and me jointly as testamentary guardians. But it’s exceedingly rare for the Chancery to overturn a father’s will. We can’t move forward until we have a watertight case.”

“And we don’t,” Cora added darkly. “If Gavin were to submit his bill of complaint right now, the Carletons would simply make a fuss that, as a married vicar and his wife, they are the morally superior choice to raise the children. But as of yesterday, my options increased dramatically. I’ve been a widow a full year, you see. I’m no longer required to pretend to mourn my husband.”

Cora’s eyes were bright; her cheeks were flushed. She was startlingly attractive for a woman who was about to make Nate’s headache infinitely worse.

“The Carletons believe I’m untrustworthy. So I’m going to prove them wrong. I’ll prevent them from using my independence against me by giving them *exactly* what they

claim they want. When Gavin files his petition, it's imperative that the Carletons—and the Chancery—believe I'm going to provide my children a *proper* family.”

She paused significantly.

“Which, of course, is predicated on the fact that I have...a husband.”

Almost instinctively, Nate put his hand up between them. There was nothing remotely viable in her suggestion. “Lady Dane, no offense meant, I do feel your plight. I hadn't realized the extent of your trouble when you were writing this spring. But...” He paused, chafed by the very thought. “I can't marry you. There's absolutely no way—”

Cora raised her hand to her cheek, a bleak laugh splintering from her. “Oh! No, no...I'm not asking you to actually marry me. My God—could you *imagine*?”

Though he had been thinking the same, Nate couldn't help but feel affronted by her dismissal. After all, *she* had started this whole business with a proposal.

Cora stood and came closer, as if worried distance would undermine the clarity of her point. She perched on the sofa next to him, and Nate caught a whiff of her pleasantly bright fragrance.

“Mr. Travers, I just shook free from the choking skin of marriage. Never, ever again will I don that mantle. My independence is glorious, and I intend to keep it that way. But I do need the *ruse* of a husband. It's important for my brother's case that I'm presumably betrothed. I can't leave the Carletons with even one arrow to use against me.”

Nate cocked his head, her meaning becoming clear. “Are you suggesting...”

“I need you to *pretend* you are my betrothed.”

Nate drew a breath, five different questions battling for precedence. “So...what? We merely...*announce* we are engaged?”

Cora wrinkled her nose. “I’m afraid it’s a bit more complex.”

Nate leveled her a stare. “How complex?”

“Well, as you’ve heard, the Carletons are coming to visit my children at Aldworth Park. They’re to stay with us for the month of July.” Cora flashed him a nervous, wheedling smile. “You would need to come to the countryside and play the part of my betrothed for at least a portion of their visit.”

“Essentially, you’d be helping to bolster my case, Travers,” Sinclair added. “While you two are in Berkshire, I’ll be here finishing my preparations. Once I submit my petition, the court may call upon witnesses to testify about Cora’s family—tenants, servants, acquaintances, anyone in her periphery. Not only do we want to stifle any rejoinder the Carletons might make, but we also want to offer proof of her impending remarriage. As close as we can get, without her actually needing to wed.”

Nate squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his temples; his headache had indeed returned in full force.

It was clear Cora was under immense strain, but her earlier contemptuous volleys at him didn’t make him eager to come to her aid. And he still maintained her current request went far beyond the cost of the two necklaces she had given to him in 1814.

This was all a sorry business, to be sure. But it wasn’t *his* business.

“No.”

A muscle tightened in Cora’s cheek, but she nevertheless nodded briskly.

“I supposed you would say that. I planned for this very contingency, Mr. Travers.”

She gestured to Gavin, who handed Nate the papers he had rescued from the spilled ice.

“This is a contract,” Cora pronounced, as though she had invented contracts. “If you help me pull this off, you’ll be well

compensated for your efforts.”

Nate plopped the unread papers on the table.

“No.”

Cora flushed angrily. “Why not?”

“I don’t take a gamble I can’t conceivably win, love. And what you are quite literally proposing is preposterous.”

“At least review the terms my brother drew up. This is a good offer—”

Nate didn’t need to know how good the terms were. What she was asking of him was laughable. He couldn’t play husband. He couldn’t play father. Not for a few weeks, not for a few hours.

“I’m not your man.” He shrugged, as if the matter were out of his hands entirely.

“You are my man.” Cora eyed him shrewdly. “I know you need funds, Travers. I’m well-acquainted with your plight.”

Nate felt another prick of annoyance. *Tabitha*. That cretin. “I assure you, my plight is none of your business, Lady Dane.”

“You and the earl are at quite the impasse, from what I hear. He’s cut off your funds until you turn things around. Isn’t that so?”

Nate rubbed his hand over his jaw. At Cora’s steady stare, he nodded curtly.

“Something like that.”

She triumphantly splayed her hands. “Then you would be most sensible to consider my offer. Don’t you see? Your brother will appreciate that you are trying to improve yourself, what with proposing to a sad little widow, taking care of her innocent, fatherless children...”

Nate furrowed his brow, unconvinced. “I don’t think—”

She slid the papers back to him. “*Look* at it. Why are you being so stubborn? It’s because you know I’m right. You know that this will help you too.”

With a groan, Nate snatched the contract. “For the love of God, here, give it over.”

Nate scanned the paper in front of him. He whistled, his eyes growing wide. Cora was right; it was a damn good offer. She was asking him to spend only two weeks in Berkshire. He’d be back in London by mid-July. Nate mentally tabulated the healthy sum she offered, weighing her stipulations against his bank accounts.

If he pulled off this ruse, he’d be well on his way to getting back on his feet. And it wouldn’t involve Raymond at all.

“And then, what happens after the fortnight?”

Sinclair tapped the contract. “You return to London. You’ll need to keep your nose clean once you are back in Town. Even though Leo is a peer, it’s likely this may take a while to clear the court, which is why the final payment is due to you upon the conclusion of the custody settlement. Once the dust settles, Cora will quietly break off the engagement.”

“I’m a lousy accomplice for your purposes,” Nate stated what was perhaps the most obvious flaw in a plan riddled with them. “You realize that, don’t you? My reputation won’t endear me to a persnickety vicar’s wife.”

Cora and Sinclair exchanged swift glances.

“Yes. Well...as my brother stated, you’ll need to clean up your act, Travers. It’s what we’re paying you for. And your reputation isn’t *all* bad. You have the Fordham name. It would look good for Leo to be attached to an earl’s family. Far better preparation for the peerage than a vicar.”

Nate raised a doubtful eyebrow. “You didn’t have anyone else to ask, did you?”

Cora bit her lip but remained silent. Confirmation enough.

Nate twisted his cuff link, taking stock of the situation. A fake engagement was one thing, but he had a sneaking suspicion it wasn’t just the one thing. There were so many bits that could go wrong, and the stakes couldn’t be higher. He was no stranger to going all in, but doing it on someone else’s behalf was an altogether different matter.

More concerning, he'd only be accepting another warden, wouldn't he? From Raymond to Cora Dane. He would still be indebted to someone, still singing for his supper. It wasn't a sterling solution, as far as Nate was concerned.

His gaze shifted to Cora. Her cheeks were flushed with nerves, and a loose lock of hair unspooled along her neck. Nate had to be honest—while her chiding was obnoxious, the way she tried to put him in his place was bloody appealing. Cora had always been bossy. Nate had forgotten how tempting it was to show her otherwise.

But even *that* was enjoyable for only a half hour, maybe. Not for weeks. Though...skipping Town and his brother's shadow for a fortnight was not without its benefits. Nor was the ridiculous amount of money she promised.

Nate drummed his fingers, working his jaw.

"Travers..." Cora's voice was so unexpectedly broken that Nate startled. "Just take the contract. *Please.*"

There was an unmasked look of utter desperation on her face, and something cleaved deep inside the hollow part of his chest.

In a flash, the anguish was gone, her countenance smooth.

But Nate couldn't unsee it.

And that's when he understood. Cora was doing her damndest to act as though this were simple and straightforward; it was anything but.

She could lose her children.

Damn it.

Nate reached forward and reluctantly pulled the contract toward him.

This was most assuredly a foolhardy endeavor.

But then, Nate wasn't exactly known for his good ideas.

June 1819

St. Lawrence Parish, Essex

Lady Dane,

The Vicar and I are looking forward to our upcoming visit to Berkshire. Before we arrive, I wanted to remind you of a few necessities:

I require two pillows of medium stuffing. If the pillows are overstuffed, it pains my neck. I am also partial to reading in my own chambers in the evening; I'll need a west-facing window and an adequate supply of candles. Mr. Carleton and I prefer to break our fast quite earlier than I'm sure you typically rise, so please ensure your staff is prepared and not idling.

I would also like to confirm you have been taking the children to church? I will be attending your local parish during my stay and expect my brother's children know how to comport themselves. Rumor has it you have become lax on this matter.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Edith Carleton



“WELL? WHAT HAPPENED AFTER I LEFT?”

The warm afternoon had faded to an idyllic June evening. Tabitha and Cora were sitting in the small back garden of Dane House, watching the sun gradually grow as rosy as a ripe peach.

“You missed Gavin in his element,” Cora said wryly. “He hardly ever gets to spout legalese to a ruffian.”

Tabitha hummed in amusement.

Whereas Cora felt ruffled and sweaty by the end of the day, Tabby was as fresh as a daisy, now wearing a crisp, cream-colored ensemble. True to her word, she had returned to Cora’s after sorting out her wardrobe drama.

“I really am sorry about your gown,” Cora said. “The embroidery was divine. I don’t expect it can be salvaged.” The women permitted themselves a moment of silence to mourn the exquisite peach muslin. “Did you ever make it to the modiste? Is your brother weeping over your expenditures as we speak?”

Tabby waved one elegant hand. “Not today. And when I do, it won’t be on Nate’s account.” She shrugged. “Don’t get me wrong, he deserves it, but his finances really have been obliterated, Cora. I wasn’t exaggerating when I said he would be more than willing to participate in your charade.”

“Hmm,” Cora murmured evasively.

“What’s wrong?” Tabby reached for her lemonade. “He did agree, didn’t he?”

“Yes...” Cora was unsure how to voice her concerns. “He did...”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it? I’d hate for my gown to have perished in vain.” Tabitha clinked her glass against Cora’s. “So what’s next for the engagement scheme?”

Cora sipped her own lemonade, enjoying the tartness. “We’re to meet at Hyde Park tomorrow. I’m going to introduce him to the children, if you can believe that. My God, Tabitha, I can’t quite wrap my mind around it. Has your brother ever interacted with children before?”

Tabby squinted thoughtfully. “Well, not from me, of course.” She laughed throatily. Tabby was unconventional in all matters, including the maternal variety. “And Raymond’s daughters aren’t much younger than Nate and me. He was only a boy when Annalise and Viola were born. I suspect he’ll do

all right. It might seem odd to say it, but I always thought Nate would make a good father.”

Cora choked on her drink, and Tabby chuckled.

“Not a good *husband*, mind you. But yes, I think he’ll do fine with the children. He is a child, in many ways.”

“We’ll see,” Cora murmured. This discussion made her feel rather forlorn. It only served as a needless reminder that the only papa Tess and Leo would know was a man being paid to do it on a very temporary basis.

There were times when she desperately wished her children had a father. She had wished it, of course, even when Dane was still alive. It would have been so nice for Tess and Leo to have another person to talk with them, to guide them, to be there when she couldn’t. It pained Cora that her children would never be wrapped in arms bigger than her own.

But, alas, Cora’s arms would have to do.

“Is something bothering you, darling?” Tabby could be compellingly observant when she wanted to be. It was quite a bother, sometimes.

“I’m not sure,” Cora admitted. To her disappointment, the afternoon’s meeting had done very little to relax the ropes of anxiety in her chest. She had hoped the conversation with Travers and Gavin would be enough to put her mind at ease. But Cora didn’t feel the giddy relief she had anticipated. Instead, she was suffering from an altogether skittering case of nerves.

“Are you familiar with Aesop’s Fables?” She held up her lemonade, watching the sunset sparkle through the glass. “Specifically, ‘The Farmer and the Snake?’ I read it to the children yesterday.”

Tabby tilted her head. “Is that the one where the snake returns, against all odds, to help the farmer in his hour of need?”

“No,” Cora said pointedly. “It’s the one where inviting the scoundrel into his home destroys the farmer’s life.”

“Ah. Well.” Tabby smiled. “It could have gone the other way. You never know. Believe it or not, trusting others doesn’t always equal an unpleasant outcome.”

“Even a known rogue?”

Tabby was quiet for a long moment, and Cora wondered if she’d offended her. The *known rogue* in question was her brother, after all.

“Well...” Tabitha paused. “If you’re concerned about that, I once more urge you to consider the other option here.”

She held Cora’s gaze. Like Travers, Tabby had gray eyes. But where his were as dark as slate, Tabby’s were pale, like the morning fog. She nodded slowly.

Cora suddenly knew exactly what her friend was going to say.

“No, Tabby.”

“Hear me out—”

“I said no.”

“You don’t have to do it like this, darling. You don’t have to playact with my dolt of a brother. There’s a much simpler, happier way—one that doesn’t involve deception and trickery and bribes.”

“Tabby...”

“You could find a man you actually *want* to marry, Cora. You don’t have to risk a ruse. You could well and truly court someone, you could start over, you could have a real life.”

“I *do* have a real life.” Cora’s eyes flashed. “I have my children. I already have my happily ever after. Tess and Leo are it for me.”

Tabitha sighed. Her eyes were heavy with something very close to pity. “I know, Cora. I know you think they’re enough for you...but dearest, you’re twenty-three years old. You can still have everything you wanted, a big, *happy* family—”

Cora seized her friend’s hand. “Tabitha, I know you’re trying to help, but you must understand—a fake engagement is

not a problem for me. I don't need a husband. I need a solution."

Tabby's slender fingers squeezed hard. Cora looked at their clasped hands, willing herself to be patient. Her dear friend only wanted her happiness. They simply had very different ideas of what that entailed.

When Tabby spoke next, her voice was very quiet. "Not all men are like Frederick Dane."

Cora shook her head. "Of course not. Some men are like Gavin. Or like Captain Finch." She smiled, referring to Tabby's adoration for her dashing husband. "But some men... are only disguised as such."

Tabby's eyes glittered.

"Cora, you've no idea how difficult it is to see someone I love so dearly not know great love herself." She sighed. "I know your family meant well, darling, but that damnable arranged marriage ruined your life."

"My father didn't know," Cora said softly, defensively. "He thought...he thought he was helping. I remember how worried he was when his health started to decline. He knew he wouldn't be there when I was of age to marry. He just wanted me to be taken care of."

The memory tugged Cora's heartstrings. She didn't fault her family for what happened with Dane. She knew her father *had* meant well. Before he died, Lord Sinclair, a wealthy baron, had worked tirelessly to secure a future marriage for Cora. He hadn't wanted to leave the worry to her brothers; he saw it as his duty alone. Her father had been so relieved when he arranged the advantageous match between his only daughter and Viscount Dane.

Papa's final responsibility laid to rest.

"I don't blame my family," Cora admitted. "I blame myself."

Tabby looked skyward, clearly unwilling to believe this.

“I had the 1814 Season to become familiar with Dane before we wed. Those were the terms of the arrangement.” Cora laughed humorlessly. “I was too naive to note any warning signs—that the only person Dane was becoming familiar with was the prima ballerina at the Sans Pareil.”

She exhaled slowly. “I know you want me to be happy, Tabitha, but I can assure you, marriage isn’t the way to accomplish that. Not for me. I’ll never again be so foolish as to permit anyone else to dictate the terms of my life. Besides, it’s not only about me now. I would prefer Leo and Tess have no father at all than risk them having a second abysmal one.”

Tabby sighed in resignation, letting go of Cora’s hand, and Cora knew she would drop the matter. Tabitha was forceful, but she wasn’t pushy.

For a moment, the women were silent. Cora took another sip of her lemonade, looking at the upturned garden surrounding her, shadowed in the flare of the setting sun. She felt a flicker of satisfaction at the disarray. She was having it all replanted. No more tidy rows. Cora wanted a tangle of color, a ferocity of blooms. Peonies tumbling to greet her, shocked at their own top-heavy audacity. Roses growing mad, laced with foxglove. A life of her own planting; a life of her own cultivation.

Hers alone.

Tabby spoke, rubbing her palms briskly.

“Very well. If you’re decided, then I’m decided.” She raised one eyebrow. “Put me to work. Sinclair is fussing over the case. Nate will be cavorting around Berkshire. What about me? How can I further your cause? Something, if you please, that won’t ruin any more of my frocks.”

Cora smiled mischievously.

“You can do what you do best, my dear—stir the rumor mill. Let word burn through the beau monde and keep the kindling at the ready. I need everyone to believe I’m engaged to your brother.”

“That, I most certainly can do.” Tabitha grinned wickedly. She set her glass down and stood. “Starting tomorrow, that is. I was at Rosalie’s ball until six this morning, and my nap was entirely insufficient for the clamor of this day. I need a hot bath, a claret, and a letter from my husband.”

Cora closed her eyes. “That sounds heavenly. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

Tabby kissed her cheek.

“Well, you better start. My brother is a man of many appetites. He’ll expect his bride-to-be to be well-rested.”

Tabby was only teasing, but Cora’s stomach grew hot.

“That’s not funny,” she said, remembering the way Travers’s gaze held hers.

Tabitha winked. “Oh darling. I’ve never been more serious.”

IT WAS VERY LATE. Cora had tried to follow Tabby’s lead: a bath, a glass of wine, and, in the absence of letters from a handsome naval captain, a few pages of a novel. Now the night pressed heavily through her windows, but still Cora lay awake.

What have I gotten myself into?

In hindsight, Cora could admit that as much as she had hoped for Travers’s help, a large part of her had expected him to refuse. She’d assumed this whole strategy would fail, forcing her to find another way. But Travers was willing to play. Which meant, ready or not, Cora was part of the game too.

A full fortnight of Nathaniel Travers.

Suddenly the Carletons weren’t the most alarming aspect of this plan.

It hadn’t seemed quite so mad when Gavin had first raised the issue on a chilly evening in March. It had felt...strangely logical. Gavin had been pacing by Cora’s fireplace when he

posed the question, albeit rhetorically, *Who would possibly deign to participate in such a ludicrous arrangement?*

The answer had appeared instantly, as though Cora had already been thinking it herself. The only man she knew who was too unreliable to *be* a husband, but just unreliable enough to *play* one.

Cora feared she had been shortsighted about the unreliable bit of the equation. As Travers so efficiently reminded her today, he wasn't inclined to follow rules. He was a troublemaker, thoroughly disinterested in behaving as he ought. Cora, on the other hand, preferred crystal-clear guidelines. Even knowing what she did of Travers, she hadn't been overly worried about his antics...because his antics had been abstract.

Now she had to face him in the very distracting flesh.

Cora rolled over in bed.

In the dark of her bedchamber, Travers's slow smile spread like honey, golden and heavy, sticking to her interior. Her pulse quickened, pulling urgently toward the wicked intrusion.

She sat up abruptly, pressing her pillow to her face and groaning. This was *exactly* what she didn't need right now.

The truth was Cora had always been affected by some unnamed quality possessed by Travers. She supposed it was the vague sense of satisfaction thrumming through him; everything about him was at ease. It was, in fact, the inelegant and seamless way he occupied space that had first drawn Cora to him five years ago. She had never known anyone with such intrinsic self-assurance.

But now Cora was the one who had to remain self-assured. She could not, under any circumstances, allow this ruse to go sideways.

She shifted restlessly, rearranging her pillows and staring at the canopy above her.

Never trust a scoundrel.

And he was, wasn't he? Travers was a rogue, through and through. All these years later, he was still getting into trouble, still unabashedly cavalier, still avoiding respectability like the plague.

Cora was the farmer, knowing exactly who she was picking up, exactly who she was taking into her home.

After all, she had seen him at the height of his troubles. She, of all people, should know better.

Cora closed her eyes, reluctantly drifting back to that dreadful evening five years ago. The memory was oddly crystalized, clear and sharp. It was remarkable how easily she could place herself there.

Fordham House, the corridor outside the earl's study, the very edge of nightfall. Cora had been on her way to Tabitha's sitting room when she heard the guttural moaning of an animal in pain. She still remembered peering into the gloomy study, uncertain of what she would find, but the bloodied and bruised form of Nate Travers, crumpled on the floor, had wiped all other concerns from her mind. The earl's study faced the side street, and it was plain the poor fool had climbed through the window rather than alerting the footmen to his appalling state. Cora couldn't summon even the shadow of exasperation at his latest mishap. His half-formed pleas, as though his mouth were in the wrong place, had pierced her with terrified, sympathetic pain.

To this day, Cora didn't know precisely what she had been thinking as she cushioned his head on her lap, feeling for contusions, choking with panic. She was newly engaged, and their proximity was unseemly...but so was leaving him alone. Travers hadn't wanted to tell her what happened, but she had coaxed it out of him—the exorbitant sum he owed to the seediest of gaming hells and no way to settle his debts.

Cora had tried to convince him to involve his brother, but on that point Travers had been acutely clear: the earl was not, under any circumstances, to be involved. It was only when her new ring glinted in the low light of her candle that Cora recalled the engagement present sent by her great-aunt. Two

heavy, unfashionable, and very valuable sets of jewelry Cora never intended to wear.

“I can help...” She still recalled how the words burned her throat, how his smoking gaze burned her chest. *“I can pay your debts.”*

He had pressed her hand to his cheek, as though her palm alone would hold his battered bones together. His face was clammy, his jaw stubbled with the new growth of beard. She had stroked his cheek once, and her fingers had burned too.

“Anything you ask, love.” Cora would never forget the sound of his voice. *“I swear to God, if you help me, I’ll do anything.”*

A promise made in haste. Cora had known that very night she wouldn’t mention it again. It was mortifying and inconceivable. What would he ever have to offer her?

But now she had learned providence has a way of turning even the tidiest of lives upside down, of prying stubbornly-closed fists open in supplication. When a woman is on her knees, her pride takes the first blow.

Cora rose from her bed, giving up on sleep entirely. She would go up to the nursery, to look over Tess and Leo. She would tuck in their blankets and smooth back their hair.

She would remind herself why she was doing this.

Tonight, in the garden, Tabitha had pitied her. She wanted Cora to know great love, but Tabby didn’t understand that Cora already knew it well. Her children had given her everything. Even through the years of Dane’s indifference, Cora had never been unloved. She knew love without limit, love in abundance. Even if that love had come from nothing, even if she’d had to grow it inside of herself.

Cora kept trying to stop the hourglass, to halt the passage of time. So much of the last year had been consumed by worry; she just wanted to enjoy her children, to revel in their smallness, their surety. She couldn’t bear the way her current circumstances forced her, always on edge, to remember every tiny detail.

Not even half a year ago, Cora had decided to breech Leo, transitioning him out of his infant dress into tunics and short pants. It had been painful but necessary, her first babe ready for the trappings of boyhood. Not to mention Tess, whose singular aim in life was to keep up with Leo at any cost to life and limb.

Both of them so big. So fast.

Most nights, Cora would lie awake and test herself, compulsively recalling the dimpled ridge of Leo's knuckles under her thumb, the puff of Tess's breath on her collarbone. She spent her sleepless nights panic-hoarding sensations of her children, afraid any day would be the one the Carletons said *enough*.

Cora knew she would lose them eventually. All she asked was that life grant her the same grief afforded every mother—the gradual, inevitable slide from baby to child.

All she asked was that she didn't miss it.

She reached for the latch on her door, meaning to go see her babies.

But Cora's hand was shaking, and then all at once, so was the rest of her. Alone in her room, she sank to the floor, buried her face in her knees, and wept.

God help me.

All of her hopes, cradled in the bruised hands of the very worst rogue she knew.

June 1819

Finch Residence, London

Nate—

You will say this is none of my business, but of course that's the only sort of business I'm interested in.

I swear to heaven, Brother, if you ruin this for Cora, I'm going to accompany you to Madame's Roost every single night for the rest of your benighted little life. Think how pleasant your evenings will be with me at your side, commenting on your cards, flirting with the henchmen, exchanging fashion tips with your paramours.

I'm sure you think I jest, and yet I'm shuffling a deck of cards right now.

Please see this through, Nathaniel.

And while you're at it, see to the bill from my modiste.

Tabby



“I SHOULD HAVE time before I'm due at Hyde Park to duck down to the stables.” Nate was sprawled over a wingback chair in his sitting room, reviewing the list of preparations Barnes had drafted that morning. “I'll inform the grooms Icarus needs readied for the country.”

Barnes was methodically brushing a hat. “Will you require evening dress, sir?”

“Not if I can help it.” Nate grimaced, thinking of the amendments he had scrawled across Cora’s contract late last night. “Apparently, there’s to be a ball, but I don’t believe it will affect me or my wardrobe.”

Barnes wrapped the hat in linen and placed it in the waiting trunk. “Be that as it may, sir, I suggest we plan for a variety of occasions.” Barnes slid Nate a significant stare. “Especially considering that plans, in general, have been lacking.”

Nate straightened, surveying the upheaval around him. For the first time in recent memory, he found himself in possession of tasks, and they were proving to be quite the nuisance—readying for a fortnight in Berkshire, settling his affairs in London, all the tedium of arranging and packing and informing.

It seemed this fake engagement was already causing him to exert himself.

“The tailor still has your navy tailcoat,” Barnes reminded him as he set about folding an alarming number of cravats. “I’ll send for it.”

“Fine,” Nate relented. “I suppose there’s no harm in packing it. Who knows what Lady Dane will have up her dainty little sleeve? We’ll need to be vigilant for all manner of surprises in Berkshire, Barnes.”

“Hmph.” Barnes’s jaw ticked, a notable break in his typical composure.

Nate quirked an eyebrow. “Is something on your mind, Barnes?”

“Not at all, sir.” Barnes turned to a stack of shirts. “Only...”

Nate sensed the question Barnes wanted to ask; he also knew he wouldn’t. Barnes possessed superlative discretion. The descendant of a freed family from Jamaica, Barnes had voyaged to London from the West Indies when he was hardly more than a lad. Whip-smart and highly observant, he had worked his way through various posts in Raymond and

Rosalie's home on Hill Street. When the time came for Nate to require his own valet, he had asked his brother for Barnes. It was one of the few prudent decisions Nate had ever made.

"You're wondering about this sudden trip to Berkshire." Nate nodded. "About Lady Dane?"

"It's not my place sir." Barnes snapped shut the trunk. "I'm sure you have a myriad of sensible reasons for a last-minute journey to the country."

Nate smirked wryly. His reasons tended more toward a tumble of dark hair and a thick stack of pounds. Nevertheless, it was as good a time as any to test out this ruse.

"Barnes..." Nate steepled his fingers and tried to look serious. "What would you say if I told you I was getting married?"

Barnes blinked twice in rapid succession. "I'd tell you..." He frowned in consternation. "I suppose I would tell you to put down the flask and get some air, sir."

Nate managed a chuckle in spite of a sudden, thorny sensation taking root in his chest. The situation *was* ridiculous, wasn't it? Unfortunately, it was also infuriatingly necessary.

"Thank you, Barnes," Nate said. "That will be all for now."

He rubbed his forehead, not quite believing the lengths he had to go to for money. It would be comical if it weren't so pathetic. Nathaniel Travers, heir presumptive to a prosperous earldom, husband for hire.

Christ.

This whole financial debacle smarted more than he would ever admit—not only the curbing of his funds but his dignity as well. Raymond insisted on treating Nate as if he were an impulsive child who let the whims of the day carry him. And it irked Nate to no end that his brother refused to see that some of Nate's whims might actually have potential.

Case in point, the damn railway. The investment that had set all this horseshit in motion. If Raymond had just listened to

him, maybe Nate wouldn't be holding a bloody task list right now.

He raked his hair back in frustration.

Regardless of what Cora said about softening his brother, Nate knew the news of a whirlwind engagement would only further provoke Raymond. His brother was a stalwart for duty. Hell, from the day he had inherited the earldom, he became *Fordham*, no longer Ray, the brother who had raised Nate from childhood.

Another barrier between them, another reminder of how different they were in character and circumstance.

Granted, Raymond and Rosalie had a legendarily swift engagement of their own. But Nate sensed his brother wouldn't look kindly on his sudden interest in a wealthy widow. He was in less than no hurry to have such a discussion, so he decided to put it off for as long as possible. He'd do every other errand—the stable, the tailor, performative romantic gestures in Hyde Park—before he'd call at Fordham House to discuss his betrothal.

Speaking of, Nate realized he'd better move along. He fingered his pocket watch, fully aware he couldn't be late to meet Cora. He was already bringing proposed changes to her contract, which was sure to set her off. And as enticing as her flashing eyes had been yesterday, Nate didn't have the energy for any more scenes.

Although, as he was bringing her an amended contract, the very least he could do was also bring a buffer. Flowers might go some way to smoothing over yesterday's bumpy reunion as well as his adamant refusal to attend a godforsaken ball.

“Barnes,” Nate called, striding to the door of his sitting room. “Did you send for a messenger yet?”

“I was just about to, sir.” Barnes's voice floated down the hall. “Is there something else you need?”

“Have him stop at the florist. I'd like a bouquet for my meeting this afternoon.” Nate wavered, considering the woeful

state of his accounts. "I don't care what arrangement he selects. Something modest."

"Very good, sir. I'll see that it's taken care of."

Nate thought for a moment. Cora had a daughter, didn't she?

"And a posy of violets."

NATE HAD to hand it to Cora; if she wanted to officially spread rumors of an engagement, there was no better locale than Hyde Park. The footpath leading from Hyde Park Corner to Kensington Gardens was an absolute crush. There wouldn't be a pair of ears among the Upper Orders who hadn't heard of Nate Travers's afternoon rendezvous with Lady Dane.

That is, if he could bloody well find her.

Nate was considering giving up. It was stiflingly hot, he was lugging these damn flowers, and he had already been forced to stop and chat with five different acquaintances. Not to mention, Miss Rhiannon Burns and her mother, slowly strolling past him for the *second* time...

"Mr. Travers?"

He turned, and there, squinting quizzically up at him, was Cora, lounging on a picnic blanket under a shady row of trees. She wore a pale yellow dress, her wavy hair half hidden under some kind of wicker bonnet. She looked drowsy and bright and—

"Excuse me, sir!" A gig waited for Nate to clear the bridle path.

"Right. Sorry, mate," Nate called, hustling out of the way and over to Cora's blanket.

Next to Cora, a pretty, round-faced woman was busily making sandwiches for two small children. Nate glimpsed the little boy's cheerful pink cheeks under a mop of brown hair, but before Nate could say hello, there was a tremendous commotion in the form of a very small tornado.

“Flowers!”

The young woman—the children’s nurse, Nate presumed—hushed the girl and attempted to pull her onto her lap. The tiny child wriggled away, her eyes unerringly focused on Nate.

“Er...hello.” He blinked, taken aback. “Are you—”

“Flowers.” The little girl marched stoutly toward Nate, her small hand flexing eagerly. She tilted her head at him, and Nate looked at her properly—honeycomb hair and the roundest, bluest eyes he’d ever seen.

“Tess, you’re being abominably rude. Come here this instant,” Cora said, reaching to tug the hem of the little girl’s yellow frock.

Nate noticed she and Cora were wearing the same color. It was oddly endearing.

He bowed gallantly, holding aloft the violets. He felt absurdly proud of himself for remembering flowers for Cora’s daughter.

The little girl—Tess—eyed the flowers, nonplussed. “No.” She waved aside the little posy as though it were a trifle. Her sapphire eyes instead fixed on the cornflowers Nate had procured for Cora. “Pink.”

“Ah...” Nate paused, eyeing Cora’s bouquet. The flowers were blue-violet.

“She *only* says pink.” The little boy suddenly spoke up. “She doesn’t know her colors yet.”

The nurse looked mortified, but a rush of mirth rattled through Nate. This doll could have anything she wished as far as he was concerned. He hadn’t realized little girls came in such opinionated varieties.

“Absolutely, love.” Nate grinned, holding out the cornflowers. “The pink ones are for you.”

Tess’s expression transformed into a sunny smile as she took the giant bouquet in both arms. She immediately stomped off, staggering under the flowers, to sit by herself under a nearby tree.

Nate turned, bemused, to the remainder of the small party.

“Was that...”

“That’s Tess for you,” Cora confirmed.

“And I’m Leo, for you, sir,” the little boy said shyly. He faltered, his eyes growing wide. “I mean...I’m Lord Dane,” he hastily corrected.

“It’s a pleasure, Lord Dane.” Nate nodded.

“Can I?” The boy whispered to Cora, his eyes still on Nate. “Give permission?”

She nodded, hiding her smile.

“You may call me Leo, sir,” Lord Dane announced solemnly.

Cora squeezed the boy’s small hand. Nate managed to keep a straight face.

“Leo, this is my...friend, Mr. Travers.”

Nate winked at Leo.

“Mr. Travers, this is the children’s nurse, Annie. She’s the most capable person in my household.”

Annie nodded politely, her eyes glued to Tess, who was methodically dismantling the bouquet.

“Mama?” Leo whispered, his round cheeks slowly drooping as he looked forlornly at Tess’s discarded violets. “Did Mr. Travers bring a surprise for me too?”

Cora admonished Leo for his rudeness, even as she shot Nate a mutinous glare. He realized the extent of his error—a present for only one of her children.

Shite.

“Of course. Of course I did, my good man.” Nate stalled, fumbling in his pockets. He didn’t have anything on him... except for a handkerchief.

“Here,” he offered jovially. “I brought you...this.”

Leo looked rightfully doubtful. “A handkerchief?”

“No...” Nate hedged. “Not *just* a handkerchief...” He cast his gaze about, ignoring Cora’s skeptical huff. “A...”

Nate saw a stick on the ground and all but lunged for it. He plucked the handkerchief from Leo, deftly tied two knots around the stick, and waved it.

“A pirate flag.”

Leo lit up, his entire face glowing in excitement. He ran to Tess, waving the flag. Annie, capable nurse that she was, set off to supervise the children.

Relieved, Nate sank to the blanket beside Cora. He stretched out next to her, helping himself to a sandwich.

“So...those are your children?”

Cora was watching Leo proudly display his pirate flag, a content smile playing on her face. Seeing her like this, it slowly occurred to him that he and Cora couldn’t be further apart in circumstance.

Cora was a *mother*.

Nate uncomfortably considered her guardianship plight. It seemed about a hundred times worse now that he had actually met the children in question.

A flare of something akin to shame ignited inside of him. He was struck by the sobering awareness that five years ago, he and Cora had been friends, in their own fashion. And then what? He hadn’t written to thank her for the jewels; he hadn’t written when her children were born; he hadn’t written when her husband died.

And he hadn’t even written when she asked for help.

He swallowed a thick bite of sandwich, belatedly grasping Cora was speaking to him.

“I should make clear, Mr. Travers, when it comes to Tess and Leo, I’m a wretched example of a proper society matron. Annie is a fantastic help, but I don’t keep my children sequestered in the nursery. They are my two favorite people in the world, and I don’t enjoy being separated from them.” She

shot him a look. “I hope that won’t be a problem for our proposed arrangement.”

Nate frowned, chewing a mouthful of bread and cheese. “Not a problem, per se. But what, exactly, do they do?”

Cora rolled her eyes. “What do they *do*? The same things anybody else does. Except with more noise, mess, and joy.” She paused, observing Nate drop half his sandwich. “You’ll likely get along with them fairly well, now that I think about it.”

“Tess!”

At Annie’s admonishment, Nate looked over to see Tess whacking her brother with the cornflowers. Nate thought of Cora’s weaponized spoon yesterday—at least her daughter came by it honestly.

“Careful with your flowers, sweetling,” Cora warned, and Tess skipped forward, holding the now-battered arrangement aloft.

“See that, Mama?”

“I do indeed. How lovely!”

Tess sparkled as she slithered into Cora’s lap. Cora lightly hummed, her hand finding her daughter’s hair. Tess leaned into the caress like a satisfied little cat.

Nate gave a low whistle. “My God, her *eyes*.”

Cora looked fondly at her daughter, running the pad of her finger over Tess’s pillowed cheek. “I know,” she said absently.

Then, as though suddenly remembering there was an actual point to Nate’s appearance at their picnic, Cora turned back to him. “Now then, Mr. Travers—”

But Nate, distracted, had leaned forward on one elbow to meet Tess’s ethereal gaze.

“I believe I’ll call you Lady Swifte,” he said, tilting his head at the little girl.

Cora looked flummoxed. “Swifte? Why ever would you call her *that*?”

Nate grinned. “Edmund Swifte’s the Keeper of the Crown Jewels, love. But I’d wager this one here’s giving him some stiff competition with those sapphires she’s sporting.”

He offered Cora a lopsided smile, which she declined to accept. Instead, she firmly tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear and studiously diverted her eyes to Tess.

“You’ll be in trouble, when she debuts,” Nate teased, enjoying Cora’s grimace of distaste. He leaned closer. “At this very moment, there’s a band of six-year-old boys catching frogs who will fall at Lady Swifte’s feet the moment she steps into her first ballroom.”

“Please, don’t talk about the rakes in my daughter’s future.” Cora crossed her arms as Tess ran off again.

“You know the saying,” Nate dug in, itching to see Cora vexed. “When you have a son, you only have to consider one pair of breeches. When you have a *daughter*, you have to consider every pair of breeches in London.”

He felt a lick of heat as he watched Cora’s gaze start to flicker down his body, toward his own trousers—but then she pulled back, tossing him an exasperated glare.

“No, Mr. Travers. I do *not* know that saying.”

Nate chuckled, feeling quite accomplished as he rummaged in his pocket and produced Cora’s crumpled contract.

“So, Lady Dane.” He unfolded the paper. “I have a few notes.”

Cora narrowed her eyes in a way that brought her thick lashes into focus. “The contract wasn’t exactly up for debate —”

Nate ignored her and pointed to the places he’d marked. “As we discussed yesterday, your terms are, indeed, largely favorable. But I do have a few matters of concern.”

Cora snatched the papers, carefully skimming his annotations.

“You’ll see here you indicated we would attend three events together—”

“I hardly think that’s a hardship over a fortnight.” Cora’s brow furrowed. “The entire point of this farce is to produce evidence of our relationship.”

“Yes, that’s all well and good.” Nate leaned back on his forearms. “But you indicated a festival, a party, and a ball.”

“And?”

Nate shrugged, as if it were obvious. “I don’t attend balls.”

Cora’s eyes rolled skyward as she exhaled impatiently.

“Perhaps not customarily, but you’ll be attending *a* ball. *One* ball. *This* ball—”

He was already shaking his head.

“Not *any* balls. I loathe them. And in fact, I have been recently reminded of why. I’m not the sort of man who typically changes my opinions.”

“The Monmouth Ball will be quite the to-do, Mr. Travers. We’ll need to be seen there—”

“It’s technically the day my contract terms would conclude,” Nate pointed out. “July 1st to July 15th. Your paperwork indicates the ball is that final evening. Bit of a gray area, I’d say, considering I wouldn’t be able to depart until the following day.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake—”

“Fair is fair.” Nate lifted one shoulder. “I’ll do the parish festival. I’ll do this Wallace shooting party. But I’m not attending a ball.”

Cora sagged, mulling this over.

“Very well,” she said reluctantly. “You can miss the Monmouth Ball. But”—she pointed a finger, halting his victorious grin—“you will need to make up the evidence in another fashion.”

“How’s that?” Nate asked suspiciously. “Another social event?”

Cora was tapping her chin, thinking hard.

“No...” she murmured, her teeth worrying her full bottom lip. “Let’s do something entirely different. *Hedge our bets*, to use a term you’re familiar with.”

Nate prickled with unease. “Lady Dane—”

“Love letters,” she declared triumphantly. “You’ll need to write me love letters. And backdate them, throughout all last winter and spring. Gavin can present them as evidence of our courtship.”

He blanched. “I don’t think—”

“It’s that or the ball.” Cora primly flicked her hair over her shoulder and shot him a superior smirk. “Your choice.”

“Fine,” Nate capitulated, raising his eyebrow. “I suppose of the two, sham love letters will be the lesser torture.”

“Wonderful.” Cora swiveled to watch her children as Nate reached for another sandwich. “If that’s all settled then, I’ll see this contract to my brother. He’ll arrange for your payments.”

Nate chewed thoughtfully. Nothing for it now—two bouquets, one contract, zero balls. He was officially engaged.

How romantic.

As if reading his thoughts, Cora slowly dipped her gaze over him. All at once, Nate saw how intimate a portrait they painted; he was stretched out on the blanket, his body an open-ended bracket alongside Cora, who was languidly propped up on one slim hand.

It was the closest they’d been during the last two days.

Nate inhaled, grippingly aware that the sweet, earthy scent lingering over the picnic blanket was emanating from Cora’s skin and that her skin was mere inches from his own.

A streak of molten anticipation flared along his spine.

Nate had always been blessed with the ability to absorb both the whole and the particulars in one fell swoop. It was a neat trick at the card table but never was it more useful than now.

On the one hand, a bird's eye view of the opening act of their engagement charade.

And on the other...the freckles dusting Cora's cheekbones. The butter-yellow skirts skimming her neatly folded thighs. The lithe line of her arm, directing his gaze to the pristine, palm-length glove currently resting a hair's breadth from his own hand.

The shouts of the children receded. Nate was entirely absorbed by the delicate curve of Cora's wrist, barely visible above the soft kid of her glove. The fine bones of her hand were a startling juxtaposition to his large, scraped knuckles.

As though his stare unwittingly pulled her palm into orbit, Cora shifted, rotating her hand toward him. He couldn't look away from the thin strip of exposed wrist. The skin was so delicate, he could nearly see her veins; if he pressed his finger there, he would feel her heartbeat flutter in greeting.

Christ, what I could do with that singular inch...

"Travers?"

He dragged his eyes away from her hand, along her arm, to her face. Her cheeks were stained pleasantly pink.

"Was there anything else we need to discuss?" Cora cleared her throat and deliberately placed her hand in her lap. Her fingers curled into her skirts.

"Yes, actually. I was thinking..." Nate swallowed, suddenly wishing for a beverage. "Don't you think we can forgo some of the formalities, by now? It's awfully stuffy, all this 'Lady this' and 'Mister that.'"

Cora looked wary. "That's not really—"

"Cora."

He held her first name in his mouth, cradling the vowels, and it was so shockingly intimate, Cora closed her pretty little

lips. It felt sinfully good, to say her name, to stun her into silence. It was a shame he'd waited so long.

Cora collected herself, likely intent on correcting him, but he held up his hand. There was no way in hell he was calling her Lady Dane again.

“I thought we were meant to be betrothed.”

She hesitated, and he nodded encouragingly.

“You, for instance, may call me Nate.” He spread his hands, as though bestowing on her a wondrous gift. “All of my lovers do,” he finished magnanimously.

She bit back a groan. “*Nathaniel* is fine,” she said pointedly, then sighed, wrinkling her nose. “I suppose...Cora is fine too.”

The way she sighed his name instantly put Nate on the edge of something sharp and strange. He shifted, precipitously aware he had felt this with Cora before. But five years ago, her engagement ring had been a barricade for both of them; nothing more than flirtation would, should, *could* progress.

Now, Nate was abruptly reminded that beneath her glove, her finger was bare.

Seeming to realize the intensity of Nate's gaze, Cora looked away and busied herself with rearranging the brimming picnic basket, carefully stacking apricots as she dug for something underneath. In her haste to distract the both of them, she knocked the basket askew.

“*Blast*—oh no...”

The golden pyramid of fruit upended; apricots tumbled in every direction.

Nate grasped an errant apricot, rolling it in his palm before holding it out to her. Cora blinked. Dappled sunbeams filtered through the oak tree and turned her hazel-blue eyes into dazzling fractals of light.

“Did you want this?” He let his voice drop as he offered the fruit.

“No...” she said haltingly. “No, you keep it.”

Nate grinned easily as he split the apricot along the seam. He held out half. “I’d say we’re in this together now.”

There was a loud commotion from the tree, fracturing the air between them. Nate looked over to the children. It seemed that Annie was being forced to walk the plank.

Fearing a similar fate for himself, Nate took his cue to leave. There was nothing whatsoever in that contract about playing pirate.

“Lord Dane, Lady Swifte,” Nate called, climbing to his feet and nodding farewell to Cora’s children. “Miss Annie.” He tipped his hat, and Annie blushed.

With a suggestive wink, Nate pressed the abandoned posy of violets into Cora’s hand. “Until Berkshire, darling.”

Whistling, he ambled off, munching on the apricot.

On the walk back to the Albany, Nate decided he would write to Raymond instead of calling at Fordham House.

No point in spoiling his good mood.

July 1819

Finch Residence, London

Cora—

Per our discussion, I penned a draft to send to the scandal sheets. You told me to make it...scintillating. Darling, you know I'm never one to shy from rumor, but I did want to make absolutely certain this is what you want? It might be sticky business, untangling this very delicious little knot.

Fond, fonder, fondest,

Tabby



THE FIRST OF JULY WAS, without question, proving to be a dreadful day.

Ronald and Edith Carleton had arrived at Aldworth Park several hours before they were expected, and Cora had been unraveling ever since. Mrs. Carleton was fussy from the start and wasted no time in taking charge of Cora's footmen, overseeing the unloading of her belongings as though she were the queen and her cases stuffed full of priceless relics.

Cora cautiously accompanied Mrs. Bainsbridge, her housekeeper, to show the guests to their quarters. She had prepared a variety of guest rooms in case Mrs. Carleton found

fault with her lodgings. It made Cora profoundly uncomfortable that Aldworth Park had been Edith Carleton's childhood home. Who knew what she was liable to fixate on? But to her relief, Mrs. Carleton had sniffed at her sunlit, *west-facing* chamber and did not ask to be relocated.

Cora offered to have tea sent up, intimating the Carletons might appreciate a rest after their long journey, but the vicar wanted to see the property, and his wife wanted to see the children. Taken together, it meant Cora had suffered through an unbearably stilted afternoon.

Finally, just when Cora was contemplating stabbing herself with a hatpin, Mrs. Carleton admitted she felt a bit overextended from the children's energy.

Biting back a retort, Cora saw her taxing houseguests to their rooms and sent Tess and Leo to the nursery for naps. She had returned to her sitting room for a reprieve of her own when her blessed solace was interrupted by Coates, her butler.

"Mr. Nathaniel Travers has arrived, my lady," Coates announced, unapologetically delighted by this news.

Since her return from London two days ago, word of her secret betrothal had spread through her household like wildfire. Cora couldn't blame them. This was undoubtedly the most excitement she had provided in the five years since she became viscountess—the day Tess locked herself in the pastry larder notwithstanding. Her staff was positively salivating to meet the mysterious Mr. Travers; Annie, apparently, had provided a rather winsome description.

"Oh." Cora exhaled slowly, sinking back on her velvet camelback sofa. "Thank you, Coates. Please, send him in."

Cora had arranged for Nate—she'd tried to accustom herself to calling him Nathaniel, but the name seemed too serious for him—to reside in the estate's former hunting box for the duration of his visit. It was a tidy, comfortable residence, tucked away in a copse of wood beyond her stableyard, and Cora thought he would appreciate the privacy. It also had the advantage of keeping Nate as far from the Carletons as she could put him and still consider this a joint visitation.

Now, if everyone would simply cooperate with her directives for the next fortnight, this ludicrous plan might work.

A moment later, Coates reappeared with Nate. There was a soft scuffle in the corridor. Cora wondered how many of her maids were lurking, collecting crumbs of intrigue. Between Nate and the Carletons, there was plenty of it to go around.

“Mr. Travers, my lady,” Coates said proudly.

“Cora, darling.” Nate strode in, grinning insufferably. “It’s only been three days, but I’ve missed you so.”

Coates beamed.

“Well, you know the saying.” Cora smiled saccharinely. “About the fondness of absence.”

Nate winked, transporting Cora back to Hyde Park when he had made himself gallingly comfortable with both her children’s lunch and her first name. She forced herself not to glower in front of her butler. Fortunately, Coates was already excusing himself, promising refreshment.

Nate circled Cora’s sitting room, trailing with him the maddening scent of pine. How did he always manage to smell like the best sort of outdoor day? He examined a landscape painting, looking entirely too relaxed in her space.

“I’m sure you wish to retire to your own lodgings.” Cora didn’t have the capacity for Nate right now. “Perhaps you would like to refresh yourself.”

“I’m quite refreshed,” Nate said, contentedly dropping into the chair across from her. “It was an excellent day for a ride.”

He stretched, his buckskin-clad legs spreading in an inviting V-shape. Cora permitted herself only the most fleeting of glances along what she suspected was an intensely muscled thigh before snapping her eyes back to his face.

Nate’s knowing gaze caught hers and held it, as though he were intentionally painting the flush currently creeping down her neck.

Goodness, Cora admonished herself. *You aren't a green debutante anymore.*

“We are to have a formal dinner with the Carletons this evening,” she said, tightly folding her hands in her lap. “I suppose you remembered to bring a tailcoat?”

Nate rolled his eyes. “I’m not a vagabond. Believe it or not, I am in possession of proper evening attire. Barnes—my valet—would be in fits if I weren’t. He’s just about the only honest thing about me.”

“Very well, Nate. My apologies, but I can’t stay and chat. I need to check on the Carletons, though you are welcome to enjoy tea in the morning room before a footman takes you to your lodgings.”

“Oh, it’s *Nate* now, is it?” He sat back smugly, apparently in no hurry to leave.

“Well Nathaniel is rather cumbersome,” Cora said defensively. “I’m partial to nicknames, you see—Leo, Tess...”

“I see.” He nodded perceptively. “How efficient of you.”

“Oh—that reminds me...” Cora jumped to her feet. Nate’s teasing, though exasperating, had jarred her to action. “Just a moment...”

She hurried to a table in the corner, snatching up a paper and waving it aloft. “Here you are. You’ll want to study this. I have taken the liberty of drafting a schedule.”

Nate slowly shifted his focus from Cora to the paper she pushed toward him. His eyes drifted over her carefully constructed plans, his brow wrinkling in puzzlement. “Cora, I thought we already settled on the contract.”

“That’s not a contract.” Cora dusted off her skirts. “It’s an agenda. Notes, if you will. It’s not set in stone, of course. I’m open to suggestions, but we need to be on the same page—”

“You’ve indicated what we will discuss and when.”

“Yes, I thought—”

He squinted. “What’s this bit say?”

“Oh, that says *casual flirtation*.”

“Cora.”

“What?” She crossed her arms. “We need to look serious about this, but not be immodest. Remember, my perceived wickedness is what started this whole mess in the first place.”

He frowned. “You aren’t wicked. You’re *widowed*.”

“To the Carletons, there’s little difference. Mrs. Carleton is famously judgmental.” Cora scowled at the ceiling, as though a floor above her, Mrs. Carleton was cataloging a list of Cora’s faults. “You’ll see tonight. She’s...challenging, Nate.”

Nate spread his arms, placing his hands behind his head. Cora studiously ignored the way the motion pulled his cravat to the left, revealing a slice of golden throat.

“It’s fortunate I excel at challenging women.”

“You excel with women who *are* challenging? Or *you* are the challenge?”

He grinned deviously. “Ah, love, does it matter?”

She rolled her eyes, then peered at him in assessment. “And on that point, might I suggest you attend to some grooming? Your hair...it’s a bit roguish, don’t you think? You need to look like you’re wooing me as a proper gentleman.”

Nate’s smirk sank right into her. “If I were *wooing* you, you’d be grateful my hair is long. Where else would those pretty little fingers tangle when I—”

“Stop!” Cora put up both hands, warding away his words as her cheeks reddened. “Just...see your valet about a trim, hmm?”

“Perhaps I’ll get around to it.” Nate shrugged, standing and pocketing her notes. “If the schedule permits.”

“You’ll see,” Cora warned. “You’ll see when you meet them. There is no room for error. You need to *behave*. You do understand that, don’t you?”

Nate crooked his eyebrow as he headed for the door. “I understand that you think so.”

Cora groaned, sagging back against the sofa. She had four hours before she'd need to be ready for dinner with the Carletons. Her stomach flipped in dismay.

So it begins.

IF CORA THOUGHT the day had started on a sour note, it was nothing compared to the evening.

Edith Carleton might have been a bully in her letters; she was a downright tyrant in the flesh. Cora was doing everything in her power to remain even-tempered, but her limit loomed nearer with each petty, snide remark delivered by the vicar's wife.

How on earth was she meant to withstand an entire month of this?

The children had come out to the terrace to say goodnight before dinner. Tess and Leo were both dressed in their finest—a stiff little waistcoat and ruffled sleeves, too starched and heavy for the summer evening. Cora could see they were desperate to change, but Mrs. Carleton wasn't permitting their withdrawal.

Edith Carleton had black hair and a personality to match. Between her severely pinned coiffure, her dark dress, and her overbearing observations, she most closely resembled a macabre crow.

At present, she frowned and ruthlessly fired questions at Leo. He fidgeted, nervously looking at Cora before answering.

“I didn't ask your mother, boy—look at *me* when you speak to me. Let's see some respect, then.”

Leo's little voice carried across the warm evening air. “I know *most* of my letters, yes, ma'am.”

“Most? So your mother thought you big enough to breech but not big enough for the alphabet?”

“The lowercase ones are a bit tricky,” he whispered hoarsely.

Cora squeezed his shoulder, quelling the anger rising inside of her. *Poor little lamb*. He did know his letters, but this dreadful woman was making him so nervous.

“Is that so? Well, Aunt Carleton is here all month, and I intend to see you apply yourself more directly to the task. Your father would expect you to know the difference between *b* and *d* by now.”

Leo faltered, looking worriedly at Cora.

Enough of this.

“Mrs. Carleton, surely you can understand Leo wasn’t expecting to be tested a half hour before bed—”

“Good evening.”

Cora jerked her head toward the open door leading to the terrace.

Nate was a broad shadow silhouetted against the orange glare of the sunset. Cora could see he was wearing a dark coat and an even darker expression as he scrutinized Mrs. Carleton and Leo.

A distraction.

Cora had never been so happy to see another human in her life.

She hurriedly stepped forward, motioning to Nate.

“Mr. and Mrs. Carleton, please, allow me to formally introduce my—my...betroted.” Cora tripped over her words. “Mr. Nathaniel Travers of London.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Nate nodded, his face devoid of its usual charm.

Cora felt a bit gratified to see his stilted reaction. She’d warned him, hadn’t she? Edith Carleton wasn’t to be trifled with.

Mr. Carleton inclined his head, and Mrs. Carleton offered her hand. They were both looking at Nate with intense—but not necessarily polite—interest.

Before any other strangled pleasantries could be exchanged, Coates appeared and announced dinner was served. At his elbow was Annie, coming to collect Tess and Leo for the nursery.

“Time for bed, you two,” Annie murmured, holding out her hands.

Leo promptly turned to embrace Cora, watching her closely as she dropped a kiss on his brow. He was worried about her; try as she might, Cora could only hide so much from Leo’s sweetly perceptive nature. She cupped his cheek reassuringly, and Leo pressed his face into her palm.

Tess, for her part, had been atypically reserved all evening. Now, she hid behind Cora’s lilac silk skirts, peering at the Carletons with unease.

“Say goodnight, children,” Cora prompted.

Leo shyly bid adieu and took Annie’s hand, but Tess clung to Cora’s leg, her eyes round and unblinking.

“Mama.” Her small voice was plaintive.

“Come, Tess,” Annie urged. “Your mother will check on you soon.”

“No.” Tess shook her head, her hair ribbon slipping from her fine curls.

Cora tried to pry her daughter’s small hands off her gown, smiling apologetically as Mrs. Carleton frowned. “Now, Tess, you need to go with Annie—”

“Bit *clingy*, isn’t she?” Mr. Carleton unhelpfully chimed in.

“Quite,” Mrs. Carleton responded, her lips pursed.

“Tess, please.” Cora bent low, working to free Tess’s fingers. Tess let up a howl of protest, stamping her small feet as she gripped her mother’s skirts with renewed vigor.

Cora glanced worriedly at the Carletons, her skin growing hot with anxiety. She absolutely did not need a scene right now, not with them judging her every move.

“Tess. You need to go with Annie. Please, darling, you need to go *now*.”

Tess began to cry in earnest, her arms coming tightly around Cora’s thigh.

The Carletons exchanged significant glances.

Cora turned, giving her back to the small knot of observers. She awkwardly maneuvered Tess to the far end of the terrace, away from prying eyes, hoarsely pleading with her to cooperate. “Come now, sweetheart, no fussing. Mama needs you to be a very *big* girl...”

There was a sudden shadow at Cora’s elbow. Nate crouched next to Tess, tapping her on the shoulder. He had to practically kneel to meet her unhappy gaze.

“I’ll tell you what, Lady Swifte, shall I come, too? You and Lord Leo can show me your nursery. I imagine you have a favorite story?”

Tess looked at Nate for a long, wavering moment. Cora held her breath, wholly unsure of this stratagem. Then, to her immense surprise, Tess let go of her skirts.

“There now,” Cora murmured, sighing in relief. She leaned her hand on the low wall of the terrace and tried to reclaim her composure. “That’s a good girl.”

Nate straightened and offered his hand to Tess. But instead of leading her away, he hesitated, glancing over at the Carletons. In a swift, shocking show of solidarity, Nate reached out with his free hand, laying his palm on top of Cora’s where it rested on the stone wall.

“Cheer up, love,” he murmured, gently squeezing once.

Oh.

Every thought left Cora’s head as surely as the air left her lungs. Her lungs, indeed, had become inconsequential, for breathing was an unnecessary distraction from the genesis happening to her hand.

The obscene span of Nate’s palm fleetingly pinned her own against the stone, his large fingers dwarfing hers, cradling

her hand beneath the blunt ridge of his knuckles. Even through her gloves, she could feel him—warm, solid, encouraging.

When was the last time a man held my hand?

She thought back—two years? Three? Four? In her entire marriage, had Dane *ever* held her hand? Had he ever casually reached out to touch her? Had he ever touched her for no reason at all?

She couldn't recall a single occasion.

Her fingers spasmed, and Nate's grip tightened, the pressure denying her nerves. Cora dragged her eyes up to his face. He half smiled, then withdrew.

“Right then, Lady Swifte, shall we?”

With Tess tugging on his arm, Nate followed Leo and Annie inside.

Cora exhaled slowly, running her palms over her now-twisted skirts. She turned back to the Carletons with a new, shaky sense of resolve.

“Shall we move to the dining room? After you, Mrs. Carleton.”

CORA SAT at the head of her opulent table, breathing steadily through her nose.

In. Out.

She nodded to her footman to begin serving the first course. Hopefully, Nate would be back soon.

“*Le potage printannier*, Mrs. Carleton?” Cora asked.

As the spring soup was served, Cora reviewed incident on the terrace, looking for fissures. She should have handled that better. She should have defended Leo. She should have expected Tess to have a fit. Her daughter was bold as brass, but she never did well with strangers.

Except that wasn't entirely true, was it? Tess had miraculously marched straight off with Nate. Though, to be

fair, Tess and Nate were both absolute fiends. It was probably nothing more than kindred spirits.

Cora internally shook her head. Her analysis didn't matter; the children were faultlessly themselves. It was quite the best feature of childhood. And the Carletons would make of them what they would.

Cora was trying. Surely, that must count for something? They *had* to think she was a good mother. She *was* a good mother.

"I'm no expert, but it would appear they are settling." Nate reappeared, sounding altogether pleased with himself. He paused in the doorway of the dining room, assessing the place settings until he saw his empty seat opposite Cora.

At the sight of him—tall, broad, and positively poured into a black tailcoat—Cora's breath abruptly lodged. She had been too preoccupied with the children and her houseguests to take full note of Nate in the low light of the terrace.

But she was sure as sin taking note now.

Good heavens.

Nate was freshly shaved, his hair obediently trimmed. Cora immediately missed the security of the longer locks; his roguish hair had given him an air of playfulness that had somehow seemed safe, a reminder of the teasing lad of her youth. But this Nate—polished, confident, wearing a waistcoat better than any pair of shoulders she'd ever seen—there was *nothing* boyish about him.

For one blistering moment, Cora felt frightfully exposed, as though his handsomeness had been lying in wait like a panther, ready to attack her over the soup course. She realized she had no sense of what to do with her hands, with her silverware, with her raging, racing pulse.

"Artichoke?" Nate asked, sliding into his seat and unabashedly tucking into his own soup. "Splendid."

Cora blinked, realizing she was very nearly gaping. Her skin felt clammy and hot at the same time, a certain indication that she needed to get a grip. Reluctantly, she drew her

attention away from Nate's face, back to the conversation at the table.

Mr. Carleton had rotated to face Nate. He was as stout as his wife was spindly, her opposite in appearance though not necessarily in demeanor. Cora had always had the impression he was careless and a bit of a bully. Rumor had it, Edith Dane was nearly thirty—long considered a spinster—when she finally found a match in the widowed vicar. Cora thought it curious how a viscount's daughter came to wed a country clergyman. But Dane and Cora weren't the kind of married couple who discussed those sorts of matters. Or really any matters.

"Now, then." The vicar swigged from his wine glass. "I didn't fully catch it, given the commotion on the terrace—Travers, is it?"

"Travers..." Mrs. Carleton scrutinized Nate carefully; her soup was untouched. "Are you by chance related to the Earl of Fordham? That's the family name, if I recall."

"Ah." Nate straightened. "Yes. My late father was the Earl of Fordham. My elder brother inherited the title."

Mrs. Carleton tutted in what Cora suspected was mock sympathy. "My condolences."

"The Old Earl died years ago." Nate shrugged. "No need for condolences. We weren't very close."

"Indeed?" The vicar slurped noisily from the tip of his spoon.

"I left my father's home when I was a child," Nate said curtly. "Just after my mother died. My sister and I lived with our brother's family. He's quite a bit older than us."

"I'd imagine he must be," Carleton mused, squinting at Nate in curiosity.

"He's my half brother," Nate clarified, his voice tight. "We have different mothers."

"I see," Mrs. Carleton said, in a manner indicating she found something distasteful in the pronouncement. "Well."

Your brother must be a saint. How exceedingly generous of him, to take you in. I had to do the same, of course, with Mr. Carleton's sons from his first marriage. It can be quite the undertaking. Your brother clearly demonstrates a great spirit of charity."

Nate's face twisted.

"Nathaniel is the heir presumptive to the earldom," Cora said hastily, trying to steer the conversation.

"So you're *second*." Mrs. Carleton sniffed.

Nate paused, his gaze darting to Cora, then back to Mrs. Carleton. He took a fortifying sip of his wine. "Yes, I am second son. Though, strangely enough, I felt a bit like the eldest, in my own way. My younger sister and I had our own childhood, seeing as our brother was already a grown man. Fordham sometimes seemed more like a father to me than the Old Earl. At least, he liked to think so."

"But he *wasn't* your father," Edith Carleton said pointedly, looking at Cora with an unmistakable sneer. "Children should always remember who their fathers are."

Cora set her soup spoon down with a resounding clatter. Her tongue burned with censure as she remembered Dane's incorrect, half-filled family tree. What about fathers remembering their children?

She was about to say as much when a footman discretely appeared at her elbow to clear the first course and serve a cold ham. Cora used the distraction to draw a breath, struggling to temper her anger. She could not chance upsetting the Carletons.

But Nate's expression had turned deliberately assessing. "Well..." He tilted his head, and Cora felt a queer flutter at the wicked glint in his eyes. "Unless their fathers aren't worthy of remembering."

A hush fell over the table.

Nate grinned easily. "Not, I'm sure, a problem in this household. I only knew the late Viscount Dane in passing,

Mrs. Carleton, but I could see plainly that your brother was a man possessed of certain *unnamed* characteristics.”

He slid Cora a sly smile as he tucked into the ham. Cora swallowed hard, dabbing at her lips with her napkin.

Mrs. Carleton opened her mouth, then paused. She seemed unsure of what had just transpired.

“Compliments to your cook, Cora,” Nate said smoothly, nodding to her. “This *espagnole* is superb.”

There was a general lull in the conversation as the Carletons were forced to politely agree with Nate’s assessment, which meant they had to temporarily cease interrogations to actually eat. Cora chewed slowly, staring between Mrs. Carleton and Nate. The vicar’s wife didn’t seem to know what to make of him. *Good*. Let her be on the defensive for once.

Cora took the opportunity to try a different tack. There was a reason they were all here, after all.

“Nathaniel’s sister, Lady Tabitha, is my dear friend, Mrs. Carleton. She’s the one who made the introduction.”

“And she did so quickly,” the vicar said, his beady eyes shifting between Nate and Cora.

“Indeed,” his wife agreed. “A remarkably rapid engagement, I must say.”

“Well,” Cora started, trying to keep a measure of deference in her voice. “I believe in the importance of the children having a proper family, as you so kindly and repeatedly advise me, Mrs. Carleton.”

“Quite.” Mrs. Carleton nodded brusquely, and Cora felt a sharp stab of relief. “Might I be so bold as to inquire when the impending nuptials will be held?”

“Oh.” Cora froze. “Well...we haven’t...that is...”

She tried to collect her thoughts. Had she...not thought of this? Her mind raced through her meticulous notes. After all that careful planning, had she neglected to select a possible wedding date?

“Please don’t tell me this is going to be another christening debacle.” Mrs. Carleton sat back and folded her arms.

“Now, Edith, Leo was christened,” Carleton interjected. He coughed wetly. “*Eventually.*”

“Five months is entirely too long—”

Cora straightened, incredulous. “He was sick his first summer!”

“It was appalling, entirely inappropriate.”

“I didn’t want to take him out, not until he was stronger—”

“And now it seems as though you are dragging again. And what for? Mr. Travers seems perfectly suitable.”

“I’m not dragging. It’s nothing like that!”

There was a pounding inside Cora’s skull; she was awash in horrified disbelief. It was never going to be enough. She was doing all of this for nothing. She was suddenly exhausted, her eyes itchy and her heart heavy.

What had she been thinking? She couldn’t handle the Carletons all month. She couldn’t even handle them tonight.

Nate tapped his fingers lightly on the table, pulling her anguished focus to him. To her surprise, his eyes were as warm and reassuring as a blanket.

“Lady Dane and I are in no rush to wed,” Nate announced to the table, his voice hard. “The last year has been tumultuous for her family, and I want to give the children time to adjust to yet another change. I’m here for a few weeks to get to know the children and their relatives.” He nodded graciously toward the Carletons. “But we’ll be sure to inform you when we’ve set a wedding date.”

All at once, Cora identified the strange feeling she’d had on the terrace when Nate had taken both her and Tess in hand.

She *wasn’t* doing this alone.

She had an ally.

The knowledge sent her ricocheting between relief and hope. All this time, she had been facing the brunt of the Carletons on her own. And now...

Her palm twitched, remembering the weight of Nate's fingers pressing against her knuckles.

"Well, then," Mrs. Carleton was saying decisively as she fussed with her napkin. "If Mr. Travers has gone to the trouble of visiting so we can get to know each other better, I suggest he stay here, at the manse. Really, Lady Dane, your hunting box is barely on the property. You have plenty of room here at the main estate, and it's not inappropriate when I will be here to chaperone. I think we can all agree it would be most prudent, given the role Mr. Travers will play in the children's lives."

Cora couldn't take in a word of what Mrs. Carleton was saying.

She could only focus on two gray eyes, watching, studying, coaxing her.

And the wildness unfurling inside of her, at the astonishing sensation of being seen.

July 1819

Fordham House, London

Nathaniel,

A courier has just delivered the most humorous letter. Really, I must thank you, Brother, for I had been having a terribly tedious day.

I can't tell you how your note made me chuckle—you, hurtling off to the countryside to spend time with your betrothed and her family. You can imagine my levity, seeing as you do not have a betrothed.

Please, tell me, Nathaniel, you do not have a betrothed.

I thought we were clear; no more lapses in judgment.

What, exactly, are you doing, Nate? And what will it cost you?

Fordham



FINALLY, after the most uncomfortable dinner in Nate's twenty-seven years of life, the dessert course was cleared, and the ghastly Carletons retired for the night.

Good riddance.

Nate cracked his neck and considered retiring to his hunting box, but then remembered he and Barnes were evidently meant to stay at the main house now. Besides, he wasn't interested in slumber so much as a drink of the strong variety.

What a lousy night.

Nate rounded a corridor thinking there might be a liquor cabinet in the smoking room...if he could remember how to get there. He hadn't taken more than two steps when he nearly tripped over Cora, who was, improbably, sitting on the floor against the wall with her eyes closed.

“*Shite!* Cora?”

“I know,” she mumbled, not opening her eyes. “I’m in the way. But I need to stay right here, where nobody is bothering me, for one more minute.”

“Ah. That sounds about right,” Nate agreed, leaning against the opposite wall. He regarded Cora with new appreciation. She was a bloody hero for dealing with Edith Carleton all year.

To think the turgid old bat had the nerve to call him second. And to his own face. There was nothing Nate hated more than being compared to Raymond. And damn if *Edict Carleton* hadn't figured that out in about half a second. It was enough to make him rethink this entire arrangement.

Except...

Except for the very disheveled woman sitting on the floor in front of him.

Nate had been planning to ensure their hoax's success for his own purposes—his financial freedom depended on it, never mind the slim possibility of winning Raymond's trust. But after what he witnessed tonight, he felt compelled to pull this off because the Carletons were damned bullies.

Cora sighed and climbed to her feet before Nate had a chance to offer a hand.

“Now then. Why, exactly, are you roaming the halls of my home well after dark?” She eyed him sideways. “I thought we agreed you would behave yourself.”

“We're still negotiating that point,” Nate replied, lazing against the wall. “But now that you mention it...do you know

where I might find something a bit more *steadying* than claret?"

Cora gave him a provisional half smile. "Follow me."

She ushered him down the hall to a closed door. "The study," she explained, pausing to light a candle. "Off-limits to the children. And the location of the tantalus."

Cora set the candle on the desk and walked to the cabinet. Nate automatically took a step back to appreciate the taut curve of her derriere as she passed in front of him. Cora may be petite, but she had always moved with a compact, supple energy that hinted at a lithe athleticism. And Nate could appreciate a good hint when he saw one.

She found two glasses and poured a measure of dark liquid in each, passing him the more heavy-handed tumbler. Nate took a slow drink, embracing the sour, smoky burn. He lifted his glass, watching it reflect the low candlelight.

"To the Carletons," he said, turning to Cora. "Bloody prigs."

"Nate!"

"Oh come now, Cora. It's me. You can admit the truth." He intentionally left a note of challenge in his voice.

She perched on the desk, swinging her legs as she experimentally lifted her own glass.

"They *are*," she murmured, daringly lifting her eyebrow. "They are absolute...prigs." She covered her charmingly scandalized smile behind a sip of her drink.

"Good girl." Nate enjoyed the shocked pride radiating from her shadowed face.

For a moment, they drank in silence. This sort of easy friendship, laced with something just a bit tight, was achingly familiar to Nate. How many nights had he snuck sherry to Cora and Tabby, watching the two of them bemoan Tabitha's suitors?

As much as he loved his sister, Nate was glad for Tabitha's present absence.

He didn't much care to interrogate the reason for his gratitude.

Cora unexpectedly set down her rummer with a decisive thud. She slid from the desk and started pacing, her slight figure cutting through candlelight and shadow like an ethereal sprite. She vigorously pivoted, rattling the precariously stacked glasses in the cabinet. Nate reconsidered—not a sprite. Possibly a banshee.

“You do see now, don't you? Do you see how impossible this is?” Cora's voice rose with each step. “They twist everything...well, *she* does. The vicar, I think, is generally useless. But Edith Carleton is relentless.”

Cora's words, her tone, pierced Nate with an overwhelming sense of recognition. He frowned, watching her pace, feeling as though he had been looking at a puzzle upside down and only now saw the true picture.

Ever since that afternoon in the Dane House parlor, Nate had been half-aggrieved by Cora's compulsive need to manage. How many times had he mentally compared her to Raymond, dreading the prospect of yet another overbearing taskmaster?

But Nate had grossly miscalculated; Cora wasn't the *Raymond* of her situation. She was a much more resilient, much more admirable version of *Nate*.

He thought of the only good moment of the night: Cora's small hand, resting under his, her fingers slightly shaking until he covered them with his palm. He had been overcome by an unfamiliar and irrepressible urge to fortify her...and an equally peculiar sense of satisfaction that she had allowed it.

They weren't so different at all. Both of them, trying to break free.

And he could help her.

“It's not impossible,” he said slowly, thinking it over. “But you're right. It isn't going to be easy.”

Cora huffed a frustrated note of agreement as she spun on her heel and paced in the other direction.

“Though we might be able to make it easier.”

She swiveled toward him in surprise. “How do you mean?”

Nate leaned against the now-vacated desk. “Well, for starters, you need to trust me.”

She reared up in protest, but Nate held up his hand, effectively cutting her off.

“Look. I can see the stakes aren’t quite equal for us, but believe me, I want this to go in our favor too. I’m not ashamed to admit the terms of your contract are exceedingly appealing to me, and I’m committed to keeping this scheme on track.”

In the flickering light of the single candle, Cora’s wary eyes glowed amber, mirroring the whisky.

“Go on.”

“First of all, no more of this scheduling and plotting behind my back. If I’m doing this with you, then I’m doing this *with* you, Cora. And from where I’m sitting, you’re in drastic need of me.”

“Oh that’s rich.” Cora threw up her hands. Her hair, swept up for dinner, was coming loose and curling around her face. “After one evening, you’ve gone and sorted me out. Thank heavens you’re here. A *man*, freshly arrived to solve my problems! Please, Nate, tell me what to do.”

Bloody hell, if that wasn’t an inviting prospect. His fingertips buzzed in response to her challenge, his mind immediately sifting through about a dozen delicious orders he could give her. Starting with giving him access to the distracting sweep of her hair.

He slowly arched his brow. He couldn’t be certain in the dim light, but he sensed Cora’s flush all the same. She had a tendency to stiffen, as though doing so would physically hold her warming blood at bay.

“What I *meant*,” she grit out, “is what, exactly, do you think I’ve overlooked in my plans?”

He stared at her in disbelief.

“I don’t know, perhaps a wedding date? Cora, love, you prescribed the exact length to which I should cut my hair, yet you failed to account for the banns. What did you intend to do?”

“I—” Cora stopped, puffing her cheeks. “Well, yes. That was a small oversight, but it won’t happen again—”

“September,” Nate interrupted, swirling his whisky.

“What?”

“We should tell Edith Carleton we’re getting married in September.”

That set Cora right back to her aggravated pacing. “Why? Why would we do that? *September*? That doesn’t even—”

She was turning him dizzy. Nate stuck out his arm as she passed, grasping her firmly by the elbow and bringing her to a halt.

“Can you stop pacing and look at me, please?”

She came up short, right in front of him.

“Think about this rationally, Cora. You dragged me out here because I’m supposed to be your betrothed. At some point during my visit, we’ll need to talk about our nuptials, our courtship, and God knows what else to make this sham look even the slightest bit believable.”

“Well, I’m sure—”

“September.” Nate’s voice was firm. “We don’t want to actually have your parish read the banns yet, seeing as we don’t intend to go through with this. Your brother said he needed a few more weeks to prepare his petition. So we’ll just tell Edith Carleton we’re planning to wed in September, to give you a bit more time to come out of mourning. Or as I intimated at dinner, to allow the children to adjust to their new circumstances, or what have you. It will appear as though our wedding is imminent, but we won’t have to touch anything even sniffing of official.”

Cora screwed up her face. He could almost see the wheels turning as she thought it over.

“Deuces.” She sighed, her cagey expression lifting. “I suppose...that makes perfect sense, actually.”

“You needn’t sound so surprised.”

She deflated slightly. “I’m sorry, Nate.” Her full mouth sagged in apology. “This isn’t easy for me.”

He waved aside her contrition; he didn’t require it. He knew how it felt to see the way forward and be unable to walk toward it.

“I don’t expect it is. Just...treat me more like your coconspirator, and less like a marionette on a string.”

She stepped nearer, raising her forefinger. “Fine. We’ll try it your way. Together.”

He was sorely aware of how close they were standing, alone, in the candlelit study. Cora looked fiery and tousled, and Nate abruptly wished her appearance had nothing to do with her woefully long day or the liquor in her glass.

“I cannot let this scheme fail, Nate.”

He stood up from the desk, letting her raised finger barely brush his chest. At his full height, the top of her head hardly cleared his shoulder.

“Then it’s a damn good thing you found yourself a master, darling.”

BY HIS SECOND full day at Aldworth Park, it had become glaringly obvious Nate had underestimated the required extent of his participation in this ruse.

When he had first agreed to Cora’s terms, Nate assumed he would spend part of his summer at a country estate, left largely to his own devices. He’d planned to indulge in leisurely days of riding, fishing, swimming, and generally taking advantage of wide spaces and rolled sleeves. Then, when Parliament recessed next week and a number of gents he was friendly with returned to the countryside, Nate could diversify his recreation with drinking and cards. It should have been an altogether restorative escape.

But that wasn't quite how it was working out.

Cora was...an involving sort of person.

With each passing day, Nate learned more of her. Cora never stopped moving, never stopped talking. It was as though she intentionally sought out dozens of daily anxieties to set her off into chaotic spirals of distress—they were out of marmalade; Mrs. Carleton made a face at her new periwinkle walking dress; Tess was cutting molars; what if it rained during the parish strawberry festival?; the vicar snapped at Leo; what if it *didn't* rain before the strawberry festival, and the fruit all shriveled up?

She always seemed on the verge of asking for help, only to grow frustrated with herself and irritable with Nate for noticing it. The way Cora was always half-riled up would have been exceedingly tempting if it wasn't also giving him a damn headache.

Between keeping up with Cora, managing the logistics of this scheme, and shouldering his share of Edith Carleton's daily venom, Nate somehow had more responsibilities than he knew what to do with.

Hell, he was now meant to control the bloody weather, of all things.

If only his brother would realize as much. Raymond's acerbic response to the news of the engagement all but railed Nate's impulsivity. Nate had immediately penned a scathing answer, but in an uncharacteristic show of sense, he had so far refrained from having Barnes send the letter. He was, after all, supposed to be demonstrating to his brother a previously undisclosed proclivity for maturity.

Besides, Nate was already in the ninth circle of correspondence hell. For the last quarter hour, he had been slouched over his breakfast, uncomfortably attempting to scribble down one of the blasted fake love letters he had idiotically agreed to write for Gavin Sinclair's compilation of evidence.

Nate looked down at his reluctant scrawl.

Small, but surprisingly tenacious...

Easily ruffled.

Rather peevish.

Good mother.

Tidy.

The Monmouth Ball wasn't looking so bad now.

"Drat!"

Cora's exasperated groan pulled Nate's attention from his efforts. Not that he had been working very hard.

He added cream to his coffee and leisurely skimmed his gaze over Cora, sitting near the window. Her full lips were pressed into a positively distracting pout, her mahogany hair loose down her back. Nate shifted; it would seem the day-to-day domesticity of this forced arrangement had done nothing to make Cora's temperament any less appealing.

"What's wrong now?" Nate asked, propping his elbows on the table.

Cora was flipping through fabric swatches. Where she had procured them, he couldn't begin to guess.

"I don't know...none of these colors seem right for autumn."

Nate sipped his coffee in an effort to hide his amusement. "Cora..."

"Hmm?" She held a small square to the sunlit window.

"You do realize you are pulling sample fabric for a *fake* wedding gown, don't you?"

She waved her swatch at him. "Believe it or not, Nate, some of us have reputations to uphold. I can't have word getting out that I've become passé. It's not as though you've given me much to work with. An autumn wedding isn't exactly au courant—"

Nate rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry, darling. Did you have in mind a more urbane date for our fictitious nuptials?"

She glared and went back to her swatches. “*You* suggested that wedding planning would make this look more realistic.” She tossed aside a scrap of a warm, burnished brown. “Besides, I didn’t really have the opportunity to plan my wedding to Dane. It was all handled for me. I’m aware it makes me seem quite pathetic, but I actually find this a fun bit of distraction.”

Nate squinted at the pile of rejected sample fabrics. They clearly had very different ideas of fun.

“What’s wrong with that one, anyway?”

“Oh...” She considered the swatch he was pointing to. “It’s a bit drab, isn’t it?”

Nate raised his hands. “I have no idea about that. I just think it looks...nice.” And then, before he realized what he was saying, “It’s the same color as your eyes. The...ah... brown bits of them.”

Cora opened her mouth to retort, but when his words landed, she faltered.

A shy, pleased smile slowly bloomed over her face. She picked up the fawn-colored swatch again, fingering it as her cheeks turned rosy.

The back of Nate’s neck prickled strangely. He picked up his coffee cup, then set it down with a clatter, missing his saucer entirely. *Damn it.* He grimaced, appalled, as he dabbed at the now-stained tablecloth.

Cora placed the fabric into her *considerations* pile.

Nate realized he was almost flustered. In an attempt to busy himself, he jotted an addition to his paltry draft letter.

Eyes have some brownish bits.

“What is this?”

Jesus. Nate jumped in surprise, not realizing Cora had silently crossed the room and was reading over his shoulder like some kind of literate ghost.

“It’s—”

“*Brownish bits?*” Cora frowned, plucking the paper away from him. “*Easily ruffled...Tidy?*”

She looked around the room in confusion, then peered out the window.

“Are you...” She glanced at the letter again. “Are you birdwatching?”

Nate snatched back his paper. “No, I’m not *birdwatching*,” he snapped with a mutinous stare. “I am, in fact, writing you a love letter.”

Ten different versions of amusement crossed Cora’s face.

“That...that’s a love letter?”

“Well, I haven’t finished yet.”

“I don’t think you’ve even started it yet.”

Nate folded his arms. “Tell me, Cora, do I seem like the kind of man who often writes love letters?”

She laughed, clearly enjoying herself.

“But you have *seen* letters, haven’t you? Written by people?”

Nate glowered. He vowed then and there that Cora wouldn’t see these letters until he was on his way back to London, safe from mortification.

“Look, I said I’d write them. I didn’t say they would meet your erudite standards—”

“Nate, Nate, Nate!”

At the sound of Leo’s stampeding feet charging toward the breakfast room, Nate hastily pushed his coffee service to the center of the table, nearly sloshing the pot of cream. He had learned the hard way that when he heard his name being hollered at that particular decibel, it was best not to have a hot drink in hand.

Leo came tearing around the corner. Nate listened for a moment, and then, as he suspected—

“Wait, wait, wait!” Lady Swifte, hot on her brother’s heels, like a tiny blue-eyed bloodhound.

“It’s *Mr. Travers*, Leo,” Cora reminded him as she returned to her swatches. “I’ve told you a dozen times now.”

“Why do you call him Nate, then?” Leo said, hands on his narrow hips.

Cora leveled a pointed stare at her small son. “Because *I* am a grown-up. And don’t chide me.”

“That’s not fair,” Leo started.

“Neither is being a grown-up,” Cora retorted. “You are to call our guest *Mr. Travers*.”

“He doesn’t need to,” Nate said, scooting his chair back so Tess could clamber on top of him. “It’s most unwieldy. Besides, Leo currently outranks me. He’s a viscount, you know.”

Nate winked at Leo, who smiled back proudly.

“Don’t be smug,” Cora warned.

“Hello,” Tess said, wiggling on to Nate’s knee and sandwiching his face between her hands. “Do you want to see my angry face?”

“Hello there.” Nate puffed his cheeks. “And no, I do not.”

“One bite?” she asked, holding up two fingers. “Yes?”

“Tess, you’ve had enough,” Cora called.

Nate handed Tess a biscuit; the past two days had taught him resistance was futile.

“Thank you, welcome,” she said promptly, sliding down and running to her mother.

“So nobody plans on listening to me, then?” Cora held out her arms to Tess.

Leo poked his head anxiously down the hall. “Mama, where are Mr. and Mrs. Carleton?” He flinched. “I mean, Aunt and Uncle Carleton.”

“I expect they’ll be down soon. I’m accompanying Mrs. Carleton into the village today.”

Cora looked as if she would prefer to spend her day scouring fireplace grates. But Leo brightened.

“So are we allowed to play?”

“Of course you can play,” she replied. Her eyes were pinched, but she managed a smile.

At Leo’s visible relief, Nate shifted uneasily. He was cross that the Carletons were ruining the boy’s summer and uncomfortable that he cared.

By far, the hardest aspect of this arrangement was figuring out what the hell he was supposed to do about Cora’s children. In all fairness, she had warned him. Tess and Leo were messy, loud, endless wells of affection, and they were rarely in their nursery. At any given moment, Nate was apt to hear a small voice shouting his name, tugging his hand, or holding an apple for him to slice.

And he had no idea what to make of them.

His instinct dictated he shouldn’t make anything of them at all. He was only here for a fortnight; what good did it do for the children to become accustomed to him? But his efforts to remain on the periphery had so far been in vain.

“Well.” Cora reluctantly stood. “I need to ready myself for the outing. Annie will be down to collect the children in a moment. Come here, you two, and give me a kiss.”

Tess and Leo ran to her, covering Cora in crumbs and kisses. Nate had to admit they were objectively adorable.

They were also, objectively, not his responsibility.

“Hold, Cora. You can’t leave me by myself with them.”

“Listen to Annie,” Cora instructed, ignoring Nate. “I’ll tell her you can play down here this afternoon.”

Nate raised a finger in protest, looking askance at Tess and Leo’s small, observant faces. He wasn’t being paid enough to play nurse.

“I actually have plans, Cora.”

This was a lie, and Cora knew it. She tossed her loose hair over her shoulder, exposing the curve of her neck. The line of her jaw carved a tempting hollow just below her ear.

“You’re right. You *do* have plans. Once Annie takes over, you’ll be in the library pulling books of poetry to quote in your letters. This is for His Majesty’s Chancery Court, Nathaniel. Please stop referring to me as *peevish* and *ruffled*.”

Nate barked a laugh. “Are you seriously dictating your own love letters? Don’t be so disparaging, love.”

Cora waved him aside as she made her way to the doorway.

Nate stood, not letting her go so easily. “As my intended, I believe you’re meant to flatter me,” he pointed out. “In your eyes, my prowess should be unmatched in all endeavors, including epistolary pursuits—”

Cora started down the corridor. “Why should I when *you* flatter yourself enough for both of us?”

“Enjoy your trip to town, darling,” Nate called after her. “Pick up a new quill for me while you’re out. And perhaps, a second nurserymaid.”

He turned to look at Tess and Leo, who were staring at him as though Cora had left an elephant in charge of them. To be sure, an elephant had better childrearing instincts.

“Right then. Who wants to learn how to play vingt-et-un?”

July 1819

Barrister's Chambers, Gray's Inn, London

Dear Cora,

Well done, Sister—five days in, and the plan is officially underway.

I must say, the happy tone in your letters has brought me a modicum of relief; I feel reassured you have found a friend in Travers. Despite my initial concerns with your selection of a coconspirator, it seems he's managing the job. Word is spreading, even in London (no doubt, I'm sure, thanks to the rousing efforts of Lady Tabitha).

For all intents and purposes, this is working, Cora. I can paint the Chancery a picture of two parents, ready and willing to manage the children's care. A family who deserves to remain together.

Stay the course; we're going to make your dreams come true.

All my love,

Gavin



IT WAS late afternoon when Cora and Leo strolled back to the manse, their baskets overladen with strawberries. Though it had rained through the early morning, by midday the sky was a pale, clear blue, and Cora was crossing all her fingers and toes it stayed that way through tomorrow's festival.

The strawberry festival was a grand local tradition. Once a simple observance to celebrate the anniversary of the parish

church's consecration, it had transformed over the years into a spirited day of eating, drinking, and general merriment. Cora wasn't clear when the *strawberry* bit had been added, but her tenants took the fruit as seriously—if not more so—as the actual feast day. It was important everything go smoothly.

Not least of all because the festival would be her first public appearance with Nate.

Cora was determined to keep the rumor mill turning with news of her engagement. And for that, she needed the weather to cooperate. It wouldn't do to have the ruse wasted on soggy strawberries and bedraggled tenants. Cora was relying on sunshine, champagne, and as many wagging tongues as she could parade Nate past.

“Do you think we saved enough for the tarts?” Leo asked, peering nervously into the basket.

“I think we have plenty.” Cora ruffled his dark hair.

That morning, Mrs. Edmonds, the cook, had promised Leo he could help bake the last batch of festival tarts. Leo insisted on picking the berries himself, and Cora hadn't put up much resistance. There were few things she adored more than the singular joy of a sun-ripened strawberry plucked from a rain-soaked runner.

Now the two of them ambled back through the garden with stained fingers and sugar-stung lips, contentedly stuffed with strawberries. *Perfection*. It wasn't lost on Cora that strawberry vines grew best when close to the mother plant.

“Let's get these to Mrs. Edmonds,” Cora said as they made their way into the hushed garden entry and turned down the long corridor to the kitchens.

“Lawks!”

Leo had rounded a corner and barreled into Ronald Carleton, sending strawberries everywhere.

“Leopold Dane!” Cora immediately felt guilty for the admonishment. It wasn't Leo's fault. Truly, this estate wasn't small. How was a Carleton around every corner?

“I’m sorry, sir,” Leo whispered, squatting to pick up the precious berries.

“Careless boy.” Carleton wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Quite the bungler, isn’t he?”

Leo didn’t know what a bungler was, but he didn’t need to. His little ears turned red. Cora found his hand, squeezing tightly.

“Leo didn’t see you, Mr. Carleton,” she said sharply. “Truthfully, I didn’t expect to see you here either. Did you need something from my kitchens?”

She raised her chin. Cora had noticed how the vicar’s beady eyes tended to linger on her kitchen maids.

“Not at all, Lady Dane.” Carleton loosened a phlegm-ridden cough. “Just on my way out to the garden...”

He paused, his heavy brow lowering. “Say...did I hear that right? His Christian name is Leopold?”

“Well, yes.” Cora frowned quizzically at the vicar. Carleton was Leo’s *legal* guardian and didn’t know his *legal* name? Shameful. “What did you think it was?”

“I suppose I thought it was Leonard.” The vicar looked a bit shifty. “His records all say Leopold? Not Leo, even?”

Cora put her hands on her hips. “Mr. Carleton, why ever are you—”

“Excuse me,” the vicar mumbled, setting off down the corridor. But he went upstairs, not outside.

“Hmm...” Cora watched his slouching retreat. A disagreeable sensation slithered into her stomach and soured her strawberries.

It had only been five days, but the Carletons were already darkening Aldworth Park like an odious shadow. If Cora had feared her legal standing before—when the Carletons had been no more than a cloudy threat—it was nothing compared to the cresting panic she felt after seeing the vicar and his wife give such prickly, cold reception to her children.

Not to mention the general unsavoriness of their characters. She couldn't countenance that lecherous man raising her daughter. *Or* her son. What an absolutely wretched example Carleton would set.

She desperately hoped Gavin was making headway on his preparations. She knew there was nothing she could do to help his case beyond what she was already doing, but it was untenable to feel so helpless, as if she had no control.

It's working, she soothed herself. Gavin said it's working.

"Come, Leo," Cora murmured, sweeping up the fallen strawberries and rolling them into her skirt. "Don't worry, sweet. We still have more than half your basket."

Leo nodded somberly, his blue eyes downcast.

"And"—Cora stooped next to him, holding his chin—"you are *not* a bungler."

"But..." He hefted his basket, discouraged.

Cora kissed him hard on the forehead. "No buts. One important secret about growing up, Leo, is you have to learn who to listen to. Especially about your own character. Which, I can objectively state, is superb."

The corner of his mouth lifted, and she squeezed his shoulder.

"Let's bake some tarts, shall we?"

And make sure Carleton hasn't been harassing my maids.

When they entered the kitchens, Cora was relieved to find all was well. The scullery maids and undercooks were in high spirits, everyone in a frenzy of activity for tomorrow.

Well. Nearly everyone.

For reasons unknown, Nate leaned against a table, systematically making his way through a tray of strawberry turnovers. His coat was nowhere to be seen, his shirtsleeves distractingly rolled to reveal a strapping pair of golden forearms.

Cora quelled a sluice of fascination; she hadn't been aware there were quite so many muscles between a man's wrist and elbow. Frederick Dane certainly hadn't had them.

She bit her lip and tore her gaze back to Leo.

"Look what we have here!" Mrs. Edmonds swooped down on Leo's basket, fawning over his strawberries as though he had spent the afternoon growing them himself.

Cora was reassured to see Leo's embarrassment from the corridor had dissipated; he was now positively wriggling in excitement.

"Go on, Lord Dane." Mrs. Edmonds nudged him over to one of her undercooks. "Lydia will help you get started."

Cora smiled encouragingly at Leo, who hustled off with Lydia.

Her son happily sorted, Cora swiveled her attention to Nate's absolutely unnecessary presence in her kitchens. She crossed over to him with narrowed eyes, one hand on her hip.

"Ah, my Lady Fair." Nate grinned, lifting an oven-warmed turnover in greeting.

"What are you doing down here? I hope not the fox in the henhouse?" Cora asked uncertainly. She hadn't thought to be worried about both Carleton *and* Nate.

"That title would go to your *other* houseguest," Mrs. Edmonds muttered emphatically. "Mr. Carleton was loitering until Mr. Travers gallantly joined us."

Cora looked around the kitchens, noting there were at least two more maids than usual. And Nate, irrepressible rogue that he was, didn't at all seem to mind the excess feminine attention. Cora tried to curb her irritation. As long as he wasn't bothering her serving girls, what Nate did was none of her business.

Except...it absolutely *was* her business. At least until July 15th. Every person they interacted with needed to believe he was marrying her.

Nate might be a more welcome visitor to the kitchens than Ronald Carleton, but he was an inappropriate one all the same.

And why was he in his shirtsleeves?

She slowly turned toward him. He was joking with Emily, her scullery maid, as she poured him a lemonade. Never mind there was already a full glass next to him.

“And he joined you without his coat, I see,” Cora said scathingly. She was more than a bit alarmed that her jealous pretense didn’t feel entirely false.

“Oh, it’s hot as Hades down here.” Mrs. Edmonds waved her hand, gazing at Nate as though he were, in fact, some sort of Olympic deity. “He’s just fine as he is.”

Cora rolled her eyes at Mrs. Edmonds’s rapturous reception. But she couldn’t blame her maids for preferring Nate’s loafing to Carleton’s lurking.

She snuck one more peek at the flexing line of his arm.

“You never explained what you’re doing here,” Cora added, accepting a lemonade from Emily with an overly bright smile.

“I’m tasht-teshting,” Nate smugly explained around a mouthful of pastry. He chewed, then bowed chivalrously toward Mrs. Edmonds. “I didn’t think the strawberry was a fruit that could be improved upon, but Mrs. Edmonds has been proving me wrong for the last half hour.”

Cora snatched the tray of turnovers away from him.

“Hey now—”

“No more,” she said to the room at large. “He’s not to have one more. We need these for tomorrow.”

Though her tenants would also be baking and cooking and assembling countless varieties of strawberry foodstuffs, the majority of festival preparations fell to the viscountess’s household. And she wouldn’t have Nate Travers’s appetite mucking things up.

“There will be plenty for tomorrow,” Nate argued, stretching appealingly against the table.

His slouch put his throat at Cora’s sightline, a vantage point that illuminated he wasn’t wearing a cravat.

As she stared at the corded column of his neck, Cora had a dim vision of an empty kitchen, a bowl of sugared strawberries, and Nate, leaning her against the table—

Her flush was so swift, her toes curled responsively inside her boots. Cora took a step back, maneuvering the tray between them like a sugary fortress.

“You don’t understand the pressure I’m under,” Cora admonished. “This is the first festival since Dane died—we had to cancel last year—and I need it to go *perfectly*. Everyone’s been working so hard...not to mention, the tenants will be meeting you—”

“*Lisshen—*”

Nate’s mouth was once more, aggravatingly, stuffed full of pastry. Cora boiled in multiple, uncomfortable ways while he took his sweet time swallowing.

“Listen, Cora. It will be fine. You’ve ordered musicians, there are dozens of crates of champagne stacked in the cellar. The parish is providing ale, and everyone will be stuffed silly with all manner of strawberries. I feel supremely confident no festival attendees will take offense to any of Mrs. Edmonds’s delectable offerings—”

“Such a dear.” Mrs. Edmonds smiled fondly at Nate, pushing a fresh tart into his hand.

“Mrs. Edmonds, I said—” Cora spun around to face her cook.

Mrs. Edmonds briskly greeted her with a mixing bowl and a whisk. “If you’d like to help with the viscount’s tarts, Lady Dane, you can sift this, please.”

Cora sighed, recognizing a moot point when she saw one. She accepted the bowl and set about sifting the flour as directed.

Nate crossed his arms, watching Cora work.

“Are you going to assist me or just stand there?” she demanded, looking at him over her shoulder.

Nate threw back his head in a great laugh.

“Oh no. Absolutely not. I’m all for enjoying the fruits of labor, but as for the *actual* labor...”

Cora scoffed, still aggrieved by his appearance down here. She dropped her voice to a tense whisper. “Well, I’m sure you’ve exhausted yourself, as it were. I imagine flirting with my maids all morning has worn you out.”

“I wasn’t flirting.” Nate chuckled. “I was helping—”

“Helping yourself to the attention of every woman in my household!” Cora darted her gaze around the busy kitchen, further lowering her voice. “Nate, you can’t act inappropriately—”

“You can’t be serious?” Nate cut in, incredulous. “I’ve never, *ever* taken advantage of a servant.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Cora’s face reddened. “I’m not insinuating you...ah. I’m only saying my entire household needs to believe you’re going to be my *husband*. You have to act as though you’re focused on *me*. I know you’re cavalier, Nate, but you need to set some boundaries.”

He glared, gesturing to Cora’s whisk. “Yes, please, *Viscountess*. Say more about appropriate boundaries. Tell me, is it customary for the lady of the house to mix pastry?”

She looked down at her sullied hands, currently wrist-deep in a mixing bowl. Nate’s point was well-taken.

“Yes, well, much to the horror of my mother, I have never been very adept at setting firm boundaries with my household staff.” Cora winced. “But she’s in Wiltshire, conducting herself as a proper dowager baroness and driving my sisters-in-law up the wall. And—”

“And you’re here,” Nate finished, his face softening.

“And I’m here,” Cora agreed, adding another pat of butter from the cutting board Mrs. Edmonds had slid down the table. “My mother means well, but she puts a great deal of stock in propriety.”

“*You* used to put a great deal of stock in propriety.” Nate’s scrutiny heated the side of her neck.

She half turned, meeting his gray eyes.

“Yes...” she said slowly. “Well. I’ve learned there are more important things in life.”

“Such as?”

Cora smiled tightly as an undercook took the mixing bowl to the wide slab where Leo waited with a rolling pin. Cora watched them, leaning against the work table next to Nate.

“Such as companionship.” Cora contemplatively blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. “It was rather...solitary here at times. Especially before the children. I found it quite enjoyable to come down to the kitchens, to find busy hands and friendly faces. My household staff has been a wonderful comfort to me.”

“Through your mourning?” Nate asked, tilting his head. His eyes were watchful.

Cora worked her jaw, thinking it over. There was a certain ache that never quite went away. She suspected there were many wounds so silent it was hard to discern they even existed; wounds so shallow it was impossible to identify the first cut.

Wounds like loneliness.

“For a fair bit longer than that,” she murmured, watching Leo laugh through a cloud of powdery flour. There was a slight movement next to her; Nate’s fingers twitched against the table, a fraction closer to her own.

Standing next to Nate in her kitchens, Leo’s laughter in her ears, flour in her hair, Cora experienced a queer sort of reckoning. She had been raised to live a respectable life; she had, in fact, childishly assumed doing as she ought was a

direct route to happiness. But respectability had only brought Cora grief.

Now look at her—messy hands, messy children, messy plans with a messy man.

But she found she was enjoying Nate's company, as ill-advised as it might be. Their rapport had picked up right where they left off five years ago. She was becoming...accustomed to him.

And blast if that wasn't the messiest bit of all.

"I love my mother, and my mother loves me," Cora said, dusting her hands on a kitchen rag. "But she didn't lead with love. She led with practicality, with purpose, and yes, with propriety. I am the daughter my mother raised. But I won't be raising my own daughter the same."

"No," Nate agreed, a marvelously warm smile sliding over his face. "No, I don't imagine Tess takes well to orders."

"Speaking of orders." Cora looked up skeptically. "Have you been doing as you ought? With my letters?"

Nate lifted his shoulder evasively.

"I'm...allowing my thoughts to germinate."

"So no. As I suspected." Cora sighed. "Please see it's handled soon. I need that evidence. And, I might add, you *also* need to write to the earl."

He grimaced. "I'm so glad you came down here. The kitchens have become so relaxed."

"Nate."

"I've written to him," he relented. "But I haven't sent it."

"Nate!" Cora glanced around, but nobody was paying them any mind. Even still, she leaned closer, once more speaking under her breath. "You're supposed to be using our situation to improve your own prospects. It's been days. How is your brother ever going to think you've turned over a new leaf if you're still ignoring your correspondence?"

Nate's face shuttered. "Trust me, Cora, when it comes to Fordham, it doesn't matter what I put in a letter. He's already drawn his conclusions, irrespective of how sound my logic might be. And, let's be honest, *this* logic isn't sound at all."

"I can help, you know," Cora inserted, unable to stop herself. "With your letter to the earl. We can write it together, make it all sound reasonable. He always liked me, I think."

"That's because you were the only person in our little trio who listened to him."

"Yes." Cora nodded in acknowledgment. "I suppose that's true. But perhaps I can provide some insight, some color to your rationale..."

Nate tried to interject, but Cora paid him no mind. She began ticking off points on her fingers.

"We'll tell Lord Fordham there had been an affinity between us all those years ago. An affinity that rekindled when you wrote to me last year to express your condolences on my very great loss."

"Cora—"

"The trick is to not get carried away. After all, you want it to be realistic. Why don't you let me take a look at what you've started? I'm happy to spruce it up."

"Is that so?" Nate asked drily. "Or is it that you don't trust me to take care of this?"

Cora gave him a slanting look.

"With what evidence to the contrary? It's in my best interests that the earl believes us, Nate. And if you're going to be lax about it, then I don't see why I shouldn't assist."

"I haven't been lax..." For one weighted moment, it seemed Nate was on the verge of saying more, of peeling back a layer of his perpetual nonchalance. "Never mind."

Cora seized the moment, suddenly compelled to tug. "Why is he so angry with you right now, anyway? I don't mean to pry, but it's not as though you were in sterling condition when

I assisted you all those years ago. What happened this time? I've never known Lord Fordham to be unreasonable—”

“I'll handle my brother,” Nate interrupted, his voice tinged with warning. “I'll send him something by tomorrow.”

His eyes had turned flinty.

“And, Cora, for the record, if you don't *mean* to pry, then *don't pry*.”

Cora flinched. She felt both chastened and vaguely hurt. Had Nate admonished her? Who did he think he was? Loafing about her kitchens, peppering her with personal questions! Yet when she wanted to know a perfectly reasonable bit of information for herself...

She had only been trying to help.

Cora fumbled, pushing away from the table, dropping her whisk in the process.

At her embarrassingly obvious discomfort, Nate's resentment seemed to dissipate.

“Cora...” His tone was conciliatory.

“It's fine,” she retorted. “I'll leave you to it.”

She stooped to retrieve her whisk, rising to meet Nate's lopsided grin.

“Here.” His voice was soft as he offered her a strawberry turnover from his seemingly endless supply.

She hesitated, but Nate urged the pastry toward her.

“All this fussing about, and you didn't even get a sweet.”

He gently reached for her hand and deliberately folded her fingers around the still-warm crust. A tingle swept along the back of her neck to her oddly ringing ears. It was the second time this week he had touched her.

She stared at the turnover, still clasped between their hands. Her irritation melted away.

Nate was right. She hadn't, in fact, had a sweet.

Cora bit into the turnover, moaning faintly at the welcome explosion of warm sugar and flaky crust. Beside her, Nate shifted, a very low hum ticking in his chest.

“Mrs. Edmonds,” Cora called through her giant bite of pastry. “This is *fantastic*. You’ve outdone yourself—”

But Cora broke off, awash with sudden heat. Nate was watching her as though he didn’t know what to make of her, as though he’d prefer to be doing anything *but* looking at her, as though he’d never stop...

He slowly lifted his hand, raising his index finger to tilt her chin. Before she could protest around her mouthful of dessert, he leisurely swiped the warm, rough pad of his thumb along her jaw. Once. *Twice*.

She stood frozen, her mouth half-agape, still alarmingly filled with turnover.

“You had flour on your cheek,” Nate explained, his slow smile belying the fleeting, searing sensation still dusted on her skin.

He bent closer, his lips only an inch from her ear.

“I notice these sorts of things. After all, you’re going to be my wife. I’m meant to focus on you.”

“Yes, well. Thank you.” Cora stepped back and quickly brushed herself off lest Nate get any other ideas with the remaining flour. No wonder the lady of the household didn’t slink about the kitchens. One never knew when a gray-eyed rogue was waiting to tidy things up.

Cora resolutely squashed the visual of Nate in the bath.

Heavens.

“At any rate, I imagine you’re cheered.” He nudged her shoulder, pointing her attention to the high kitchen windows. “Much to my chagrin, it seems as though you are once more getting your very favorite thing.”

Cora followed his gaze to the slice of bright sky outside. “What’s that?”

Nate smiled, shaking his head. “Your way.”

At her confusion, he stole the uneaten half of her turnover and neatly popped it into his mouth. “Tomorrow looks like sun.”

Cora,

In hindsight, agreeing to the damn ball would have been more palatable than suffering through these useless attempts at love letters. I shudder at the thought of these scribbles ever seeing the light of day. I can only hope that by the time I need to hand these over, you've forgotten how to read.

If I were smart, I would simply copy some sonnets and be done with it. But then I'd be giving in, wouldn't I? Can't let you and your half-brown eyes have the upper hand, love. Someone around here needs to challenge you.

So, alas, I'll persevere...even if it's only to my own mortified eyes.

You make it all quite difficult, you know. I wish at least one aspect of you could be straightforward. Your scent, for instance: I've figured out it's part rosemary, but that's not all, is it? And damn if I can't discern the rest.

Seems the sort of thing a bloke should know if he's going to pen a love letter.



NATE HAD BEEN at Aldworth Park for nearly a week when he had his first dream about Cora. For a heady, erotic interval he drifted outside of time—

Weaving one hand in her wild tumble of hair...slowly peeling away her glove...lightly tonguing from the inside of her wrist to her bare fingertip. Laying her over the desk in the study, following her flush with his mouth...down her throat,

along her collarbone, all the way to her pert breasts, until her back arched against the polished wood...

He woke gradually, his bare torso sweaty and tangled in his bedsheets. He was achingly hard and in no hurry to shake off the imprecise fog of arousal conjured by the dream.

Nate stretched and considered whether this recent development would be a problem before promptly dismissing it as nothing more than errant lust. Cora was a beautiful, stimulating woman, a woman in his direct proximity, day in and day out. Despite her being contractually off-limits, it was only natural his subconscious would take note.

Besides, the dream hadn't been exactly personal. It was just a dream. All fantasy, no reality.

Even still, he kept himself awake until dawn.

He didn't want his subconscious to give him any further ideas.

THE DAY of the parish strawberry festival dawned bright and clear. The sky was so brilliantly sapphire, it seemed as though the heavens had finally gathered enough cerulean to compete with little Lady Swifte.

All morning, Cora had been pulled into a chaotic array of last-minute arrangements, delaying her ability to ready herself for the festival. Talbot, Cora's lady's maid and a real stalwart, had been warning her for an hour she needed to finish dressing.

Nate didn't see why Cora needed to change; she looked astonishing in the pale pink gown she was already wearing. But when he pointed out that very fact, Cora reacted as though he had suggested she go to the festival wearing a potato sack.

Finally, Cora swept into the morning room where Nate waited with Leo. He glanced up, momentarily unnerved as he reconciled the undone woman from his dream with the polished viscountess in front of him. Cora's hair was in a

complicated little twist with a hat perched on top, and she was wearing...a pale pink gown.

“I thought you were going to change?” Nate frowned.

Cora looked affronted. “I did change.” She gestured to the nearly-identical dress.

“You were wearing pale pink when you went upstairs.” Nate crossed his arms. On this point, he was positive; he had spent all morning thinking how the color of that frock was the exact shade his dream state had invented for Cora’s upturned nipples.

“It’s not *pale pink*,” she admonished, as miffed as if he’d said she was wearing chartreuse. “It’s rose.”

“Stop, Nate,” Leo whispered, wise lad that he was.

But Nate, being the unwise man *he* was, did not stop. “Is rose not a derivative of pale pink?”

“Are you serious right now?”

Nate smirked. “Do you want me to be serious?”

Cora looked at her skirts in distress, and he hastily reversed course.

“No, Cora, wait. That gown—that *rose* gown—looks superb. You’re a vision, love.”

“I can’t wear pale pink to a strawberry festival.” She threw up her hands and stormed out of the morning room. “I need to change again!”

That had been half an hour ago.

In the meantime, Nate dealt a stealthy hand of vingt-et-un for Leo. The boy was an extraordinarily quick study. Once Nate had discerned Leo knew his numbers, it was simply a matter of assisting him with the sums.

“A ten?” Leo squinted in concentration.

“And what was your first card?” Nate prompted.

“A four.” Leo dropped both cards.

“So fourteen together,” Nate mused. “What do you say?”

“Another,” Leo said decidedly.

Nate peeked at the next card in the deck. It was a nine of spades. He surreptitiously shook his head.

Leo’s nod wavered. “No, wait. I’ll stay.”

“Smart man.” Nate clapped him on the shoulder. “I wish I had half as much sense as you when I was four. Or even four weeks ago.”

Leo smiled shyly. His small hand stacked the cards, then slid his pile over to Nate to shuffle.

“Are you looking forward to this afternoon?” Nate asked. He had no idea how to converse with children, but Cora spoke to them as if they were people, and that seemed sensible enough. “Your mother is certainly bothered about the festival.”

Leo considered. “Well...I don’t really want to wear my *church* boots.” He frowned, sticking his legs out to show Nate the offending footwear.

“Who would?” Nate commiserated, dealing a new hand. “Church boots are not to be trifled with.”

“Did you wear them when you were small?” Leo asked, carefully picking up his cards.

Nate had to think about it. He didn’t have very many memories of his early childhood, before he went to live with Raymond and Rosalie. But Leo’s words summoned a faint recollection—a stiff pew, a stiff collar, an even stiffer pair of boots. His mother tightly holding his hand as he struggled to sit still.

“You don’t say, Leo.” Nate turned to the boy, smiling in wonder. “I rather think I did.”

Leo grinned, pleased at this shared grievance.

There was a noise from the corridor.

“And now we’re going in the heat of the day. What did I tell you? She’s not pragmatic in the slightest. Lazing about all morning, and only now she decides to finish dressing...”

Edict Carleton.

Nate and Leo exchanged a significant glance. They were operating under a strict no-teaching-four-year-olds-to-gamble rule. Nate swiftly stacked the deck and tucked the lot in his coat just as Mrs. Carleton appeared.

“And what are you two occupying yourselves with?” Mrs. Carleton scowled. “Sit up, boy.”

Leo and Nate straightened as one.

“We’re discussing church, Mrs. Carleton,” Nate answered with a straight face. “I believe it is on your list of approved topics.”

Mrs. Carleton glared. Cora would kick his shins to bruises if she could hear him, but Nate couldn’t help himself. If Edict was going to pick, he’d pick right back.

“I wasn’t aware you could read a list at all, Mr. Travers.” She sniffed snidely. “I haven’t seen you pick up a book all week. My brother, you know, was an avid reader himself.”

He had to hand it to her; the vicar’s wife was nervy.

“No time for reading, Mrs. Carleton.” Nate smiled disingenuously. “I’ve been quite busy, you see, helping manage the estate. It seems we’ve had a bit of a pest infestation as of late.”

Nate made no attempt to hide his note of challenge. He’d like to see Edict taken down a peg or two, and he didn’t at all mind doing the legwork.

In truth, it was starting to concern him there was merely a week left in his betrothal contract, and thereafter, Cora would be stuck here alone. Just that morning, Barnes had inquired about Nate’s schedule for when they returned to Town. But the thought of leaving only reminded Nate that when he departed, the Carletons would stay for the remainder of the month. It didn’t seem right to leave Cora with their grating wretchedness.

Nate wouldn’t go so far as to voluntarily remain at Aldworth Park beyond his required contractual terms. But it was the damnedest thing. Since his arrival in Berkshire, he had felt increasingly...useful.

The constant, flittering clamor emanating from Cora—her determination to control every minute of her day—should have been the most off-putting quality imaginable. But to his surprise, Nate found Cora’s antics didn’t bother him in the slightest.

It had become an entirely new game between them; Cora spun herself into a tizzy, and Nate spun her right out of it.

It was almost as if she needed him.

It was almost as if he liked it.

Mrs. Carleton, apparently deciding to disregard Nate, jerked her chin at Leo. “Where’s your sister, boy?”

“She’s upstairs, ma’am. Deciding about behaving herself.”

“Hmph.” Mrs. Carleton huffed. “I should say so.”

The vicar lumbered into view. “Carriage is ready, m’dear. We should depart. I’m to tour the rectory in town today. Get some ideas for the renovation of the vicarage.”

Mrs. Carleton nodded briskly and followed her husband to the door. “Please inform Lady Dane that Mr. Carleton and I are taking a carriage to the festival. My husband has some business to conduct.”

A moment after the Carletons departed, Cora swept back into the morning room wearing an ivory dress and spencer.

“Perfect timing.” Nate cracked his knuckles. “Edict Carleton and her portly little Charon just left.”

“Nate.” Cora was staring at Leo. “Why is my son sitting on a jack of diamonds?”

Nate looked at Leo; he had failed to secure all the playing cards.

“I imagine because it’s a good card.” He attempted to sidestep Cora’s ire.

“You aren’t teaching him cards?” Cora hissed, aghast. “The Carletons will have my head!”

“It’s actually quite useful for his sums when you think of it —”

“You don’t think of *any* of it.”

She stormed up to Nate, her slender hands quickly sliding over his waistcoat. It was undoubtedly the most arousing pat-down to which Nate had been subjected. Cora found the remaining deck of cards, her eyes flashing.

“If they had seen you!”

Nate prickled with irritation. “They’d what? Scold me? I’m a grown man, a fact you seem to have forgotten. And you, Cora, are a grown woman. A viscountess, for Christ’s sake. *They* should be deferring to *you*.”

It had been vexing Nate all week. Cora was far too soft with the Carletons. It rankled him how she bit her tongue, playing polite while her eyes burned with anger.

“You know exactly the reason we need to tread lightly.” Her jaw clenched. “To think you would put me at risk like this —”

“Nothing happened, Cora.” He frowned in annoyance. “Will you calm down?”

“How can I, when you’re undermining me left and right? You know we have to act according to their terms,” Cora warned. “No matter how irritating we find them. I can’t have anyone stirring up trouble now.”

She nodded toward Leo, and Nate understood the discussion was closed.

“Just...refrain from underage gambling. Please.”

“Fine.” Nate took back his cards. “I’ll refrain as long as she does. And that’s all I can promise.”

“GOOD AFTERNOON, Lady Dane. Have you sampled my jam?”

“Not yet...we’re going in order, Mr. Perkins,” Cora playfully rebuked a ruddy-faced man. “No cheating! You’ll need to wait your turn.”

She turned away from the eager Mr. Perkins, swinging her parasol dangerously near a cluster of passersby. Nate grabbed her elbow before she knocked into the nearest fruit stall. He managed to forgo pointing out that her ivory ensemble was perhaps a risky choice for a berry festival.

For over an hour now, Nate had dutifully strolled along the market stalls on the village green, smiling at Cora's neighbors and tenants with her fidgety hand tucked in his arm. He could sense a detritus of smiles and whispers in their wake. And a good thing too; it was time for him to earn his keep.

Leo and Tess were with Annie. Only moments ago, Nate had seen them tearing by, laughing boisterously as they skipped off to visit the goat kids in the barn. Nate had immediately checked for Edict Carleton, expecting her to spout a lecture about why strawberries and baby goats were damning their small souls. But the vicar and his wife were thankfully across the green, still engrossed in conversation with the parish rector.

Good. Maybe they'd get exorcised while they were here.

Meanwhile, Cora was rhapsodizing in relief that everything was unfolding according to her meticulous plans. "It's going smoothly, don't you think?" she whispered, nodding graciously at a couple strolling past.

"You know, this really is quite the to-do," Nate observed, looking around the noisy, crowded festival. "I hadn't known what to expect."

Cora pivoted to face him, and Nate dodged her parasol lest she put out his eye.

"You've never been to a parish festival?" She looked charmingly flummoxed by his ignorance.

"Not since I was a child. I recall at least one mishap at a harvest festival," Nate said, dropping a devastating grin on Mrs. Rollins, his geriatric new acquaintance, as she pressed a slice of strawberry pie upon him.

Nate winked triumphantly at Cora, holding up three fingers. She bit back a smile. The two of them were in stiff

competition for who could receive more free treats today.

“Hmm,” Cora replied. “Good day to you too, Mrs. Rollins. I didn’t need any pie, not at all—”

“Congratulations, Viscountess!” a man called from his stall across the grassy lawn. “You two make a very handsome pair, if I may be so bold.”

“It’s not bold when it’s the truth,” Nate called jovially around a mouthful of pie.

He might be laying it on a bit thick, but he wasn’t going to risk his payday for not being a winsome enough husband-to-be. As Cora endlessly reminded him, the Chancery could theoretically call upon anyone to testify about her family. Even half-blind Mrs. Rollins.

“Well, you’d better pay close attention today,” Cora teased as they continued to promenade. “After all, you’ll have to become familiar with these sorts of county events.”

Nate turned to her in confusion. He had agreed to only one parish festival.

“No.” Cora laughed lightly. “Not because of me! I only meant you’ll likely be Earl of Fordham one day, won’t you? Or, at least, your future son will be. In either case, you’ll have obligations like this too.”

Nate slowed, chewing thoughtfully.

“I suppose that’s true.” He shook his head. “Strange...but true.”

“You don’t want to be earl?” Cora asked, studying his face. “Or have a son?”

Nate shrugged uncomfortably. “It’s...quite difficult to envision either scenario, if I’m being honest.”

“How so?”

Cora accepted a glass of champagne from a refreshment booth.

Nate frowned, linking their arms once more. “I suppose, in many ways, Fordham seems eternal. It’s hard to conceive of

ever taking his place. In any capacity.” His mouth tightened. “I expect I’m more like the Old Earl than my brother.”

“The Old Earl? Your father?” Cora’s eyes sharpened in inquiry. “Tabby rarely mentions him.”

Nate uneasily twisted one of his cufflinks. Though he had brought it up, the Old Earl was an unpleasant topic of conversation. For years, Raymond had lamented that if Nate weren’t careful, he would end up exactly like their irresponsible father. On his good days, Nate chalked it up to Raymond’s jealousy at Nate’s freedom. On his worst days, he assumed the slide to degeneracy was inevitable; his constitution was predisposed to recklessness, his brain created for negligence.

“Our father was...difficult. A bit like me, I suppose.” Nate grimaced. “Rather, I’m a bit like him. He was a good-timer, most often in his cups. He didn’t give a tinker’s damn about being earl, or, in fact, about any of his familial responsibilities...”

Nate trailed off, looking toward the knot of children in the barnyard.

“He had the tendency to get a bit...callous. With Tabby, especially. He bullied her. I remember, even as a child, wondering where the adult was. And then my brother...dealt with it. He was the head of the family, long before he had to be. He took care of us.”

Cora hummed sympathetically. “How did you come to live with him? It’s a strange arrangement, isn’t it?”

Nate steered her through the festival, his hand falling lightly to her back as they sidestepped a booth.

“Fordham’s mother died when he was away at Cambridge. Our father...well, suffice to say he was never true to the marriage bed. But he had miraculously managed to avoid any *trouble*. I suppose when his first wife died, the Old Earl got a bit more slipshod. At least he did with my mother.”

Cora reddened at the insinuation. “Ah...you mean...?”

He nodded, understanding her implied question. Nate was the heir presumptive, a legitimate son.

“Our father always said it was down to my brother. When he found out the Old Earl had a child on the way with his mistress, he left Cambridge and all but dragged our father to the altar. He didn’t want his sibling—me—to suffer the stigma of a by-blow. Later, when our mother died, he didn’t want Tabby and me to be influenced by the Old Earl’s odious habits. Our father didn’t want us, so it was an easy enough solution. And here we are.”

“Your brother sounds...like a force.” Cora seemed a bit awestruck.

“He’d love you for saying so.” Nate’s jaw ticked. “But you aren’t wrong. Fordham was born knowing what to do. He’s managed everything—for our father, for himself, and now for Tabby and me...” He laughed humorlessly. “And he never lets me forget it.”

True to form, Raymond never let go of anything, including Nate’s summer plans. After his brother’s second letter, Nate had finally taken Cora’s advice and sent a response. He’d used more of her verbiage than he cared to admit, drumming up his finest impression of a man besotted. Nate had no idea if Raymond would accept his explanation, but this was officially the best he could do.

Because of Cora. The only reason he stood a chance in hell of convincing Raymond he was straightening out was because of her constant—though admittedly earnest—needling.

Nate looked down at her. The parasol was dangling uselessly over her shoulder, her nose already freckling. He couldn’t shake off the memory of her sweet, floury smile in the kitchens. She was always trying so hard. *Too hard*. For herself, for everyone else.

With an uneasy lurch, Nate realized he wanted Cora to be pleased with him. For her to speak of him as she did of his brother. And then, before he could think better of it...

“It was the railway.”

She blinked in surprise. “What?”

“The other day, in the kitchens, you asked me why Fordham is angry with me, why he cut me off now, of all times. It’s because of the railway proposal.”

“I don’t follow.”

Nate’s mouth and shoulders tensed in an uncomfortable swoop.

“There was a survey completed last year for a proposed railway route, up near Darlington. I had been looking for an investment opportunity, something to get Fordham off my back, something of my own, if you see my meaning. I looked into it, Cora. I really did. It wasn’t a whim. There was a projected five percent return on investment shares.”

Cora frowned. “So what happened?”

Nate scowled.

“What happened was a messy dispute about the route cutting through a private estate. The measure went to Parliament in March and failed by *thirteen* bloody votes.”

Thirteen votes, but the only one he’d really needed was his brother’s vote of confidence.

So infuriatingly close.

“I wanted to stay the course—I still do. There’s money to be had in railways. I know it. But Fordham was apoplectic when the investment failed. Said I’d been rash, only looking to make quick coin. But the truth is, he’d been looking for a reason to collar me for years and he finally found one. When the rail shutdown, so did most of my accounts.”

Cora winced. “I’m sorry, Nate. I had no idea. That’s a rotten outcome, but it’s not your fault. I’m sure Lord Fordham will see that eventually. It’s clear he cares about you. And...” She hesitated, then forged ahead. “And you care about him. A great deal, from what I can tell.”

Nate bumped her shoulder lightly, abruptly wishing to end this scratchy discussion. “Not sure you can see much, all the way down there,” he teased.

She stopped to add more berries to her basket. Nate obligingly gave a coin to the vendor.

“You can laugh all you want.” Cora moved to the next stall. “But I can see your brother is a good man. And you’re altogether wrong about your character.”

“How so?” Nate asked skeptically.

Cora popped a strawberry into her mouth, and his eyes fell to the plush tug of her lips. A frisson of desire peppered his veins.

“Well, you aren’t anything like you described yourself. You said you were like your father, thoughtless and idle. But you’ve been here all week, and while you might attempt to be thoughtless and idle, you’ve actually been a great help to me.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.” Cora spun her parasol, offering him a small smile. “Believe it or not, it’s been rather...pleasant, on the whole. To have you here.”

She had a queer look on her face. A warm, sunny feeling cracked open inside Nate’s chest. Hadn’t he been thinking the same? It was *nice* to have a purpose, even if the purpose was pretending to be someone he wasn’t.

And it was especially nice Cora had noticed it.

“Kiss!”

For one wild moment, Nate thought *Cora* had said it, and he very nearly pressed her right against the nearest stall to comply. But it was only a small knot of girls, berry-stained and overly sugared, looking delighted at their newly engaged viscountess and her handsome betrothed.

Cora turned red. “Oh.” She laughed nervously, waving them off. “Girls...that’s not...appropri—”

The last word crumbled as Nate stepped closer. Earn his keep, indeed. After all, they had a part to play.

“Ah, Lady Dane,” he chided softly. “Can you blame them?”

Her agitation was so endearing Nate wholeheartedly hoped she had no idea what a delightful little wreck she was. He reached for her wrist, gently pulling her toward him, half-blocking the now perseverating crowd of girls.

“Shh...trust me,” Nate whispered.

He reached down, finding the handle of Cora’s parasol and casually spinning it to rest on her shoulder. Her eyes grew wide as he brought a single fingertip to her chin, slowly turning her face up and away from the festival crowd.

“What are you—”

Nate grasped the parasol, rotating it as he bent forward until the umbrella blocked both of their faces.

Shadowed there inside the cave of her sunshade, Nate ducked his head low, locking eyes with Cora for one long, strange heartbeat. Each tight puff of her breath smelled of strawberries laced with her customary bright, herbal scent. It drove him half-mad that he *still* couldn’t place it.

With a fierce swoop of heat, Nate nearly closed his eyes, so intense was the sensory experience of this sunny hollow. But Cora’s wide, hazel-blue gaze was trained on his lips, and he’d be damned before he’d miss a second of it.

Bloody hell.

If he kissed her right now, she’d taste of pure sugar. Surely, nothing at this festival would be as sweet. He could almost feel it—the sumptuous pillow of her mouth pressed to his, his fingers flexing in her hair, the basket of berries falling to the ground.

But he didn’t lean any closer than necessary, keeping their faces a palm’s width apart but entirely hidden by the parasol.

“See?” he murmured. “Trust.”

Cora laughed nervously. “Goodness. You startled me. For a moment, I thought you were going to...”

She faltered, her glowing cheeks illuminated in the diffuse shade of the parasol.

“Nobody can tell the difference,” Nate rumbled, and Cora’s dilating irises reflected just how dangerous his smile had turned. “Unless...”

“No,” she breathed, her lips barely moving. “There’s no *unless*.”

“No?”

She licked the corner of her lip. A thread unraveled along Nate’s spine, tightening all the way to his navel. If Cora wished, she could pull it. He was practically dangling it in front of her.

And if Nate wasn’t very much mistaken, a part of her *wished*.

“No.” Cora blinked, looking away. Her armor returned. Nate wasn’t sure it had ever really come down.

“Capital effort, love,” Nate murmured, strung somewhere between dimly disappointed and intensely aroused. “You would have fooled a lesser man than I.”

At her faint, surprised exhale, Nate abruptly pulled back, twirling her parasol away. He nodded wickedly at the gaggle of bystanders, even as his pulse beat raggedly.

“Well then, Viscountess.” He recovered himself as he guided her toward the music pavilion. “I’d say the ruse is going swimmingly.”

“Yes,” Cora murmured, absently touching her cheek. “I estimate we’ve duped them all.”

THAT NIGHT, the dream returned, as hazy and hot as the night before.

His fingers threaded through her hair, gently tugging just hard enough to make her gasp. He slid his other hand along the length of her arm, all the way to her glove. He slowly rolled the silky fabric away, revealing the soft skin of her wrist as he brought her hand to his lips...

“Are you mad? Nate, this glove is raw silk. Get it out of your mouth or you’ll ruin it!”

His kiss absorbed her laughter.

Nate sat up, his hair tousled, his eyes wide as Cora’s exceptionally authentic voice reverberated in his ears.

That’s what it would be like, he realized, his heart beating in the wrong place. That’s exactly what it would be like.

And that’s when Nate knew he was in trouble.

July 1819

Finch Residence, London

Dearest Cora,

I do hope this letter finds you well. But not too well. You are behaving yourself with my brother, aren't you?

I only jest. I wholeheartedly approve of you finally doing one thing for yourself, darling. You would hardly be the first widow to enjoy the attentions of a strapping young man. (Not that I actually want to consider my brother being said strapping young man, mind you.)

I'm merely noting you've somehow found yourself with all the nuisance of a betrothal and perhaps none of the fun.

That's all.

All my love (and wickedness!),

Tabitha



“MAMA, I HAVE A GREAT IDEA.”

Cora entered the nursery to find Leo all but jumping on Nate. To her very great surprise, Nate had offered to read with the children, but it appeared he had fallen asleep on the floor with the book under his head. Now, he was blinking in bewilderment, bowled over by the sudden clamor.

“So can we?”

“Can we what?” Nate asked, trying to make sense of the four-year-old’s feverish explanation.

“A swim!” Leo exclaimed.

Nate blearily rubbed his neck. Cora couldn’t help but notice that in this half-roused state, his voice was rougher but his eyes were softer. She felt a flush start in the pit of her stomach. By now, she had learned the tingling burn would slide up, where Nate could see it, and down, where she could feel it.

It was heady and horrifying in equal measure.

She was mostly able to squash these increasingly frequent sensations, chalking it up to Nate being *Nate*. He was a walking daydream; he likely elicited this sort of response from any woman with a pulse. Besides, they were simply partners in a business arrangement.

A business arrangement with only four remaining days.

Nate squinted at Leo. “Do you know how to swim?”

“No,” Leo said eagerly. “I’ve never even tried it before.”

Nate glanced at Cora again.

She pressed her lips into a thin line as Leo’s excitement rose. Her son had never gone swimming because his father had never taken him. But that was neither Nate’s fault nor his responsibility.

“He didn’t...have anyone to teach him.”

“But *you* could!” Leo was at Nate’s elbow, his eyes wide with excitement.

“Ah...” Nate looked uncomfortably torn. “I...could try, I suppose—”

He was interrupted by Leo’s whoop of glee.

“Yes—yes, come. Tess, did you hear?”

“The pond!” Tess shrieked.

At the prospect of teaching Tess to swim, Nate visibly shuddered. Cora couldn’t blame him. Her daughter had no

sense of self-preservation.

“Not you, little lady,” Cora said firmly, ignoring Tess’s wail of protest. “Not until you’re four. You can stay up here with me, for tea.”

“But *I* can?” Leo looked rapturous.

Cora peered warily at Nate. He nodded.

“Fine. If Nate’s agreeable, you can go.” She raised her voice over Leo’s cheers. “But take Annie with you. She can intervene if anybody starts drowning.”

“Right then.” Nate looked as uneasy as Cora felt. Against all her instincts, her family was growing far too reliant on him.

“Me and you, mate.”

Cora’s heart sank.

Nate and Leo had said it in unison.

TO CORA’S DISPLEASURE, when she and Tess arrived in the family parlor, their tea service had company.

Edith Carleton was standing over a side table, fussily sorting through the fabric samples for Cora’s pretend wedding gown. Cora had completely forgotten she had put the swatches up here last week.

“Mrs. Carleton? Is there something I can assist you with?”

“Are you having your curtains redone?” Mrs. Carleton’s countenance was one of extreme distaste as she held up the fabric.

“No. Those are for my wedding gown.”

“And you selected this?” Mrs. Carleton shook the swatch Nate had complimented last week.

Cora decided that even though it wouldn’t be for a wedding, she was damn well commissioning a dress made in that color.

“I think in the right material, with an overlay, perhaps? It could be quite striking in the autumn.”

“Hmph.” Mrs. Carleton sniffed. “You’re too short to pull off an overlay.”

Cora moved to her tea tray, finding a cake for Tess. She summoned all of her patience from where it was retreating to the corner.

“Well, the wedding will be quite small, Mrs. Carleton. I have no need for a grandiose gown.”

“Yes. Small is wise. It *is* your second wedding. And you’ll be losing your title, of course.” Mrs. Carleton frowned. “It’s a shame, Lady Dane. Just look around at my family’s estate. All of this, the life my brother tirelessly provided for you...and you’re hitching yourself to an untitled pair of shoulders.”

Cora shook off a vile sweep of memories at Mrs. Carleton’s delusional assessment of her marriage. The only things Dane had been *tireless* about were his mistresses. Cora inadvertently looked toward the well-worn chair next to the fireplace. Her title hadn’t been very good company on the many nights she’d sat there alone, had it?

“Well. On the distant day Nathaniel inherits from his brother, I suppose I would become a countess. So really, I’m only losing the *vis-* part of my title.”

She had intended the words as a contrary retort to Mrs. Carleton, but it was Cora’s own heart that rebelled. She was momentarily cowed by the intrusive vision of a fawn-colored gown, a church strewn with autumn aster, and two teasing gray eyes waiting for her at the end of the aisle.

She smiled tightly, no longer wanting to talk about her nonexistent wedding. It only served as a prickly reminder that Cora was beginning to suspect Tabitha was wrong. Nate Travers would one day prove himself a *remarkable* husband, if he would only grow up a bit. He was merry and tolerant and handsome and present...

A remarkable husband for someone else, that is.

“Well, we’ll be at the wedding, in any case,” Mrs. Carleton interjected, pedantically sipping her tea and frowning at Tess, who was pretending her gingerbread was a gnome.

“Of course.” Cora nodded stiffly. “I would expect nothing less.”

“And after, the vicar and I will obviously take the children back to Essex with us. I do hope you aren’t considering a date *too* late in September. The chill will be setting in, and it’s a long journey for us, let alone for little Tess.”

What the...?

Cora’s limbs went perfectly still.

“Wh-why...” She scrambled for a semblance of composure. “Why would the children be leaving with you after the wedding?”

Mrs. Carleton’s smile didn’t reach her calculating eyes. “Why? Because you’ll be a newlywed, of course. I plan to keep the children with me this year. To give you some privacy.”

Cora was fully aware of her failing heart weakly pumping blood to her extremities, every useless pulse turning her colder.

“After all.” Mrs. Carleton prissily picked up her teacup. “The vicar and I are entitled to physical custody as much as you are. And you’ve had the children for a year.”

Because they’re mine.

“You...you’re taking them...for a year?” The words rattled painfully. “I assure you, that won’t be necessary—”

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for children to be around a newly married couple.”

“That’s not your decision—”

“It is, actually.” Mrs. Carleton raised her chin. “My husband is their testamentary guardian.”

“But—”

Cora stopped herself before she teetered past the point of no return. As her vision blurred, she turned to the window, giving Edith Carleton her back.

She wanted to tear her hair out. For so long, Cora had yearned to be free as a bird, but in every direction were unfriendly skies. She couldn't leave her blasted cage, even with the door hanging open.

Her breath turned wet with withheld despair.

“Mama?”

Tess appeared at her knee.

Cora rallied, pulling herself together by the thinnest of ropes.

If she came undone right now, if she let Mrs. Carleton see her underbelly, the older woman would think she'd won. And she would never retract her claws. She would keep picking at Cora's family—there would be no end in sight. Tess and Leo had been miserable around Mrs. Carleton this month. Cora could not allow her unraveling temper to cause them a miserable year, a miserable *life*.

Cora smiled tightly, taking Tess's hand.

“If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Carleton. I'm...needed in the garden. I completely overlooked the groundskeeper wanted a word this afternoon. Come along, Tess.”

“Tell him to do something about your flowerbeds,” Mrs. Carleton called, pouring more tea. “The roses need pruning.”

CORA'S NERVES seemed to have their own idea about how to steady themselves, carrying her through the house, out the garden door, and into the sunshine. The crumbs from Tess's cake pressed between their clasped palms as she toddled to keep up with Cora's tense stride.

We're taking them for a year...

Cora realized her feet were taking her on the winding path to the pond. She was loath to admit it, but what she truly

wished for right now was...Nate.

Cora stopped short on the sloped lawn, woozy from her treacherous thoughts.

For years, she had mastered carrying her burdens alone. Her back had grown hard from the yoke, molded to the exact size of her narrow shoulders. If she needed anyone, she had Gavin, she had Tabitha.

But above all, she had herself.

What had happened to her? Cora needed to govern her own internal affairs. She was becoming woefully lax about doing so.

Although...Nate had been bizarrely adept at pulling her away from the brink over the last ten days. He always seemed to know what to say to change her mood, and he excelled at remaining unaffected in the face of the Carletons' grueling fault-finding.

"Mama?" Tess tugged her hand. "I want to see Leo."

Cora wavered another half second, caught between the pond and the house.

"Yes, sweet. Let's go."

They picked their way along the footpath, Tess stopping to gather wildflowers and weeds in equal measure. As they neared the pond, gleeful shouts floated toward them, followed by a loud splash.

"Leo!" Tess dropped her fistful of leaves and took off, disappearing behind a cluster of brilliant yellow lady's bedstraw.

Not wanting to let Tess out of sight, Cora hurried after. She whipped around the bend, where the brush gave way to the pond.

And—

Oh.

Oh—

Oh.

All of Cora's worries temporarily vanished.

Leo was swimming, that much was true.

And Nate Travers was swimming with him.

Cora couldn't look away. Leo's smooth skin was delicious; he was all stretching ribs and jutting elbows underneath the reassuring roundness still clinging to his cheeks. He shrieked, hurling himself into the water, his arms and legs wrapping tightly around Nate, who was helping him float.

And turning Cora to vapor.

"Look at that." Tess laughed as she raced to Annie, who was pretending to read on the banks.

"Oh, sweetheart," Cora murmured, shakily setting down her wildflowers. "I *am*."

Not that she needed to look. The image was now permanently emblazoned on the inside of her eyelids.

Oh my.

He was...*magnificent*. So offensively striking, she felt lightheaded. Cora had suspected the power of his body; Nate's charisma was the sort that couldn't be faked. He had a reason to be at ease in his skin, and it must be because he knew his skin was quite possibly the most desirable destination on the globe.

This...was not how her husband had looked.

Nate was wet, his maddeningly tousled hair dripping water along his jaw, down his corded neck, over the rigid, sinuous lines along his back, his shoulders, his abdomen. Cora could see, under the perfectly populated expanse of glistening hair dusting his chest, the many muscles of his torso, flexing and retracting along a treacherous plane, down to where his wet buckskins were sticking obscenely.

She had seen statues, the Greek studies of anatomy, portrayals of masculine perfection, but it had never seemed so unfair. The marble said nothing of how the body moved, how

the muscles reached and coiled, how the skin reflected light and water.

For one delirious moment, Cora felt that she had no choice but to reach out and touch him, that her mouth had been destined to trace each droplet, to create a river in reverse, licking the beading water until she found his lips—

How could a man come to look this way? How was it even possible?

“I box,” Nate said helpfully.

Cora was mortified, unsure of what she had actually said aloud.

“I...” She raised her hand to her burning cheek.

Nate’s lips curled into a pleased, perceptive smile. Water was clinging to his shoulders.

She wanted to cling to his shoulders.

“No need to be shy, darling,” he called. “Remember what you told me in the kitchens? I’m going to be *your husband*.”

For two wild heartbeats, Cora let herself believe it was true, all that skin was hers, a fantasy so tactile she could nearly feel how the water would sluice beneath her fingers as she dragged them across the sun-warmed expanse of his chest...

You wouldn't be the first widow.

This was all because of Tabitha. What had she been thinking, sending such an iniquitous letter? Putting ideas in Cora’s head?

With a dizzying effort, she tore her eyes away from Nate. But her gaze unluckily fell to a sharp outcrop of rock that only recalled the shadowed concave of his hip, just above his clinging buckskins.

Cora wheezed.

“What’s wrong, Mama?”

“Annie...” Cora looked over to see her nurse holding Tess’s hand, staring at the pond. “Annie!”

Annie blinked, her eyebrows raised.

For the love of heaven.

“Please take Tess and Leo back to the house.” Cora’s voice was surprisingly calm for a person currently on fire. “I’ll be there in a moment.”

Annie took the longest possible amount of time to bundle Leo in a towel and gather Tess. By the time Cora saw them off down the footpath, Nate was climbing from the pond, golden and bright as a second sun.

“Ah, damn...” Nate muttered wistfully, looking at the vacant footpath.

“What?”

“Tess left already.” He looked implausibly disappointed. “I wanted to tell her I saw the duck.”

There was a lone, fully white duck on the property. Famously mean and mercenarily greedy, the fowl had once chased Leo up the embankment, flapping threateningly until he hurled his entire loaf of bread at her. The duck was unequivocally Tess’s favorite animal; it was rather sweet of Nate to remember.

Cora realized that finding herself alone with a sweet and shirtless Nate Travers was an egregious tactical error on her part.

“Do you...” She faltered. “Do you perhaps have a towel? Or...clothing?”

Nate shrugged one sinewy shoulder. “I planned to dry in the sun.”

Cora’s brain fizzled. “Well...don’t. Plan on it.” She blinked. “Come up with a new plan. One that involves this.”

She reached down, grabbed his discarded shirt, and tossed it to him, her hands shaking as she turned her back. She heard a rustle as he tugged the garment over his head.

“You can join me, you know. Plenty of room on this rock for both of us...if you don’t mind getting a little damp.”

That does it. Cora took two quick strides, putting herself close enough to count the water droplets on Nate's throat.

But she wasn't counting water droplets.

She was attempting to push him.

"I should shove you right back in."

Her hand landed firm and flat on his chest and she almost lost her footing. Cora had assumed the linen shirt achieved maximum danger while *off* Nate's body, but now, sheathing the heated plane of his torso, the innocuous white fabric was yet another hazard.

"Do it," Nate breathed. His hand fell to her elbow, where his palm instinctively slotted against her pointy edges. "Believe me, Cora, I'd love *nothing* more."

His thumb rubbed a single, slow circle along the inside of her bicep, now the most important part of her body.

Somewhere far away, a match was lit, the tiny flame tilting, tipping, then ever-so-lightly pressing to a long, oiled rope.

Desire.

This must be how it happens.

Slow.

Fast.

Nate bent closer still, the wispy, fine hairs at her temple moving with his breath.

"But fair warning, love. I'm not falling without you. If I go under, I'm taking you with me."

She took a nervous step back, his fingers still enfolding her elbow. His hand was so large it encircled her arm.

"You wouldn't."

"I absolutely would."

"What if I can't swim?"

He grinned wolfishly. “I suppose I’d have to resuscitate you.”

“Ha! I’d rather take my chances with the duck.”

Nate startled, looking hastily behind him. “Why? Is it here?”

Cora couldn’t help the laugh suddenly lifting from her. Nate dropped her arm and smiled triumphantly at her good humor. As predicted, he had lightened her mood.

And then Cora remembered the reason she had come to the pond frayed with worry, needing her mood lifted in the first place. Her laughter broke off as Edith Carleton’s nasty threats caught up to her.

At the abrupt change in her mood, Nate knit his brows.

“Cora?”

She looked out over the pond, her shoulders slumping.

“Ah.” Nate sighed. “What did Edict do now? The usual nagging?”

“Worse.” Cora pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to stem the pressure gathering deep in her eye sockets. She slowly sank to the rocky embankment. “*Far* worse. She intimated they would be taking the children after we married. To give us privacy. For a year...”

Nate rubbed his hands over his face as he dropped down beside her. He was half-dry now, his outdoorsy scent sharply layered with water and sun.

“Cora, look. Are you truly *surprised* by this?”

She squinted at him quizzically, and Nate shrugged.

“Has it occurred to you that widowhood wasn’t the reason Edith Carleton was threatening to assume custody of the children? That perhaps she was only saying so because the prospect of you remarrying was so unlikely? And now that you’ve been parading your betrothed in front of her, she’s pivoting and laying the groundwork for a new angle?”

“Oh...” Cora flinched, realizing he was probably correct. “I hadn’t considered it that way.”

She kicked at a rock, feeling dreadfully daft. “I’m sure you’re right,” she admitted reluctantly.

“Fordham’s the same,” Nate said slowly. He picked up a small, flat stone, lightly rubbing his fingers over the smooth surface. “The rationale for his actions varied, but he never wavered about the end goal—changing me.”

He grimaced as he threw the pebble. They watched it skip twice over the green glare of the pond to disappear in a pool of ripples.

“I know it’s difficult, but try not to give weight to what the old crone said.”

Cora chewed her lip. “Do you really think so?”

“It’s a *good* sign.” Nate said decisively. “She buys the ruse.”

Cora picked up a pebble of her own, hefting the warm, solid weight.

“It’s a game, Cora. And *we* are the ones who are bluffing. All of this”—he gestured between them—“will be over well before September. Her threats won’t come to fruition.”

Cora frowned, studying the rock in her hand. Even though she’d thought similarly, it stung to hear how eager Nate was to return to London. He must be bored out of his mind here, counting the days until his payment. He was a notorious rogue, after all. And her family had reduced him to a nurserymaid, filling his days with stories and swimming.

It made her strangely sore.

“Right.” Cora shook off her peculiar mood. “A game. For now.”

“*For now* is not to be trifled with.” Nate smiled bracingly. “*For now* has enabled many a man to fight another day.”

“Fight another day...” Cora mused. “I do like the sound of that.”

She stood and raised the rock, sending it skipping over the pond.

“Nicely done.” He whistled appreciatively, climbing to his feet beside her. His eyes glinted with mischief. “For a viscountess.”

“Come now.” Cora nudged him, harder than strictly necessary. “I’m a viscountess with three elder brothers.” One more shove, her shoulder tingling where it touched him. “I can still send you back into the pond, yet—”

Before she quite realized what was happening, Nate was all but against her, his hands dropping to her waist.

For one astonishing moment, Cora felt enveloped.

He was looming above her, his thumbs burning where they anchored just below her navel, his fingers a bridge from her hip bones to her spine.

The feeling of his hands on her body changed the patterns of her veins, her blood flowing in new directions. Her nipples and throat tightened in tandem.

She looked up, her victorious smile slipping at the heated, unreadable undercurrent emanating from Nate.

And then he was in motion and so was she, in his arms in the air as he swung her out toward the pond.

For one wild moment, Cora really did think he was about to toss her in the water. She felt a thrill of girlish anticipation, almost hoping he would.

Please. Send me flying.

But then he turned, spinning her back to the rock.

Cora staggered, frazzled.

Nate’s eyes trailed over her as he lifted a daring brow. “Are you sure you don’t fancy a swim? Not feeling overheated?”

Cora’s confusion sank heavily inside of her.

He was a fiend. He was her friend.

And...he was leaving.

The hopeful fluttering left her body, her wings curling around her ribcage, firmly closing over her racing pulse. No good could come of this. Her only concern should be staying the course and focusing on her family.

She stared up at Nate, stubborn and fearful. "I'm fine here, on the ground."

He shook his head. Cora sensed she had disappointed him. All at once, she wished he would tip her right back into the sky.

"If you say so, love."

Cora,

Seeing as I've no bloody clue what to write...perhaps I'll start with an observation of your habits.

By half past ten this morning, you had already written eight letters: four to send and four duplicates, apparently to keep for posterity (I cannot imagine a distant future in which anyone needs to bear witness to you and Tabitha dissecting the ongoing affair of Mrs. Putnam, but there you have it).

You then spilled tea all down your floral dress, snapping at me when I made a—very clever—joke regarding watering gardens. You half listened to the vicar's assessment of this year's crops; you hid your suggestive novel from Mrs. Carleton; you retied Tess's hair ribbons at least three times before I lost count.

And you smiled at me twice.



“WELL THEN, is everyone settled? We're due at the Wallace Estate within the hour.”

Cora's enthusiasm was persuasive, but Nate wasn't so sure he shared it. He wasn't exactly thrilled about rejoining the ranks of the *ton*, but Parliament had officially recessed, and the countryside was in full swing. Today, they were expected at Lord and Lady Wallace's home for a small shooting party. Tomorrow, Cora would attend the Monmouth Ball.

And Nate would return to London.

The thought of leaving Aldworth Park rankled. Nate still hadn't had word from Raymond. He had no sense of what awaited him in Town. He had no sense of what awaited Cora in Berkshire. He had no sense of why all of this suffused him with a faint feeling of dread.

"I think we're ready," Cora called to her footman, anxiously smoothing down her green dress.

"You look lovely, Cora." Nate coughed lightly, stifling a worrisome urge to take her hand. In a maneuver befitting a rake of his standing, Nate instead fiddled with his cuff links and dropped one. "Don't you two think your mother looks lovely?"

Leo beamed, patting his mother's knuckles. At least one man in this carriage could take matters in hand.

Cora smiled at her children, pleased and eager. Despite his lingering discomfort, she made Nate feel oddly keen too. It was the damndest thing—he had skipped out of his own brother's ball, just weeks ago, because he couldn't stand these sorts of stale society ordeals.

But there was something about Cora when she turned bright and animated, and everyone else seemed to notice it too. Leo and Tess were acting preposterously adorable. Even Annie, who was accompanying them on this excursion, seemed lighter.

Suffice to say they *all* needed a day away from the Carletons. And it should be a generally convivial group. Nate had been at Eton with Finnegan Wallace, and Cora had long been acquainted with his wife. Moreover, last week, Lady Wallace had written, instructing Cora to bring her whole family along; the Wallace boys were near in age to Leo.

Cora had been relieved she wouldn't have to leave Tess and Leo behind. But Nate could only focus on the unsteady lurch he felt at the word *family*.

"Are you looking forward to the hunt?" Cora asked now.

The large family coach pitched into motion, bringing a relieving breeze through the open windows. The Wallace

Estate was a scant half-hour journey, but the air in the carriage was already blistering.

Nate turned to face Cora, stretching one arm along the back of the carriage seat. He had meant to sit opposite her, as propriety dictated, but Tess and Leo both insisted on sitting with Annie, which might have caused a row if Cora hadn't been in such a lenient mood.

The change in seating arrangements suited him just fine.

"It's not a hunt," Nate corrected. "It's a pheasant shoot."

Cora shrugged, perplexed. "I know that's what the invitation said, but isn't pheasant season—"

"In November?" Nate finished wryly. "How exactly like a vixen to know."

Cora rolled her eyes, and Nate let his hand trail a half inch closer to her.

One day left.

The carriage rolled along, the breeze intermittently carrying the bright, effusive scent of Cora. It was her blasted cosmetics—rosemary and...citrus? He still didn't know. Each waft of her fragrance forced Nate to wonder. Was it perfume, dabbed to the hollow of her throat? Was it salve, smoothed over her dusky rose lips? He would likely never find out. He was a goddamned saint for what he'd endured this fortnight.

But Cora seemed oblivious to his distraction.

"So if pheasants are November, then why, exactly, are you shooting them in the dead of July?"

If she was aware of his hand, mere inches from the back of her head, she didn't let on. The sight of her rich brown hair, so close to his fingertips, summoned the startling image of two different people in a different life. Two people who both wanted and accepted a domestic sort of idle affection, a man's fingers, combing through a woman's hair, her head lolling against his palm in the afternoon sun.

"Nate?"

Right. The people in this carriage, in this life, were interested in neither domestication nor affection.

“Well, according to the note he sent, it would seem Wallace’s thickets are overrun with pheasants. He wants to thin the flock before the true season opens in autumn.”

“And Lady Wallace was all too keen to turn it into a party.” Cora beamed, as though she personally had overseen the pheasant abundance. “Finally. I’ve missed going out, you know.”

“Are you ready?” Nate chanced brushing her shoulder with the pad of his forefinger. He would leave it there if she let him. It was pathetic how he’d started collecting the dust of Cora, both relying on and resenting her rules.

It made him faintly insane. *Nothing had changed.*

And yet...

She swatted him away and briskly rubbed her hands together.

“Undoubtedly,” she said with relish. “I know Emmeline Carrington thinks herself the mistress of piquet, but she’ll be caught unawares today.”

“You remember what I told you? Always discard—”

“Nines and lower,” Cora confirmed, somehow managing a nod that was equally prim and conniving. “Even if I lose the suit.”

Nate had spent the last few evenings managing Cora’s cards strategy. He was absurdly proud of his tutelage as her competitive spirit surged. Her sweet determination was so bloody charming.

“It’s not about the point round,” Nate reminded her. “Lose all you want early—it’s the later rounds that count. And if all else fails, hold your stop cards to block the opponent. Like I always say—”

“*If you can’t win, don’t lose.*” Cora grinned devilishly. “I know. But I won’t need to worry about a safeguard. I’m going to destroy the lot of them.”

“Good girl.” Nate’s voice reflexively deepened.

Cora’s cheeks tinged a slow, steady rose. As if acutely aware of her own flush, she lowered her gaze and instead fussed with her bracelet.

Nate retracted his arm across the carriage, away from where she was obviously flustered. His daily ritual: know when to start, know when to stop.

If you can’t win, don’t lose.

Cora’s overwhelming presence, all too close, crowding him with her unattainability, reminded Nate he would be spending almost the entire day apart from her. Which was a good thing. He needed to swear and drink and storm around the forest with a weapon. Anything to take the damn edge off.

Tugging on his cravat, he turned to Cora.

“I know I’ve mentioned it, but remember, I’ll be returning to Aldworth separately tonight. Wallace has a new stallion, and he asked me to break him in a bit. I told him I’d ride back this evening, after drinks.”

“You’ll take a groom with you?” Cora asked, her tone deceptively light. “Because...it could be late, and you aren’t familiar with these bridle paths.”

She resolutely looked out the window, an attempt to prevent him from witnessing her concern.

Nate’s insides warmed. Weeks ago, he would have balked at this sort of attention. But it really wasn’t so bad, to have someone fret over him.

“I won’t be late.”

He looked out his own window, unsure whether he felt like smiling or scowling. His palm inexplicably missed its spot on the carriage seat, four inches from her hair.

One day left.

If a fortnight ago, someone had told Nate he would be spending his summer in Berkshire, playing family-to-be with a woman who double-copied her own correspondence, he would

have asked that person for a glass of whatever they were drinking because it surely led to a grand old time.

And yet, it was entirely wrong to whittle this experience down to nothing but a charade. Cora was *real*—surprising, aggravating, playful, soft. She had him on edge every moment of the day, perpetually trying to keep up with her. And what he didn't manage to learn of her during the daylight hours, his psyche readily made up at night.

The incessant dreams had become his own private torture. Nate's desire for Cora was matched only by the blatant degree to which he couldn't have her. Every morning, he suffered the same routine: waking restlessly, forced to take his stiff cock in hand, insufficiently slaking his lust while her burning gaze gilded the inside of his eyelids. And then he would sit at his writing desk, spinning his quill over her required fake letters, not for lack of inspiration, but because he feared saying too much.

She was reality and fantasy all at once. And Christ, if that wasn't a dangerous combination.

Now, his rebellious stare traced the smooth line of her neck; there was an obstinate lock of hair no pins seemed able to catch. He permitted himself one rationed daydream—cupping her thigh with his broad hand, lifting her loose curls with his breath, tracing the line of her pearl necklace with his tongue. Her sigh would release, and he would catch it, his mouth hovering just over her damp, parted lips...

“Nate? What's a pheasant shoot?”

Leo's earnest question pulled Nate from his feverish thoughts.

“Well...ah—”

Cora's eyes were wide with warning. “Leo is very fond of animals, aren't you sweet?”

Nate fumbled, still half-distracted as he attempted to explain the concept and execution of a hunt to the most worried person he'd ever met.

“And then, once the birds are...*sleeping*...the hound dogs will track them down, so the gamekeeper will be able to find them...”

At this, Tess whipped her little head around.

“Dogs?” Her sapphire eyes were twice their usual size.

“Well, yes, love, Lord Wallace will have his hunting dogs —”

Tess’s rosebud mouth trembled under a wash of horror.

Nate paused, feeling as though he had made a crucial misstep.

“No, no, *no*—” Tess frantically climbed on the carriage seat.

Cora groaned, putting her hand to her head. “I forgot...” she murmured. “Tess, now, don’t worry about this, dove—”

“No dogs,” Tess warned. “No dogs.”

Nate was flummoxed. *This* was the same small child who loved rabid ducks and pirates?

Annie was now cajoling Tess, trying to get her to sit properly as the carriage lurched over a rut. “Tess, sweetheart, we won’t be anywhere near the dogs.”

“*I* want to see the dogs,” Leo pointed out.

Tess snapped, letting loose a mighty wail.

“She’s petrified of dogs. I have no idea where it came from.” Cora sighed, scooping Tess into her lap.

“I think I have a biscuit somewhere,” Annie mumbled, searching her knit reticule.

“We’re going to bribe her?” Cora whispered in disbelief.

“If you don’t, I will.” Nate grimaced.

Tess had found a pitch that would have shamed a soprano, and the Wallace residence was no small distance.

One day left, he reminded himself as Tess’s shrieks hit his eardrums. *Just one day left*.

But it didn't feel like relief.

"LADY DANE, Mr. Travers, if you'll follow me."

"Here we go, darling," Nate whispered. "Our audience awaits."

Dog drama notwithstanding, the carriage had delivered their party to the Wallace Estate in surprisingly good spirits. Tess had eventually calmed—under the influence of biscuits—and upon their arrival, Annie, Tess, and Leo were warmly greeted by the housekeeper, who saw them to the garden with the other children and nurserymaids.

"Steady," Nate murmured as he and Cora followed the butler to the Wallaces' drawing room. He took her arm, letting his fingers graze the inside of her wrist. Cora inhaled sharply, and an ache answered low in his groin.

"I'm steady," Cora insisted, nearly stepping on her hem. "Are you?"

"I'm always steady." Nate winked. "Like a rock."

"Keep that up." She adjusted her necklace. "The winking. And the...wrist-touching. That's the sort of flair we need for this charade. And don't skimp on the dimples either."

"How I relish when you tell me what to do." Nate ducked closer, nearly brushing the shell of her ear. "Almost as much as when you tell me what *not* to do."

"I'm glad you at least amuse yourself."

"I could amuse you, you know," Nate said, itching for his favorite game while he could still play it. "But you have repeatedly asked me to behave. Unfortunately, they are mutually exclusive activities."

"You—"

"Lady Wallace, may I present Lady Dane and Mr. Travers," the butler said loudly.

Nate sincerely hoped the pronouncement drowned out Cora's very unladylike curse.

“Lady Dane!” Lady Wallace rushed forward in greeting. “And...” Their hostess was looking askance at Nate, as though Cora had been accompanied by Julius Caesar. “And Mr. Travers.” She recovered herself, allowing Nate to bend and take her hand.

“Lady Wallace.” He smiled cordially. “You are a vision, as to be expected.”

She turned pink, laughed, then shot Cora an extremely urgent look. “I’ve heard all about your *news*,” she stage whispered.

Cora was immediately cut off from Nate, fully surrounded by a tittering circle of women. Among them, he recognized the unwed Carrington girls, who he would have danced with at the Fordham Ball if he hadn’t escaped.

Funny. It felt like a lifetime ago.

As Cora had the gossipmongers in hand, Nate wisely skirted the crowd of pastel perfume and made his way to the huddle of men at the far end of the room.

He accepted a tumbler of brandy, good-naturedly nodding to Lord Monmouth and John Carrington. It was rather hard to ignore the half dozen pairs of feminine eyes appraising him, as if he were a stud horse on the auction block.

“Shall we, gents?” Wallace said, motioning them forward. “The grooms will be waiting.”

The men made for the door without a backward glance at the ladies. Nate started to follow, but a tingling awareness gave him pause.

He turned in the doorway, unsurprised to find Cora’s eyes on him. She, too, was assessing him. *The ruse*, he reminded himself. *She’s playing out the ruse*. Nevertheless, he returned her stare, slowly unraveling a punishing, possessive smile.

It was meant to be for show, but the intensity he felt wasn’t faked. Nor, he suspected, was the heat on her face.

Lady Wallace squeaked. “Lady Dane, he’s...”

But Nate left, never hearing what Lady Wallace and her friends thought he was.

Nothing mattered less.

“WELL DONE, boys, this is quite the haul. Not bad for a day’s work, eh?”

As promised, the pheasants had been prolific. Lord Wallace looked delighted with himself as he surveyed the braces being strung by the underkeeper.

Nate gave a halfhearted grunt of agreement, looking guiltily away from the birds as he thought of Leo.

Needless to say, the afternoon wasn’t the diversion Nate had been hoping for. He was a decent shot, and the gamekeeper had timed the outing to coincide perfectly with the pheasants’ afternoon feeding. It should have been an afternoon of leisure.

And that was the problem; the whole business was *too* easy. Too artificial. Nate preferred a challenge. He craved authenticity.

And he knew all too well he would have both in spades if Cora had been at his side.

“Shall we join the ladies for some refreshments?” Wallace asked, waving the men forward. The jovial group turned in their fowling pieces and began trudging through the thicket, back up to the manse.

Nate, distracted by his disgruntled mood and a growing blister in his boot, was only half listening to the drivel around him when his own name pulled him into the larger conversation.

“I have to say, I’m still not sure how you managed it, Travers.”

“I said the same to my wife. It’s odd of Lady Dane to remarry, isn’t it?” Wallace mused as they leisurely hiked along. “Can’t be much in it for her. Certainly, she’ll lose her

dower rights. And no offense meant, Travers, but you aren't titled yet."

Nate grit his jaw. The casual reminder that he brought quite literally nothing to this presumed union rattled in his head as loudly as a blast from a fowling piece. Hearing the words from another man's mouth—how ludicrous the notion of a wealthy, unconstrained viscountess tethering herself to a near-penniless cad—was a sobering reminder Cora had merely selected Nate because he was the *only* man she knew who would play this part.

"Eh, what's a title?" Nate laughed it off, shrugging amicably. "Doesn't seem to have benefited the lot of you much."

The men chortled, mocking one another, fortunately not noticing Nate wasn't in a very teasing mood.

Monmouth smiled slyly. "Well, there's certainly something in the union for Travers, at any rate."

A bolt of ire unexpectedly speared him at the thought of these useless men insinuating anything vulgar about Cora. On the heels of that unpleasant notion was a far more worrisome conjecture—what if they were speaking of the *contract*? Could Monmouth have an inkling of the betrothal arrangement? *Not possible*. Nobody knew except him, Cora, Tabby, and Gavin Sinclair.

And in truth, it had been days since Nate had given any thought to the terms of the contract.

His time at Aldworth Park didn't feel much like a job anymore.

"How do you mean?" Nate asked carefully.

"Well, Lady Dane's son retains Aldworth Park, don't forget." Monmouth looked over to Nate, calculating. "I imagine as the boy's stepfather, you'll live well."

"Too right," Carrington agreed. "My cousin is guardian to his nephew—he's more flush than ever."

Nate frowned, ruminating on this perplexing information.

“I thought the legalities around all that were fairly stringent,” he said slowly, his mind turning. “That is...a guardian can’t financially benefit from the arrangement.”

Carrington waved him off. “On paper, to be sure. And a guardian, of course, cannot inherit. But if investments are made carefully, it’s not impossible for the heir’s custodian to skim from the top, especially if there are any personal finances. As long as he squares by the time the boy comes of age, nobody would be the wiser.”

The gentlemen became swept up in a discussion about Carrington’s cousin, but Nate was stuck on what he had just heard. He hadn’t realized the Carletons could derive any profit from their guardianship of Leo and Tess.

Now *that* was something to ponder.

As the shooting party came up the lawn, Nate’s churning thoughts were brought to a halt by an abrupt cacophony of barking.

Wallace’s gamekeeper had stayed back to finish with the pheasants, and the kennel keeper was nowhere in sight. The hunting dogs, meanwhile, were running loose along the lawn toward the garden.

“Ah, Wallace,” Nate called, quickening his stride. “Your hounds.”

Wallace turned, waving a disinterested hand. “They’re all right, no need to worry. They likely hear the children in the garden.”

Nate jerked his head toward the garden, where he could see the cluster of playing children. He squinted, finding Leo’s mop of brown hair, and, at the edge of the group, Tess’s golden curls, once again bereft of a ribbon.

A wash of agitation rolled over him.

The men continued strolling up to the manse, paying no mind to the children or dogs. Nate knew he should follow; he needed to uphold his end of the ruse. He willed his boots to turn toward the sloping park leading to the terrace, toward brandy and lunch and the idle carelessness expected of him.

But he couldn't return to the house. Because right now, Nate was back in the carriage, recounting Tess's adamant, panicked cries. *No dogs.*

"Wallace." Nate tried again, jogging a bit now. "Call your hounds. Please."

Wallace frowned at the second interruption.

"The dogs are harmless, Travers. They only want to see the children, it's no matter—"

Logically, Nate understood this. The rational part of his brain demanded he let this go, that he refrain from inserting himself into the children's business. This wasn't his concern. The dogs were well-trained, and Wallace wouldn't let them play with his son if they were a danger.

The hounds let out a joyful bark as a boy opened the iron gate, allowing them to tumble into the garden.

Over the low stone wall, Tess's cloud of flyaway hair popped up. Even from this distance, Nate could see her eyes widen in unease.

And then came her tiny, fearful shout. "No!"

Nate's stomach dropped and took his damned logic with it.

"Travers?" Wallace was staring at Nate's obvious discomfiture.

Any chance of conducting himself with gravitas evaporated. Nothing had ever stirred him to action so quickly as that single, wavering syllable. It was absurd, but somehow, it seemed Nate's ears had been tuned to the exact decibel of Tess's cry.

Her small voice was louder than the children's laughter, louder than the barking dogs.

It was louder than his recalcitrant doubts.

Nate pivoted sharply, rerouting to the garden.

"My little girl is afraid of dogs."

Tess had been promised no dogs, and now dogs there most certainly were. The hounds were gentle as anything, but that, of course, didn't matter. Nor did the confused faces of the assembled men, staring in bewilderment as Nate tore off to the garden.

The only thing that mattered was getting to Tess.

But he was too late.

The dogs had plunged into the knot of children, almost all of whom were delighted by the interruption of their furry visitors.

Except for one very frightened little girl.

“Ah, *damn* it to hell—” Nate momentarily lost sight of Tess as he ducked behind a hedgerow, but he heard her gut-wrenching sob.

Fuck.

He vaulted easily over the low wall closest to her, just in time to see Tess struggling to heave herself onto a bench. Her little legs were scrabbling, trying to get higher, her panic making her slip and cry harder.

Nate winced. Tess's small face was red, her mouth drawn into a tiny maw of anguish. Annie was attempting to placate her, but Tess was weeping in terror, her feet stamping in fright. Her chest heaved, shuddering as she tried, over and over, to get out her few precious words.

“*No...dogs...*”

Seeing her this way, Nate experienced tremendous confusion, his own chest cracking in empathetic dread.

He was afraid for her; he was afraid with her.

It was the bloody worst feeling he'd ever had in his life.

“Tess!” Nate sprinted to her, his heart far outside of his body as he watched her wail in distress. “Tess, it's all right, sweetheart, it's all right...”

At the sound of his voice, she turned, hiccuping, her watery eyes landing on him like a tiny blue beacon: *There you*

are.

“Nate!” Tess cried.

He stopped short, momentarily stunned as she scrambled down from the bench and raced to him, barreling across the garden as fast as her small, brave legs could carry her.

She was coming to him.

He took two long strides, and then he was scooping her up, folding her shaking body inside his arms. She clung to him, curling into a tight little ball, her knees tucked against her own chest even as she wiggled her way into his.

“Shh...shh...Tess...”

Her little hands clutched his coat, her wet face burrowed into his neck. “I don’t like it...”

And Nate understood; Tess was frightened, but not of the dogs. She was frightened of her own fear, of the realization that she could be afraid, that she should be afraid.

He knew the feeling well.

“You’re fine, darling girl, I’ve got you,” Nate murmured, smoothing down her hair. He fervently prayed he was doing this right. “Don’t cry, sweetheart, nothing is going to hurt you...I’ve got you.”

“You’re bigger.” Tess sniffed against him, his cravat now a mess of tears and God knew what else.

“So much bigger,” Nate confirmed. “Bigger than dogs. Bigger than anything in your way, Tess.”

The resolve Nate felt in that instant had nothing to do with the hoax, nothing to do with playing a part, nothing to do with earning his payment from Cora.

Tess had chosen him, and her affinity was both freely given and priceless beyond measure.

My God.

Finally, her loose sobs slowed, her rattling gasps calming under Nate’s broad hand.

As his own racing heart steadied, Nate checked for Leo. But Leo was fine, rubbing one dog's belly and waiting for his turn to give a treat.

Tess pressed her damp cheek against his. Nate tucked one hand between them, finding her little fingers, tightly squeezing twice.

She squeezed back.

“Let's see it, then. Show me the jewels, Lady Swifte.”

Tess leaned back, her tiny hands fiddling with his cravat. Her round sapphire eyes crinkled as her chubby cheeks finally split into a sunbeam.

Crisis averted. Nate shuddered in relief.

He turned with Tess in his arms, meaning to take her back to the house for a few moments. Surely, she would want to see Cora.

And that's when *he* saw Cora, standing on the terrace, staring straight at him and Tess.

Her hand was on her throat, her thumb rubbing over her pearls, her intolerably beautiful face shattered by a strange, stirring emotion.

Nate felt it land deep in his chest, where he recognized it.

July 1819

Barrister's Chambers, Gray's Inn, London

Cora,

I'm preparing to close out this portion of Travers's contract, but I need to verify how he wants his funds deposited. He never indicated an account, and my previous letter to him requesting the information has gone unanswered. I can't imagine the man has chosen to forgo his payment!

Can you please inquire or have him write to me? I don't want to be in breach of contract on top of all the other issues we're facing.

Love from—

Gavin



IT WAS MIDEVENING by the time the family coach deposited Cora and the children at Aldworth Park. Tess and Leo were eager for bed after the afternoon's exertions, and to Cora's immense relief, the Carletons had retired early, taking their reading to their own west-facing, appropriately candlelit guest chambers.

Cora was likewise exhausted. But she was far too restless to sleep.

As planned, Nate had remained behind at the Wallace Estate to see to the new stallion, another task assigned to him due to his reckless streak. It was unnerving to think of him on an unfamiliar horse, on unfamiliar paths. The sun was beginning its descent behind the darkest line of trees and soon it would be too dangerous for him to ride back.

Perhaps he would spend his last night in Berkshire at the Wallace Estate.

Perhaps it was best if he did.

Cora wandered to the drawing room, gloomy in the heavy cloak of dusk. She paused for a moment to light a candle, considering whether she should read or take up her needlepoint. An idle activity to settle her agitated mind.

Something had...happened today, at the shooting party.

She'd been troubled all afternoon, not knowing how to reconcile what she witnessed—Tess finding comfort in Nate's arms. The memory was loose and dangerous, rattling around inside her, too big and heavy to fit in any of Cora's ordered mental drawers.

How many times over the years had she wished her children had a father? Not Dane, aloof and cold. She had wanted a real papa for them, the sort of man who put on silly voices when he read stories, the sort of man who helped build a fairy house for Leo's grasshoppers.

The sort of man who could calm small but very real fears with nothing more than the space between his arms.

Cora halfheartedly considered the novel on her console table, already knowing she wouldn't be able to concentrate. She rotated away, the flare of her candle swinging in an arc to illuminate a gilded picture frame, half-hidden in a shadowed corner of the room.

Ah.

Cora drew near. The candlelight danced along the edge of the painting, gradually bringing something best forgotten to the light.

Her eyes adjusted in the dusky haze as she studied the frame.

It was the first—the only—portrait of Cora and Dane. It had been completed just after her wedding.

Last year, she hadn't known what to do about Dane's portraits; she still didn't know the best course. She certainly didn't want to see him, smug and pretentious, but how was she to explain that to Tess and Leo? In the end, she had decided to send his individual portraits to storage while his old family portraits remained. As did her wedding portrait; she had it moved first to the study, then to the hall, and finally here, in the back of the drawing room.

Somewhere her children could see it.

As much as she wanted to, Cora couldn't erase her husband. She liked to think of Leo and Tess as entirely hers, but she couldn't make that decision for them. It seemed important that her children form their own opinions of Dane, that they were given the chance to choose their father.

She only wished they had a better option.

Cora sighed. Shaking off her turmoil, she distractedly regarded the pianoforte squatting under the portrait. She approached the instrument, absently running her hand over the polished wood before she set her candle down and slowly sat on the narrow bench. Her palm curved instinctively as she brought her right hand to rest on the cool ivory keys. She hadn't played in a long time.

Cora hummed, tracing her finger over B-flat, gently pressing to release a soft, melancholy note.

Impulsively, she lightly tapped out a C-minor scale, the haunting notes hovering in the dim drawing room. She paused, allowing the last dissonance to fade, before playing the opening stanzas of Haydn's Sonata in C minor from memory.

She frowned in concentration, plucking out the melody with her right hand, letting her left hand rest in her lap. Cora never played the bass clef if she could avoid it; she always had trouble with chords.

These days, Cora would prefer to play half a song perfectly than to clumsily fumble with the entirety.

As the partial sonata unfurled, Cora's eyes drifted up to the portrait. The minor key suited, complementing her thoughts.

After all, her marriage had been in a minor key.

She moved into the next stanza, skipping her fingers in the required allegro, but she could feel the heavy adagio section looming.

She held the trepidation in her fingerprints; she held it in her heart.

When Cora had wed Dane, she had been filled with a sense of possibility. She was practical; she was patient. It had been an arranged marriage, and as such, Cora had never expected she would marry *for* love, but she had foolishly assumed she would marry *and* love. Eventually, as they came to know each other, she and her husband would forge a bond of duty, care, and affection.

That young version of herself had been laughably silly, firmly entrenched in her naive habit of mistaking rocks for seeds, thinking she could eke a life out of nothing. She had kept hoping, in those early days, all her tender longing twisting toward her husband like a new shoot searching for the light.

But in the end, all she had found was shadow—a creeping awareness, as certain as the red sun sinking low on the horizon, portending the end of day.

The truth was painfully simple and simply painful. Dane didn't love her, he wouldn't love her, he had no interest in loving her. Cora fulfilled one specific set of aristocratic requirements; his dalliances and mistresses satisfied the others. And she was trapped with him, caught in the web of a cold, lonely marriage.

The disappointment that she herself would never experience the joy of falling in love had changed the entire orchestra of her life.

It was quite the most awful sort of ache.

Once upon a time, Cora had lived her life in C Major.

She wondered if she could find her way back. She sensed it might be too late for her, the path closed off and unattainable.

Nate, most assuredly, lived *his* life in a major key.

“Is something wrong with your left hand?”

There was a sudden shift, a shadow darkening the piano keys. Cora looked up, startled from her reverie.

Nate must have only just returned; he carried with him the warm scent of a damp summer evening. He was still holding his hat.

Cora’s pulse skittered. He’d come here, to the drawing room, straight away. Before doing anything else, he had looked for her.

“There you are,” Cora exclaimed in relief. “I was wondering—”

She stopped, flinching at her forwardness. But she couldn’t help herself. There was a giddy thrill coursing through her. Nate looked astonishingly handsome in the low light.

“You waited up for me?” he teased lightly, but he seemed genuinely pleased as he sank to the chair behind the piano and stretched his legs alongside her tapered bench.

“I...” Cora trailed off, once again recalling the way he had cradled Tess. “I suppose I couldn’t sleep.”

“You’re only playing the treble clef,” Nate noted, motioning to her left hand, still in her lap. His half smile reached for her.

“Oh.” She looked down at the keys, then smiled, embarrassed. “Yes. Well, you see?”

She held up her small hand, splaying her fingers, then lightly rested it on the keys. “I’m rotten at the intervals. I can’t comfortably manage more than a sixth—even that’s a stretch. I find it preferable to focus on the melody.”

Nate shook his head. “You really need to control everything, don’t you? Even Haydn.”

Cora’s mouth curved down.

If Nate had even an inkling of her melancholy thoughts about Dane, he would understand why she felt the compulsion to take charge when she was able.

Even if it was nothing but a sonata.

“Here.” Nate stood and motioned for Cora to slide the bench over. “Budge up, make some room.”

Cora’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Budge up? Do you forget yourself, Nathaniel Travers? I’m a lady. Does this look like a table at the Finish to you?”

Nate rolled his eyes and waved his hand. “Go on, slide down.”

Cora hesitated, but her curiosity won and she slid her bench to the right. Nate easily swung his own chair around, squashing it next to Cora in front of the piano.

He eyed the setup. “Hmm. You’ll need to push the bench a bit further, love.”

Nate bent and grasped the wooden seat, his hands on either side of her hips. His chin brushed her shoulder, and Cora bit her lip as his warm breath found the curve of her neck. A loose lock of her hair shifted under the wave of his exhale.

She closed her eyes. A tremor licked along her fingers where they pressed against the inflexible piano keys.

Slowly—surely more slowly than necessary—Nate slid her bench slightly to the side. Cora stared as he eased into his own chair, close enough their elbows knocked.

Nate adjusted his legs—his knees nearly bumped the back of the pianoforte—and positioned his left hand. He was pressed flush against her, and it should have felt crowded.

And yet, all Cora could think about were the parts of them that *weren’t* touching: her left hand lay in her lap; Nate’s right hand was on his knee.

They were mere inches apart.

“All right, then.” He nodded seriously. “You play the right hand, I’ll play the left.”

Cora erupted in a startled laugh. “You can’t be serious?”

Nate shrugged, his right shoulder dragging along Cora’s bare arm, leaving a ripple of gooseflesh in its wake. Cora tingled, wondering how his skin would feel along hers without his coat between them.

But she had more preposterous notions to deal with at the moment. “What...you play Haydn?”

Nate grinned. “My sister-in-law, Rosalie, is a most accomplished pianist. She taught us—Tabby and me—when we were small. She said it was the only time I would sit still.”

Cora was temporarily bewildered by the opposing yet equally disconcerting notions of a tiny rumped Nate, fidgeting at the piano, and the current indecent width of his hand on the keys.

He would certainly have no problem managing the chords.

“Well, this I have to see.”

They started playing together, much too slowly. Cora was watching Nate’s hand, not her own.

His linen sleeve rubbed against her elbow, the same spot where his thumb had traced her skin at the pond. His woody scent, more pronounced at this proximity, hung thick in the air around her, bringing the outside in.

Cora was so tense, she felt she might snap. Everything in her periphery, everything at her core, was suddenly *Nate*.

His fingers moved haltingly, as though trying to remember something by touch alone. The effect was somehow more beautiful in its awkwardness—masculine and endearing—and Cora wished she could place her hand over his, as he had done for her on his very first night. *Let me help you too.*

With a start, she realized Nate was trying not to chuckle, and it brought her back to herself. Just in time to fully absorb

how terribly they were butchering this piece.

A crash of dissonance, Nate's fingers fumbling, Cora tripping over the E-flat.

"Keep up, we're well past that bit." Cora nudged his arm.

"You could slow down, you know." Nate cheerfully banged out a minor seventh that was nowhere in the vicinity of correct.

Cora smirked. "If I went any slower, we'd be playing backward."

"Fine, I'll speed up then." Nate eyed her sideways as he danced his fingers in some sort of misguided attempt at a glissando.

"Your sister-in-law is a saint," Cora mused, her eyes glued to his hand in a decidedly unsaintly manner.

Nate knocked her shoulder, a smile curling his lips in a perilously distracting way.

"I thought we were partners?"

"I'm not so sure we *should* be." Cora was torn between laughter and an altogether different sort of pleasure.

They forged on, but at the utter cacophony emanating from their efforts, Haydn was surely rolling over in his grave—not to save his music, but to cover the remains of his decaying ears.

Cora was unable to hide her snort of hilarity. "My God. We've killed Haydn. Again."

Nate looked at Cora in surprise. He was at least two stanzas behind and possibly playing in B major.

"Are we meant to be playing Haydn?"

"Nate!" Cora laughed in earnest. "I asked you—"

"I thought it was up for interpretation."

"You said you could play," Cora teased, losing the melody entirely.

“Oh no. I’m terrible.” Nate grinned, vindicated. “But you looked so glum.”

“And now?”

His smile was a reflection. “And now...you don’t.”

He was right; her somber mood had lifted to something far more complicated. Nate was looking at her carefully. The candlelight half hid his face.

“Was...” He hesitated, his mouth twisting. “That is...what were you thinking? When I came in?”

She was silent.

“Ah, never mind. You don’t have to tell me. It’s not my business.”

He fiddled with his cuff link; she had noticed he always loosened them when he felt uncomfortable.

The suspicion that the unflappable Nate was *nervous* turned Cora starkly brave.

“My husband.” Her words surprised them both. “I was thinking about my husband. After what happened today.” She sighed. “With you and Tess.”

Nate looked up sharply, following Cora’s gaze to her shadowed wedding portrait. He was silent, staring at the face of Frederick Dane.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you think of him,” Nate said softly.

His profile was unreadable in the flickering light. Cora fought the urge to pull his chin around, away from the painting.

They were both quiet for a beat, and then he turned to her. “To be honest, Cora, I don’t really know anything of your marriage. Not that I need to,” he corrected hastily. “I rather have the gist of it, I think. But...”

“I always think of him,” Cora whispered.

She moved her hand over the keys, playing the song without pressing down; a fidgety sort of muscle memory.

“Not because of *him*, though.” She worried her lip, thinking it over. “Because of *me*. Something will happen, and I’ll wonder, how would I have felt about this before? Did he change me? Am I the same? I don’t want to be different because of him. But I think I am.”

Nate seemed to sway closer, his right hand flexing where it lay on his thigh between them.

Cora inhaled slowly. She had cracked open a window when she first came home; the evening breeze was wonderfully restorative.

“My husband and I...had very different ideas of what a happy marriage entailed,” she murmured. “Dane wanted a *proper* wife, you see. I wanted an *improper* husband.”

She laughed shakily. It was marvelously liberating to say the words aloud. She wasn’t used to verbalizing what she wanted. She wasn’t used to anyone listening when she did.

“I wanted a life that was loud and hungry and busy with love. Dane wanted a life that was tidy and separate and quiet. I thought it was a given that two people could grow together. That love, when yearned for, is always around the corner, waiting to be found.”

Cora met Nate’s stare, his eyes absorbing her.

“But it wasn’t.”

She paused, looking down. She could feel, nearer than Nate’s solid presence, the ghost of herself at eighteen years old.

“The lesson first made me small, then lonely, then hard. It’s easier, now, to just...keep it that way. But then, sometimes, I’ll remember what I missed. I have two children, yes, but I’ve never even had a proper kiss. The kind where you’re more nervous it *won’t* happen than you are that it *will*.”

Nate’s hand twitched again. Cora was afraid to look at him. She was cracking open; a truth long-buried was worming

its way free.

“Countless times I’ve told myself Tess and Leo are enough for me. But that’s not wholly true, Nate.” She heaved a shuddery sigh. “The whole truth is they are nearly enough for me. *Nearly.*”

She chanced a peek at him, and even in the dim light, she could see his face was cloaked.

“I wish...I didn’t remember wanting a different sort of life,” she finished quietly.

“Cora...”

Nate’s voice was low, coming from somewhere deep and primal in his chest, calling to somewhere deep and primal in hers. The night air hung so close between them, Cora resented how it pressed where she couldn’t.

She suddenly didn’t trust herself and scooted to the outer edge of her bench. She had never appreciated quite how narrow it was. That is, until a muscled man was wedged against her.

It seemed critically important she shift this new, dangerous energy between them.

“Well.” Cora gestured to the piano, laughing lightly in an attempt to break the tension. “We certainly didn’t improve upon my efforts at the song. I suppose I had the right idea, after all. No use mucking up the melody.”

“It was something...” Nate murmured, his words strangely hoarse. “It was something entirely of our own making.”

“It was objectively terrible.”

“At least we tried.” There was an edge to his normally casual tone. “You can’t play a sonata with only one hand, Cora. As much as you’d like to. The song requires *both* parts. You do know that, don’t you?”

“Of course I know that.” She slipped further down the bench, her bottom half-off now. “And I do try, I’ll have you know. I try...plenty.”

Nate swiveled fully toward her; she could see the faint white scar under his cheekbone. She remembered the long-ago night he'd gotten it and resisted the impulse to follow the jagged line with her fingertip.

“Do you, though? Do you try? Or is that another half truth you tell yourself at night?” Nate’s voice slid through her like the sweet burn of whisky. “Because you could, Cora.”

Her throat tightened. Nate leaned one imperceptible inch closer, a question in the bend of his body. His eyes fell to her lips.

“You could try...right now.”

How easily it would happen. She only needed to tilt her face a fraction. She could all but taste Nate’s mouth. She could feel it in bas-relief on her own.

Cora didn’t have to look at her old portrait, hanging over Nate’s head, to feel the weight of her past. She had thought Dane’s death would liberate her, but every passing day revealed the lie. Cora was her own warden, still restricting herself, still ordering her life to exacting specifications.

For years, she had distilled her essence to her most enduring parts. Her world had shrunk, *but she remained*. And the remaining was a ferocious accomplishment.

No man, ever again, the law of her self-governance. It used to seem a simple, necessary price to pay for her independence.

But her desire was no longer buried.

It was burning. Right here. At her piano.

All at once, Cora desperately, compulsively, needed to know if there was a different melody cobwebbed inside her, waiting for her determined hands to find the bright notes of a major key.

“*We* could try, Cora.” Nate’s voice caught, snagging on the sharp air between them.

He leisurely lifted his fingers to her face. Cora closed her eyes against a crest of longing. Nate rested his thumb against

her cheek, lightly tracing the curve of her cheekbone, his bent knuckles trailing her jaw.

Her heavy eyelids fluttered open to find Nate's eyes had turned to charcoal. He held her gaze as his hand curled gently around her neck.

Slowly, almost reverently, his fingers threaded through the loose hair at her nape. She felt a coo swell in her chest. The tenderness in his touch was an inordinate luxury.

But it wasn't enough.

In a rush of unbelievable daring, her hand jerked forward to grasp the lapel of Nate's coat. She was so close, she could hear his jaw click.

"Tell me, love." His voice was so soft she could have imagined it. He brought his mouth right against her forehead, brushing the words on her skin. "It's on your word, but you have to *tell* me, Cora."

The thundering awareness that he was waiting for her—that if anything progressed between them, it would be because of her own choices—set Cora aflame.

"Yes." The barest exhale and still the loudest word she'd ever spoken. "Yes—"

"Thank God," Nate rasped, the word falling into her breathless mouth.

His lips brushed hers so lightly, she nearly wept. Her shaking hands twisted harder into his waistcoat, as if bracing herself for what she sensed would come.

Nate brought his other hand to her face, steadying her in the gentle cradle of his fingers.

Their lips were touching, but only just. Nate shifted, lightly nudging Cora's bottom lip once. Then again, as though savoring her edges, his tongue learning the seam of her mouth. Then *again*, pressing harder, and Cora realized he was still asking her.

A proper kiss.

She parted her lips, and on his next sweep, she met him in her own tentative answer.

Nate groaned, immediately responding to her. And there was nothing hesitant about the way he slanted his mouth, fitting it over hers in a staggering, satisfying puzzle.

Cora sank against him, gasping at the keening recognition tearing through her.

This—*this* was what she'd been waiting for.

All of this time.

His mouth slid over hers, insistent and accepting. Time seemed to slow as Nate deepened the kiss, his lips opening her lips, his tongue touching her tongue. A sigh, a groan. Her? Him? Cora couldn't tell.

Nate kissed her unhurriedly, dipping against her over and over, relentless and aimless, with no purpose other than to absorb the pleasure of her mouth. One of his large hands still held her cheek, the other gently fisted her hair. Cora's lips stung; she felt vaguely drugged and yet fully conscious, sharply aware of his heartbeat under her palm, of his little finger stroking the back of her neck.

His mouth left hers to trace her jaw, her throat, his lips offering the shadow of promise everywhere they touched. His tongue dipped beneath the weight of her pearl necklace, and Cora arched against him, every nerve seeking out the solidness of his body.

"Yes," she mumbled hazily, and he rumbled his agreement.

Yes, yes, yes.

An ache bloomed low in her belly, called forth by Nate's intoxicating onslaught. She resolutely clutched his shoulders, pulling him closer, a terrible urgency overtaking her.

But as Cora quickened, Nate slowed. His mouth dragged against hers as his hands left her hair, once more framing her face.

"Cora..."

He pressed his forehead to hers.

One soft kiss, another, and then he was pulling away, his hands sliding to her shoulders, down her arms, until he was holding her hands.

“Nate?”

Nate grinned, easy and relaxed. He looked like he’d just awakened from a sun-dappled afternoon nap.

Cora, meanwhile, felt as though a carriage had run her over. She stared at him, dazed. “What are you...”

He raised her fingers, gently kissing each knuckle. Her mouth coveted every kiss that landed on her hand.

“I’m simply bidding you goodnight,” he murmured, smiling crookedly. “Maybe you can sleep now.”

“But—” Before Cora could comprehend what was happening, Nate was at the drawing-room door.

“Sweet dreams, love.”

And he was gone.

July 1819

Fordham House, London

Nathaniel,

I won't pretend to understand the full extent of your decisions, but in my nearly five decades of life, I have learned when an apology is warranted. Your recent impassioned letter admittedly took me by surprise. I hadn't the first idea you had been corresponding with Lady Dane all year, and certainly, I had no inkling your relationship had progressed beyond friendship.

So first, my most sincere regrets for making light of your situation. I didn't think this day would come, and in doing so, I almost missed it.

And second, my most sincere felicitations on your upcoming nuptials to the viscountess. This is wholly unexpected but decidedly welcome news.

I request you return to London as soon as possible so you and I may come to a new financial agreement. If you are of the mind to marry, I need to ensure you have the resources you require.

Your Brother,

Fordham



NATE'S BROW furrowed as he read Raymond's letter, then, in deepening confusion, read it again. He rubbed his hand over his early morning beard, feeling vaguely afflicted.

Here it was, his brother's response to the letter Nate had sent before the strawberry festival. In the blur of the last few days—in the blur of last night—Nate had forgotten about Raymond altogether.

He frowned at the letter. For starters, Nate wouldn't have called his own missive to Raymond *impassioned*. Nate had merely tried to be convincing, penning an explanation for his engagement his brother might find sufficient. Granted, he couldn't remember his exact words, but they certainly hadn't been impassioned.

And second...it had worked?

"Sir? Is something amiss?" Barnes was readying a basin and shaving tackle with practiced efficiency.

Nate watched his valet's nimble fingers take the strop to the razor. In spite of the blade in his hands, Barnes had his eyes on Nate.

"No." Nate frowned. "Things are eerily....not amiss."

"Yes," Barnes said lightly, pouring hot water from a pitcher. "Well, that clears things up."

Nate tossed the letter on the bowfront bedside chest and took his place in front of the table where Barnes held a hand mirror for him.

"It's just..." Nate paused, lathering soft soap over his face. "The earl seems to be...pleased with me."

Nate met his valet's eye over the mirror. In appearance, Barnes was Nate's opposite—his eyes were so deeply brown, they were nearly black in the burnished russet of his cheek, but Barnes's expression was a keener mirror than the one in his hand.

"And that's a *bad* thing, sir?"

Nate dragged the razor over his cheek, thinking over his brother's words. *I didn't think this day would come...wholly unexpected....sincere apology...*

In that letter was the Earl of Fordham so beloved by the *ton*. All the generosity, all the warmth, finally directed at Nate.

A promise of financial security and a pat on the back, besides. The entire point of this arrangement with Cora, fully realized.

Nate should be crowing from the rooftops; this ruse had proven wildly successful, at least where his interests were concerned.

Instead, he felt oddly dejected.

In the spring, Nate had been attempting a real effort when he made that rail investment, but his brother had been so doubtful, he had turned over every proverbial stone, looking for criticism. Now Nate only had to write a pseudo-heartfelt letter, and Raymond was treating him like the bloody prodigal son?

This was only because Raymond thought Nate was getting married. His brother wasn't taking *Nate* seriously; he was taking *Lady Dane's betrothed* seriously. He was simply relieved Nate was finally falling in line, no longer a risk to the family's good name.

It had nothing to do with Nate himself.

He looked down, avoiding his own wary gaze, instead focusing on the stripe his razor cut through the lather.

"Sir?" Barnes tilted the mirror.

Nate sighed, giving reluctant voice to his internal doubt.

"It's not a bad thing, per se. I only mean...it might be nice for my brother to be this welcoming based on my own merits. As opposed to trickery."

"Ah," Barnes hummed. "I see." There was a pause. "And you suppose you *are*, sir?"

Nate cocked his head. He looked like an unhinged Father Christmas, white soap covering the bottom half of his face.

"Do I suppose I am what?"

"Tricking your brother, sir?"

Nate cleared his throat uncomfortably, dipping his razor in the basin. Under Cora's strict guidelines, he had never explained to Barnes the full extent of the betrothal ruse,

though his valet *had* to know Nate hadn't really been courting Cora this year. There wasn't a coming or going Barnes wasn't privy to.

"Come now, Barnes," Nate murmured, starting on his left cheek. "You must know I'm not truly engaged to Lady Dane."

Nate's stomach clenched as he tried not to think of his ring on Cora's slender, non-chord playing finger.

Barnes was quiet for a long moment. "Sir, may I speak plainly?"

Nate lowered his razor, intrigued. "I'd be offended if you didn't."

"Mr. Travers, not once, in all the time I've known you, has the prospect of trickery given you pause."

Nate bent over the basin, rinsing the lather away with a splash of warm water.

"Nor, sir, have you ever been quite so attentive to your grooming. Nor risen so early in the morning. Nor been in better spirits."

Nate braced both arms on the table, leveling a glare at Barnes as he handed him a towel.

"For someone proclaiming to speak plainly, Barnes, you sure managed to muddle it."

"I am merely stating my observations, sir. As your valet."

"And have you drawn any conclusions from said observations?"

Barnes began to clean the razor. "We are to depart for London tonight, sir, and you haven't mentioned it once. Not packing, not preparations, not your schedule for when you return."

"And that's supposed to be a conclusion?"

Barnes eyed him shrewdly, handing over a glass vial of lotion. "Isn't it?"

Nate smoothed the cream over his cheeks, inhaling in surprise as the unexpected scent all but carried Cora into the room. He almost turned around to look for her. Nate stared at the lotion, sniffing again.

It was the very mystery aroma that had been turning him mad.

“Barnes, did you—?”

“Fever grass,” Barnes said casually, folding Nate’s towel. “Lady Dane had some in her garden. It’s good for the skin. My mother used to grow it in Jamaica.”

Nate inhaled again, his eyes widening in recognition. “It smells like...”

He watched the corner of Barnes’s mouth lift.

“You know it best as lemongrass, sir.”

Nate groaned.

Rosemary and lemongrass.

“Thank you, Barnes,” he muttered. “That will be all, for now.”

Barnes nodded, hefting the basin and taking his leave.

Nate distractedly rubbed his thumb over his now-smooth jaw. His room was alarmingly suffused with the scent of his soap, joined by a lingering aroma he’d previously associated only with Cora.

As if he needed further reminders of her.

All night, feverish memories had woven through his sleep, returning to him the sacred tenacity of Cora’s searching mouth. By dawn, he was fully aware that the moment he kissed her, his life had fractured into two parts.

He couldn’t go back; he didn’t want to.

Yesterday, Cora had finally cracked open her veneer, like a geode splitting to reveal a glorious crystal. And what Nate found inside her was unspeakably lovely and singular and

sharp. Cora's interior was infinitely priceless. He couldn't believe she had entrusted him with it.

He also couldn't believe he had managed to refrain from striding to the family cemetery and rattling Frederick Dane's rotting bones. What an egregious, asinine oversight—to have Cora, to have Tess and Leo, and to disregard them entirely.

Imagine, not understanding the worth of this family. A mistake Nate had very nearly made himself.

With a terrible jolt, he realized none of this actually mattered. As of today, his contract was finished. Not, of course, that the contract signified now.

Nate would rather be impoverished than accept payment from Cora for whatever the hell had transpired between them. He could hardly remember the man who had considered refusing to help her, necessitating the payment in the first place. Nate felt like an entirely new person.

His eyes slid guardedly toward Raymond's discarded letter.

I didn't think this day would come...

Nate couldn't argue that so far in his life, he had done the bare minimum to be respectable. He was stagnant, stunted. That's all anyone expected him to be. And frankly, he was tired of pretending it was water off a duck's back. In the eyes of his brother, Nate was nothing more than a lost cause.

But Raymond's weren't the only eyes that mattered.

For the rest of his life, in his lowest moments, Nate would recall Tess running to him. She had seen something in him, something worthy. And he didn't think it was preposterous to suppose Cora might have seen it too.

He stood, frustrated and undecided. Raymond wanted him to return to London to discuss the future. But Nate wasn't so sure his future was in Town, after all. He was still aimless, uncertain about what he was doing and what was next for him. But now he knew he could make a stormy Cora smile.

And that was far from nothing.

Raymond might not know it, but here at Aldworth Park, things were different. *Nate* was different. He could step up when needed; he could *be* needed in the first place.

And it felt damn good.

There was an unsteady resolve building inside of him. He was supposed to leave tonight. Those had been his own foolish terms; he was the one who had made such a stupid stink about the Monmouth Ball.

But Nate had never minded breaking the rules.

Even his own.

HE NEEDED to speak with Cora, but he didn't know what to say. Nate wasn't good at overthinking. He had no patience for contemplation. All he knew was that a tide was coming in, altering the terrain beneath his feet.

He wondered if Cora, too, stood on changeable ground.

Her maid informed him Cora had gone for an early morning ride, so Nate made his way to the stables. Judging by the squat, gathering clouds, he wouldn't have much time before the rain showers moved in.

He reached the stable-yard and paused, unsure whether he should wait by the stalls or near the copse of trees behind the coach house. In spite of the threatening storm, he wanted to find Cora outdoors, away from the Carletons, away from the children.

“Oh blast it...”

Speaking of storms.

There she was—the object of his nocturnal notions and his morning musings—exiting the stables and swearing under her breath as she wrestled with her dark brown riding habit.

For one selfish second, Nate watched her, tangled and beautiful, but then she nearly tripped over herself.

So much for being a hero.

“Here, love, careful now.” Nate strode forward, catching her elbow and halting her sideways progress. “And good morning.”

His face split with genuine levity. Nate had mastered smiles of all persuasions—charming, daring, wicked. But an earnest smile was still a rarity for him.

At least, it used to be.

“Nate!” Cora blushed, her gaze nervously roving his face. Her mouth ensnared his focus, forcibly recalling how she had tasted, citrusy and sweet. Now he wanted not so much to talk to Cora as he wanted to lift her against the stable and kiss her until his own lips chapped from the drag of her mouth.

“Um...hello,” she finished distractedly, finally managing to unwrap herself from her heavy riding cloak. She absently touched her lips, and Nate feverishly hoped she was sharing his jarring recollection.

Underneath her cloak, Cora was wearing a pale yellow dress with some sort of fluttering sleeves that left the expanse of her arms bare. Her color was high, and she was slightly breathless and extremely tousled.

She looked like morning.

She also had a sprig of leaves sticking out of her hair.

“Are you going for a ride?” Nate asked pointlessly. He felt addled, and he didn’t even care.

She gestured to her discarded habit. “Just finished.”

“Walk with me,” Nate said impulsively.

Cora’s face was pained. She wavered, chewing her lip.

“All right,” she agreed, to his relief and surprise. “But not for long. It’s going to rain.”

Nate led her along the path winding through the trees behind the stables. He imagined taking her hand, but she clutched her skirts, her knuckles tense.

“Did you sleep well?” Nate adjusted his gait to match hers.

“I...no. I didn’t, actually,” Cora said, her voice hoarse as she studied the ground.

“Too much on your mind?”

“I typically sleep terribly,” she admitted, grimacing slightly. “I loathe nighttime, you know.”

“You do?”

It was suddenly imperative to learn Cora’s habits, to know when he rolled over to check his pocket watch in the middle of the night what she might be doing in her own bed, in a sheer white nightgown.

She kicked a rock.

“Sleep is not kind to me.”

He held a low-hanging branch out of her way, and she glanced up at him.

“Do you sleep well?” Her cheeks stained, as though she was unable to stop herself from asking. “That is usually? And...last night?”

“I had a marvelously restorative night,” Nate fibbed, slowing his steps as he turned to face her. “I was blessed with the sweetest of dreams.”

He leaned against a chestnut tree, suggestively lifting his eyebrow. He knew he was meant to be discussing his newfound hesitance to depart Aldworth Park, but he couldn’t help himself. He never could with her.

Cora frowned.

“Well, I don’t suppose you should get used to it,” she said slowly, crossing her arms and studying the tree behind him. “It won’t be happening again, you see.”

He tilted his head. It was hard to take her seriously with the twig in her hair. “Is that so?”

“You’re...you’re leaving tonight.” A small crease burrowed between her lovely wide eyes. “And I have the Monmouth Ball. Besides, we shouldn’t have...allowed

ourselves to be swept away. It was a terrible risk—the Carletons were upstairs.”

“Hold, love,” he said, catching her flailing wrist and drawing her closer. “Just...”

Nate lifted his hand to her hair. He lightly cupped her shoulder as his fingers worked to untangle the leaf.

“Just?” Cora prompted, staring up at him.

“Just a leaf.” Nate pulled it free and dangled it in front of her. He gently smoothed back the curl of hair that had come loose with the twig.

A very small sound escaped Cora’s throat. Her gaze flicked to the leaf, then back to his eyes.

“I couldn’t let you chastise me while looking like a deranged woodland nymph.” He grinned, lazily spinning the leaf. “Carry on.”

“We made a mistake, Nate.”

At the sudden, jagged sting, his teasing smile retreated.

“Point of correction.” He directed the twig at her. “We did not make a mistake. Or at least, *I* didn’t.”

Cora stepped back, almost bumping into the tree behind her.

Nate straightened, his stare growing heated. “You told me you never had a proper kiss. I wanted to give you one. I would like to give you another one, and yet another after that...kisses of all manner, proper *and* improper. I won’t discriminate.”

Cora was staring at his mouth.

“We can’t, Nate. And...and the ruse is concluded now, anyway.”

She tilted her head, her eyes filled with agonized longing. And that’s when he understood: Cora had *no bloody clue* how to want something for herself. She would exhaust every opportunity to self-sabotage.

But Nate wouldn’t allow her to get in her own way.

He took a step toward her, then another. Her breath grew shallow, but she didn't back away.

"The ruse?" he whispered. "Is that what you're worried about?"

Cora nodded jerkily, her jaw clenching in frustration. "Of course it's the ruse..."

Nate felt a rushing high, scarcely out of reach. She was still holding back, but only just.

He filled the last bit of space between them. Her eyes flickered underneath the smoky curtain of her lashes, wordlessly revealing and beguiling in equal measure. Nate was all at once consumed by need. He wanted her hazel; he wanted her blue. He wanted Cora in both parts and falling apart.

He leaned over her, and she tried to follow. Nate normally experienced a satisfying tug of arousal at their height difference, at the way he always pulled her gaze up along the length of his body. But this time, he met her halfway, ducking his head so Cora only had to lift her eyes.

"Tell me, love, do you truly believe that everything that has passed between us over these last weeks has been solely for the benefit of a *ruse*?"

His fingers returned to the hair at her temple. Her lips parted, and Nate's voice grew husky, his breath grazing her brow.

"Is the desire you feel sliding over your skin, crackling through your veins, and driving you to distraction only meant to fool the Carletons? Or is it meant to fool *you* as well?"

He slid his hands to her shoulders, his thumbs stroking lightly along the ridge of her collarbone. His gaze swept insistently over her face, peeling away the veil of control.

"Because it's not fooling me, Cora."

Her hands found his, still fused to her shoulders. He slowly rotated his forearms, letting her fingers touch his wrists, silently urging her to feel the pounding of his pulse.

"Nate..."

She shook her head, but he followed her, moving in sync. His nose brushed hers, coaxing her back to him, not permitting her to look away. Her hair snagged on the bark of the tree trunk, so close was she to it.

“I know, Cora, I know. You have a plan, and I don’t expect you to deviate. I understand you don’t want any more mistakes.”

His lips hovered just above hers.

“But here I am. Think of it, Cora—both of us, *here*. And I can help you. Let me ease *one* burden for you. You’re aching for me, love. I see it all over you, all day. Let me take it. Please, Cora, put me out of my goddamned misery and let me ease your ache.”

Her eyes closed. She took three staggering breaths, and Nate felt every one of them hit his lungs.

“It...it wasn’t a mistake.”

Nate’s chest constricted.

“What did you say?”

Cora shook her head slowly.

“It wasn’t a mistake, Nate.”

Her hands gripped his, hard.

“Well, actually, it *was*, I suppose,” she mused, opening her worried eyes.

Nate lifted his thumb to the lush curve of her mouth. He wanted to feel her say the words.

“But it’s one I would make again.”

She groaned, her head falling back against the tree as Nate lightly teased his thumb over her bottom lip.

“That is...”

She swallowed, revealing the faintest flutter in the hollow of her throat.

“I would *like* to make it again.”

She nervously brushed back her hair, turning pink.

“I mean...what I’m trying to say is...”

“Cora,” Nate whispered hoarsely, shaking his head in affectionate exasperation. “Please, love. Stop talking.”

And then, mercifully, she was in his arms, finally bloody listening to him.

GONE WAS his tempered restraint from the piano. Nate hauled her against him, away from the tree, his hands starving for her body. The sensation of her muscle and bone, alive under his fingers, turned him mad.

He was unknowable, a man in the abyss, and he wanted to stay there.

He kissed her hard, sucking her bottom lip, seeking entry in an insane wave of longing. He had never felt this frenetic, this completely out of control. Nate wasn’t one to beg, but he heard his own plea and didn’t give a damn.

“Cora...”

Please, love. Want this with me.

Cora gasped, tugging him closer still, her hands seeking purchase along the expanse of his chest. Nate was momentarily drowning in a blood-rush of gratitude and anticipation. Her fingers skimmed along the taut muscles of his neck as she reached for his height, stretching to her tiptoes, as if the tree branches held her by an invisible marionette string.

“My foot.” Cora panted sharply, pulling away from the heat of his kiss. “The arch of my foot is cramping...”

Nate groaned, his hands sliding roughly over her arse to cup the back of her thighs, lifting her. Cora sank her lips against his and moaned, shocked and sweet, her fingers weaving through his tousled hair.

He held her, one arm pinioning her against him, his free hand scorching a path from the swell of her breast to the curve

of her bottom, the thin fabric of her dress denying his heat but accepting his friction.

He could feel her skin, too far from his bereft fingertips, and he took her skirts in hand, using the fabric as an extension of his own touch, dragging it along her thighs, her back.

Nate was lost to the manic, combustible sensation of her tongue, her teeth, her lips. He stepped forward blindly, needing more, *more*.

At the last moment, he realized he was about to slam her into the rough bark of the tree, and he rotated, spinning them so it was his own back that fell against the unyielding trunk, his jacket snagging as his shoulders took the brunt of their passion.

“Are you all right?” Cora cried, pulling away. Nate only drew her tighter against him, his fingers splayed in her hair.

“Come here,” he panted. “Come here, stay here.”

On and on it went. Cora melted against where he was growing hard, her body accepting the increasing evidence of his arousal. Her hands slid down his chest to his hips, holding them against her own.

Her skirt had hitched, his thigh between hers; Nate became gradually conscious she was moving against his leg—she was *riding* it. The thought was so filthy and delicious that he grunted, his desire tightening, his need growing acute.

He was suddenly aware her hair was wet under his fingertips.

“Cora...*Cora*...we have to stop...” He cupped her bottom, holding her still on his leg.

“No.” She pushed him harder into the tree, the rough bark biting into her palms.

“It’s raining, love.”

Sure enough, a fine spray was making its way through the leaves, the mist curling Cora’s hair. Nate’s mouth chased a raindrop down her throat, his fingers digging into the curve of her arse as he pulled her tighter against him.

“The hunting box,” Cora rasped. “The one...you were meant to be staying in. It’s that way...”

Nate shrugged out of his coat, holding it over her head. It wasn’t raining hard, but thunder rumbled in the distance. Cora wrapped herself in his garment, tugging him away from the tree, toward the cottage.

Nate didn’t budge. He laced his fingers with hers, pulling her back.

“You’re certain, Cora? This is what you want?”

He was barely hanging on, his head as dense with lust as the heaving clouds seeking their own release. He feared he wasn’t far behind.

But he had to be sure—absolutely sure—because if he got her in that cottage, they were both done for.

Cora tilted her face up to the rain. She started laughing, incredulous, her flushed cheeks lifting into a smile that changed the color of her eyes.

“Yes. Yes...yes, I’m certain.”

A crack of thunder, closer. The misty drizzle concentrated, the drops coming harder, faster. The sky was dark through the wide canopy of leaves above them.

Nate pulled her back to him, kissing her hard. Cora tasted like herself, like the earth, like the sky. He wanted to stay, for one moment, right here, where she was mad enough to let him embrace her in the quickening deluge.

Her hands came to his face, diverting a rivulet of rain from his cheek to her knuckles. Thunder rumbled close and low, as if it came from the trees, as if it came from his chest.

“Let’s go,” Nate groaned.

The sky opened, and Cora shrieked, grabbing his hand as she started running, slipping and sliding through the rain, the two of them breathless and laughing, from one storm to another.

July 1819

Aldworth Park, Berkshire

My darling Tess,

You won't read this for many years, but I needed to write now, while the revelation is painfully fresh. You see, there are things a young woman should know about her mother. It's unfair for you to spend your life ignorant of the truth about me.

And the truth is...I've been a coward, Tess.

When I became a mother, I made a vow: I'd give you, I'd give your brother, a life of more. But how can I? How can I impart the only essential lesson, when I have resigned myself to a life of less?

When you were born, I felt the most exquisite pain of my life. A daughter. The ripest joy; the most rancid burden. A girl, to share the shape of my life; a girl, to learn my lessons.

So here's the real lesson, darling, the one I'm still trying to learn:

You have to be brave.

Both of us have to be brave.



THE SKY CLEAVED in a stuttering curtain of rain. Cora couldn't think as she sprinted to the hunting box. Sheltered within the cave of Nate's coat, she couldn't do anything except put one rushing foot in front of the other. Nate was at her heels, dodging puddles and tree roots as his fingers snaked through hers.

“And to think I was worried about a damn leaf in your hair.”

Cora started laughing again; this entire sequence felt impossible, like some fantastical version of a life she hadn't lived. Nevertheless, Nate kept her anchored to reality—his fingernails biting into her knuckles, his awkward half steps as he synchronized his stride to hers, the weight of his hand at the small of her back.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

Around the silvered bark of a copse of beech trees was her hunting lodge. One skidding moment later, Nate and Cora were at the door.

“The key, Mr. Watts keeps it behind that loose brick.”

Nate raised her hand, kissing a circumference around her wrist as he tugged the brick aside.

“Truly? With your groundskeeper's careful attention to security, I have to say, I'm rather glad I ended up at the main estate.”

The door swung open, and they tumbled inside, the sonorous crescendo of the rising storm muted in the tidy interior of the cottage. Cora had one glimpse—the brick hearth, the cheery lemon curtains, the sturdy parlor chairs. And there, through an adjoining doorway, an inviting, four-poster bed.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

“Cora...”

The heavy desire in Nate's voice corresponded to the pulse beating fast in her throat and slow between her thighs. In a single pace, he was upon her. Cora forgot the wet of her dress and the bedraggled mess of her hair as she dropped Nate's coat from around her shoulders.

She reached for him, fisting his sopping shirtsleeve, staggering at the expression on his face. Nate's eyes were as dark as the stormy sky, unblinking even as water droplets pooled from his hair to run down his brow.

Nothing about him was relaxed; gone was his wicked teasing, his devious fun. Nate was shockingly serious, and all of that somber concentration was aimed at her.

Cora wordlessly pulled him toward the bedroom, pausing in the doorway as she pitched under a wondrous wave of anticipation. She had always done what she was supposed to do. She had always made herself want what she was supposed to want.

But no more.

Last night at her piano, Nate had unearthed a thorn so deeply buried, she had forgotten it was there, her skin having learned how to close over and contain the ache. For weeks now, he had loosened the nettle, gently working it free, until Cora finally expelled it, handing it over to him.

This is who I am; this is why I am.

And it was a blessed, beautiful, impermanent relief.

Cora wanted one thing for herself.

This one thing, this one time. Before Nate left, before he returned to London, before she resumed the rest of her life alone.

She turned toward him, her chilled, damp skin chasing his heat. Nate bent to her, and she brought her fingertips to his cheek, sliding all the way up to his wet hair. For a clutch of heartbeats, they were silent, and the silence was profound. Their days together were peppered with words, defined by teasing, marked by endless articulation.

But no words could articulate what hung between them now.

“Just once,” she finally managed, her voice bruised from longing. “One time, before you go. I need to know...”

“Tell me exactly what you want.” He pressed the words to her ear as he gripped her hips. “I can have you any way you want me. As many ways as you want me.”

His kiss ghosted over her brow, to her cheek, along her jaw, back to her closed, burning eyes. When he came to her

mouth, she could taste the salt of her own yearning.

“Slow,” she sighed, leaving the syllable on his lips.

“What’s that, love?”

“Slow,” Cora repeated. “Make it *slow*, Nate. I want to remember this.”

His laugh was as soft as the misting summer rain. “Cora.” Nate’s eyes flickered; his hand tensed against her hip. “You beautiful, infuriating woman. What part of you thinks, even for a moment, that I’d be damned enough to take you in haste?”

And then he tilted her face to his, claiming her lips in an ardent, insistent kiss. His thumb stroked her jaw until she was slack, her mouth open and soft, her tongue curling against his in rising need.

“*Oh...*”

Nate kissed her with his whole body. He kissed her as if he would consume her, as if he would take her apart and put her back together, rearranging the pliable, molten parts of her to ache in a way he alone could fill.

“Mmm.” His exhale was part sigh, part complaint. Nate, both satisfied and wanting, all because of her. “You taste...like rain.”

“Oh,” Cora woozily repeated, because it was the only word she seemed to remember.

Nate turned her, pulling her back to his front, leisurely sucking the water still beading the back of her neck. His fingers massaged into her tightly pinned hair, deliberately pulling free each hairpin.

Cora shuddered in luxurious relief as her wet, heavy tresses tumbled loose, his hands coiling and fisting the damp strands.

“Are you cold?”

“No.” Cora would never be cold again.

“You’re shivering...”

“Not from cold,” she muttered, pushing her bottom against him, blindly seeking the pleasure of his solid weight against her back. “Please, Nate...”

“You said *slowly*,” he breathed, his hands halting the searching friction of her hips even as his grin seared the damp skin at the juncture of her shoulder. “You wanted me to take my time.”

“I didn’t expect you to listen,” Cora whined, shifting against him.

“Please, Cora.” His voice was abruptly ragged against her ear. “Please don’t make me rush this. Because I will. If you ask me to, I *will*. I’ll have you over this bed, against the wardrobe, undone before I take off your dress.”

His words fell, hushed and halting.

“But don’t ask me, Cora. I want to remember this too.”

Nate skimmed his palms up her sides, cupping her breasts through the sodden, clinging fabric of her bodice.

Cora’s legs shook where they pressed to his thighs. Her protest sank into a groan, her head falling back against his chest.

His fingers searched the back of her gown, and it was sinful how slowly he freed each button, working patiently against the rain-stiffened muslin, methodically tugging each loop free.

Lower and lower—first her buttons, then the laces of her half stays, and finally, the ties of her shift.

“Did you know”—his lips traced along her shoulder blade until she shivered from the warm pressure of his tongue—“you have freckles, dusted just...here?”

“Ah...*no*,” Cora managed, her breathing uneven. “I’ve never thought about it...”

“I’ll think of nothing else,” he grunted darkly, and Cora’s vision dimmed.

Nate cradled her trembling ribs in his hands, unspooling her inch by inch. The pads of his fingers seared her from the inside out as he shed her wet garments, her clammy skin prickling in the musty air of the cottage even as his heated mouth languidly greeted each newly exposed inch of her spine.

“*Nate...*” She wasn’t even sure what she was asking for, but it was a wonder to say his name, a reminder this was real; she was with him, burning under the onslaught of his hands.

“Say my name again.” His voice fell roughly as he dropped to his knees. “And this time, hold the bedpost.”

Cora whimpered as Nate knelt behind her, tossing aside her half stays and tugging her gown and shift to the floor. His hands brushed the bare, sensitive skin of her waist before sliding to her stomach and retracing their path to her aching breasts, this time finding her nipples and drawing them to peaks.

“So goddamn responsive.” His voice was hoarse against her spine. “You’re flushing before I even touch you. You’re a dream, darling.”

He cradled the slight weight of her breasts, her skin tingling as he pebbled her nipples between his fingers, steadily kneading in question until her legs opened in reply.

Nate dropped his right hand to her leg, running his wide, warm palm over her stocking to the top of her muddy riding boot. He ducked his head, kissing in an open-mouthed path over the curve of her bottom, down the back of her thigh. Lightning flashed at the same moment he teasingly dipped his tongue below the edge of her stocking.

“Good God, Nate!”

“*Hold the bedpost, Cora,*” he repeated, and she half turned. Through the curtain of her hair, she could see him breathing hard.

He lifted his head and Cora sizzled. His gray eyes were dark with something wild and unready.

Nate was a man undone.

And the knowledge that he, too, was this affected sent Cora surging with desire.

His hand slid along her bare back, firmly bending her, opening her, and Cora stifled a cry. Her arms fell forward in careless obedience, securing herself to the bedpost with white-knuckled expectancy.

But Nate had grown still. For a weightless moment, he didn't move.

“What...are you doing?” Cora asked thickly.

He laughed, the sound cracking strangely in his chest.

“Nate? Are you well?”

“I'm thinking of my future self.” His voice was so deep she could hardly recognize it.

“What?”

“My future self.” He slowly untied her garter. “The lucky bastard who can return to this moment, whenever he likes. Holding in his mind's eye, you, half undone, in only your riding boots.”

He sucked back a groan.

“So no, love. I'm not well.”

Still kneeling behind her, Nate slowly lifted her right leg, bracing the sole of her boot against his thigh, working the knots and laces as his mouth pressed insistently to the small of her back. He gently loosened her boot, pulling the dirt-caked leather from her foot before rolling her stocking down her thigh, her knee, her calf.

Her breath grew shallow and useless over the steady keen lifting from her chest. Her desire had become agonizing, her sex pulsing to the point of pain.

Nate's fingers trailed the back of her knee, tracing her gooseflesh all the way to the arch of her foot. He lowered her bare foot to the floor, then with excruciating control, repeated the entire erotic ordeal on her left leg.

“Well, your present self seems to have things quite in hand,” Cora murmured breathlessly. His laugh was hot against her back.

The vibration of his jaw on her bare skin was too much. Cora’s thighs clenched, seeking friction to ease the piercing sting of her arousal. Pushing her toes against the wooden floor, she bent further over the bed, gripping the bedpost as she instinctively spread her legs.

“Yes,” Nate coaxed her, brushing his lips along her inner thigh. “That’s it, let me see you, darling...”

Cora became acutely aware she was slick with desire when she felt Nate’s hot breath flicker over her center.

She had heard enough from Tabby to know what *this* was, what Nate meant to do to her, but she had never before experienced it and wasn’t at all sure her legs would be able to support her, not even with the bedpost.

“Nate—you can’t...I’m not...I don’t think...”

He slid his tongue against her, stroking impossibly lightly over her quim. Cora faltered, clutching the bedpost so tightly her knuckles cracked. His fingers dug into her hips, tugging her firmly against his mouth, holding her open for another scorching pass of his tongue. Every nerve in her body was frayed, ignited by bliss.

“Never mind, never mind...you can...”

“You’re right,” he rasped.

She felt an abrupt, unwelcome cooling as he pulled away; how she could contemplate strangling him in a moment like this was beyond her.

“No! Don’t stop! I didn’t mean...” She was incoherent.

“I’m not going to stop.” Nate’s low voice pulled right to her core. He turned her in his arms, his gaze laden with an exorbitant yearning as he knelt before her. “But I need your eyes on me, love. I need you to keep your eyes on me, no matter what. I want to see it, all over you, what I’m doing to you. What you’re *allowing* me to do to you.”

Nate stood, gently nudging her to lie on the bed. Cora pulled him on top of her, suddenly mindless to feel the expanse of skin and muscle she had seen at the pond.

It was only when she touched the wet fabric of his waistcoat that she comprehended he was still fully dressed in his drenched clothing.

Cora grasped his cravat, working the knotted linen. When her fingers finally brushed the exposed skin of his neck, Nate released a soft, collapsing groan. His mouth fell to her breast, his lips capturing one peaked nipple.

“Now *you’re* shivering,” Cora breathed, lifting his chin.

“That *is* from the damp,” Nate teased, but his voice was painfully raw.

“Let me touch you.” She smoothed back his hair. “Please.”

He kissed her deeply, his hands meeting hers, helping her find the edges of his clothing: the straps, the braces, and the buttons walling him off from her.

She met the bare skin of his chest and a powerful ardor crashed over her. “Finally...”

Nate held himself above her, his forearms enveloping her in dizzying heat. Cora’s hands were rapacious, insatiable for the slide of his skin against hers. She mapped his body, marking the ridges of his abdomen, searching the divots of his hips. With a sigh, she arched against his chest, taunting her aching nipples with the rough hair dusting his torso.

“Cora...”

Her fingers followed the teasing trail disappearing into his trousers, her thumb tracing, dipping underneath to feel the muscled globes of his arse. Her palms dragged along the fabric covering his impossible hardness, her slick thighs opening to the pressure.

Cora shifted, trying to pull down his trousers. But true to his word, Nate remained unhurried. He sucked lightly under her jaw, his thumb circling the pulse point on the inside of her wrist.

She was throbbing, but he ignored the push of her hips and instead lowered his mouth to her ear.

“I want to see what color your eyes turn when you come apart, Cora.” His voice was like gravel. “I’ve bet myself it’s blue.”

If he kept this up, he wouldn’t have to wait long to find out. Cora could come just like this, rocking against his still-clothed thigh, his weight and his words fusing her to the bed.

She had only fallen over the edge under her own hand, but that felt laughably like a London street curb when compared to the frightening cliff Nate was driving her toward.

She sank back into the soft mattress, his fingertips softer still, as plush as velvet, but this was no fine thing. This was rain-soaked hair and musty sheets, this was a provenance, this was a return. The trailing, lush press of Nate’s fingers was as dense and absorbing as moss, covering her, converting her to a baser state. A version of herself that belonged only to this stormy morning, to this verdant wood, to this confounding man.

“Nate...”

He groaned, pressing his face to her sternum. “It’s senseless, what you’ve done to me, Cora. You’ve turned me senseless. Mindless. Reckless.”

“You...already were...all those things,” she pointed out breathlessly, her hands moving to his hips and pressing his hardness against her. “Oh, this is good, here...”

“Just wait,” Nate vowed, leaving a trail of greedy kisses along the ridge of her ribcage, dragging his mouth under her breast, curling his tongue around her nipple.

His hands dropped heavily to the backs of her thighs as he continued his torturous descent. She gasped into her own bicep, burying her face and her half-formed plea as her hips rocked toward the heady force of his mouth.

She knew what she wanted, she understood the dreadful ache at her core, but she’d asked for so much already; she couldn’t bring herself to ask for this too.

But he was already there, his hand cupping her sex, and she felt immediately soothed, immediately suffering.

He stared up at her, his eyes hooded, his jaw clenched. When she met his heated gaze, Nate drew one finger through her curls, lightly tracing her center. Cora moaned faintly, sliding further down the bed, toward his hand.

“Nate—” Her vision blurred until everything was the color of the rainclouds, the color of Nate’s eyes. The color of her desire was lead.

“Still slow?” His lips grazed her inner thigh, closer, closer, and Cora mewled, lifting her hips to meet his maddeningly light touch.

He eased one large finger inside her, only a fraction, and waited, his eyes boring into hers. Cora panted, fisting the bedsheets as he hummed, rotating his finger. She tried to close her legs, to keep him against her, but his palm wrapped around her thigh.

“Yes,” she gasped, unbelieving her own words. “Yes, please...take your time, Nate, I’ve never—”

Nate abruptly ceased his excruciating teasing. “In four years, your husband *never*?”

“No,” Cora said haltingly, circling her hips in frustration. “No, not this...”

She looked down, expecting his arrogant smirk, but Nate’s expression was one of agonized determination.

“Despite how abysmally low you’ve set your expectations,” he rasped, “I swear to all that’s holy, Cora, you’ll get the best of me.”

He hooked his finger, and Cora jolted at the pressure, her bare feet slipping against the bedsheets.

Heaven help me.

And then he lowered his mouth to her, pressing his tongue exactly, exactly, *exactly* where she wanted him.

His groan was so soft, she almost missed it, so revelatory was the sensation of his hand and mouth working in tandem.

“How does it feel?” Nate’s breath was incendiary as he brushed against her folds. He dipped a second finger inside her, and she cried out, pushing her hips against the broad hand holding her open. “Do you want to stay here?”

This was it. This was how she would meet her end. In her hunting box, under Nate’s hand. There was a revolution happening in her body, her desire giving over in allegiance to Nate, and yet Cora felt no defeat.

“Nate, please...”

Her plea dissolved as he licked further into her folds. His jaw worked against her, urgent, demanding, showing her exactly how to move with him, how to stay with him. There was a quiver, low in her belly.

His free hand slid to her pelvis, holding her in place as his fingers worked patiently against a spot deep inside her. His tongue traced a wicked, ruthless pattern, each pass more insistent. The rough, slick compression tunneled her senses.

“Oh God—”

Cora dimly felt her climax approaching from a distance, and then, without warning, it was upon her. She looked down, to tell Nate, but when she lowered her eyes, his were already on her, and he *knew*. At the understanding burning there, the awareness that he knew exactly what he was making her feel, Cora was *gone*. She was spiraling, she was a thousand particles of light. She chased the high, and Nate stayed with her, encouraging her.

“That’s it...*that’s it*, Cora...”

He was grounding her, his hands on her thighs. Cora became dazedly aware he had pushed off his trousers, and he was once more right above her.

She sank her hands into his hair, her mouth finding his. On his tongue was her desire, and Nate’s acceptance of it only ignited her anew.

Cora was voracious in her need to touch him. Her hands trailed over his back, caressing his shoulders, sliding down the rough line of hair bisecting his chiseled stomach. She had never known such ferocity of feeling.

He was reaching between them, readying himself, and she eagerly met his hand, curling her fingers around his...

Oh my.

Cora was greedy and wary in equal measure as her fist closed over his startling length. She was a widow, hardly untested. But to compare Dane to Nate was, perhaps, a different sort of test altogether.

Oh my, indeed.

“Of course,” she breathed deliriously. “Of course you’re *this...you’re so...*”

Nate exhaled a laugh against her neck, his hand returning to her center, where she still inconceivably ached. He slid two fingers inside her, persistent and firm; he was stretching her, readying her.

His cock pulsed, heavy in her palm, and she understood why.

Cora gasped, rolling her head, seeking something his fingers weren’t giving her.

“Please...”

He silenced her, kissing her fiercely, his tongue echoing the rolling of his fingers—pressing, stroking, once more building an exquisite heat. But before she could meet the cadence of his rocking hand, he withdrew.

She cried out in needless frustration, because Nate was suddenly right there, his cock pressing into her, slowly, *slowly*.

It was too much...*he couldn’t...she wouldn’t be able to...*

Cora felt feverish in the aftermath of her bliss, and she nearly laughed, hysterical at the thought that this affair would be a short one indeed if she wasn’t able to take him.

“Cora, love, relax, *relax*...you have to relax.” His voice was low in her ear. He sank heavily and relentlessly inside her, chasing the right angle.

She felt an impossible, delicious stretch. It had never, ever been like this.

“It’s good, it’s fine, right here.” She was babbling, nonsensical, clamping her thighs, her hands stilling his hips. “It feels *so good*...I can’t let you move, I can’t let you move anymore...”

He pressed his forehead to hers, damp with sweat. He groaned into her mouth, kissing her deeply, his thumbs rubbing light circles on the inside of her thighs.

“I promise, love, it will feel so much better if you let me move,” he whispered, rolling his hips, just a little, and God help her if he wasn’t right.

He ruined her for want. Every worry, every wall, gone under his expert hands. Cora understood she would do anything, *anything*, to stay right here, where he was against her, hard and undeniable.

“Easy,” she pleaded, yielding to him, every part of her flush and full.

“Easy,” he confirmed, and his voice had changed. Nate was inside her, and it altered them both. “Until you say otherwise.”

He rocked slowly, and Cora closed her eyes, fighting a surge of emotion. Right now, in this moment, Nate wasn’t a fantasy, invented from her loneliness; he was here, stroking into her, as measured and drowsy as the first time he kissed her.

Cora felt as though she could float away, but the flexing weight of him, working her into the mattress again, again, *again*, tethered her. She didn’t want to be anywhere but inside the skin Nate touched.

“*More.*”

Her arms were over her head, her hands tangling in her own damp hair. Nate shifted, capably arranging her, tugging her thighs higher and wider, his quickening pace still short of the tempo building in her belly.

“Eyes on me,” he grunted, lacing one hand with hers against the bed. “That’s it, love.”

“*Nate—*”

At her own urging, he stroked harder, letting her set the pace until she couldn’t, until she couldn’t do anything but cry out for him, her nails digging into his shoulder blades.

Nate thrust into her, deeper, faster, dragging against her center with every pump of his hips. Cora could sense herself unwinding, she was spiraling toward the light.

“Take it, Cora,” he urged, his hand slipping along her calf. “Take it, love. It’s yours.”

And there, after all this time, Cora could see she had sustained her wings; she was still a creature made to fly.

Take it.

She was careening, she was soaring, she was freewheeling and buffeted by a wind howling of chance, she was reasonless, she was seasonless.

She could be anywhere, but she was *here* with Nate, seeing in his own terrified face that it wasn’t just her.

Both of them tumbling madly toward an unknown horizon, toward a feverish crescendo. Both of them crashing right against their limits, until the limit couldn’t hold.

Cora,

~~*I thought of something this morning*~~

~~*I'm not sure how to say this...*~~

~~*Here's a letter I'll never send*~~

When I awoke, my first thought was you.

*And damn if you haven't stayed there all day, pressed
inside of me, filling my cracked places.*

As if you'd been there all along.



NATE HAD ALWAYS BEEN CAREFREE, but he was no longer free. He was a willing, furious prisoner to his task—to take Cora over the edge, to pull his name from her breathless lungs, to orient her toward him alone.

She had already shattered once around him. Her muscles were limp, her skin deliciously dewed with rain, with her sweat, with his sweat—but Nate couldn't stop. He was a man possessed. He was possessed by her.

He wanted to possess her in return.

“More, Cora. *More*...darling, can you give me more?”

With every drive of his hips, he found deeper purchase, and it still wasn't enough. She cried into his chest, her legs

slipping around his waist. She was trying to meet him thrust for thrust, but she was sated and loose.

“Nate, I *can't*. Please...I can't—”

That's what you think.

With a groan, Nate withdrew, sitting back, half kneeling on the bed as he grasped the bedpost. With his other arm, he pulled her with him, spreading her shaking legs across his thighs.

“Hold me, Cora,” he urged her, his mouth against her throat. “All you need to do is hold me.”

She shuddered but complied, her arms twining obediently around his neck, her legs tightening around his waist. His hands fell to her hips, guiding her back over his shaft. Her soft moans slammed inside his skull.

Slowly, Nate took her to the hilt, helping her work herself over his cock, his vision darkening at the sensation of her quivering muscles. He dragged one hand up and down her spine, his palm sliding beneath the heavy coils of her hair.

She cooed into his ear, her cheek pressed to his.

“Better?”

“Yes...” she hissed, rocking forward as she adjusted in his lap.

Nate stopped breathing. Both of her hands twisted in his hair, and he had a staggering memory of her delicate fingers, barely able to span a chord on the piano, and how they felt wrapped around him...

“Fuck, Cora...”

He was altogether livid—with lust for her, with the lack of her.

Nate roughly palmed the taut curve of her arse, his fingers bruising. He urged her to sink against him, holding her in place as his hips ground a tight circle against her.

Didn't she realize? She belonged here, splitting around him. Cora was made to take him, and he was made to give.

Christ, what he would give her.

Instinctively, he clutched her harder, taking her in an intense, steady slide. Her breath was catching high in her throat, her fingers pulling tight and welcome in his hair.

“Nate—”

“Yes, Cora, you’re so good, my love...I’ll take you there again...”

He licked down her neck, dipping his mouth to her breast, his teeth lightly scraping her achingly tight nipple.

Nate met her unfocused gaze; Cora’s eyes had dilated, leaving only a thin ring of blue—he fucking *knew* it—and he was suddenly on the brink. His groin grew heavy, so tight he was about to snap. He’d have to pull away from her to do so—he had almost forgotten they needed to be cautious, their impending marriage wasn’t real.

But *this* was real.

This, him inside of her, beside her, with her.

Nate had been looking for purpose, to fill the gaping lack in his life, and he hadn’t even realized it. But he could see it now, as surely as he could see the fear and wonder in her eyes.

His purpose was Cora. It didn’t feel pitiful or weak to say so. It felt true. She pulled his ramshackle life into focus.

With a grunt, Nate dragged his thumb to her center, drawing against her in a tight circle. Cora’s sigh sank to a sob, her fingernails scratching his shoulders. He felt the pressure, tugging and low, urgent and inescapable.

But he’d be damned if he’d come before he took her there one more time.

“Look at me, Nate...” Her voice tore in half. “You have to look at me.”

His eyes were wide open.

With a startling explosion, Cora’s head slammed against his shoulder as she broke around him. He felt her tighten and he held on for one delirious moment, seeing her through it, and

then, in a show of iron fortitude, he got her on her back, driving into her until he felt his impending release. He stayed with her until he *couldn't*, pulling away to expel in the sheets, immediately reaching back to hold her hand.

For a countless stretch of minutes, they sprawled together, tangled and panting in the quiet cottage.

With a groan, Nate roused himself to action. He rolled the sheet away before laying back properly, pulling Cora's boneless body against him.

"Nate...that was..."

Nate laughed up at the canopy of the bed, raking back his sweaty hair as he finished her thought. "It was *something*. Of entirely our own making."

Cora laughed too, stretching alongside him, her fingers tracing his hipbone.

"At least we didn't offend Haydn this time," she teased.

"Ah, I don't know, love." Nate smiled wickedly. "I think he'd be fairly offended if he witnessed that."

Cora flushed, but she seemed rather pleased with herself. As she damn well should.

"The rain's slowing," she whispered, looking out the window. "We should go back up to the house. Someone might be looking for us."

Nate raised one skeptical eyebrow, gently pinching the exposed curve of her bottom.

"Well, *me*," Cora corrected, lightly elbowing him in the side. "They might be looking for me."

At the prospect of returning to the manse, Nate realized he hadn't told Cora his misgivings about leaving for London.

Shite.

His abrupt rush of nerves was implausible, especially after what had just happened between them. There was nothing they didn't share. His fingerprints were bruised into her hips, the crescents of her fingernails imprinted on his shoulders.

He should just bloody tell her.

But...

His mouth fell to her collarbone, his lips skimming the column of her throat, leaving one soft, tugging suck; she moaned, letting him lave against her for one moment longer than she should have before reluctantly dredging up her senses and swatting him away.

“No marks, you can’t leave a mark—”

“The ball,” he finished, wincing as he pulled back, pressing his thumb over the reddening welt. “I hope you have a thick necklace. I’m sorry, darling.”

She didn’t look very upset. Even still...

“You can give me one in retaliation,” he offered. “I have both a cravat and no scruples.”

Cora smirked, then reluctantly started to slide from the bed.

“Here, love.” He stretched and climbed from the wrecked bed linens. “I’ll get it.”

He felt her eyes trail him as he retrieved her clothing.

“How chivalrous of you,” Cora quipped distractedly.

Nate offered her a smug grin, which Cora missed entirely as her eyes were trained notably south of his face.

“I’m a gentleman, I’ll have you know.”

And for once, Cora didn’t argue.

THE RAIN HAD CEASED by the time they dressed and began picking their way through the trees. A cool, humid fog still wound through the wood, but the clouds had said their piece and retreated to a misty, benign shade of silver.

Cora, too, had retreated, turning quiet and pensive, but Nate had expected this.

Tread lightly, he schooled himself, allowing her to lead the way in silence.

What transpired between them this morning would either make Nate's appeal to stay at Aldworth Park much easier or nigh on impossible. He wasn't about to put his foot in his mouth until he figured out which.

He paused when they reached the terrace doors. Cora stopped beside him, and Nate drew a breath, sweeping his eyes over her. *Tell her you want to stay, you lousy shit.*

Cora stared up at him, her eyes cloudy with question.

"You go in first," he murmured, disgusted with himself. He was weak for her; he was weak in general. "And I'll see you... later."

The words hung between them, a reminder he was meant to depart in a matter of hours.

"Am I...fine?" Cora blinked slowly and stared down at her slightly damp dress. She tried in vain to dab away a speck of mud.

Nate suppressed a chuckle. Her hair was a mess, her cheeks flushed. The bruise of Nate's kiss was emerging on the left side of her neck.

"You're beautiful, love, but you are absolutely not fine. If I were you, I'd find your maid and a comb posthaste."

Cora gave him a shuddery smile and disappeared inside.

Nate allowed her a moment's head start, checking that his cuffs were properly fastened, his cravat neatly knotted, everything buttoned up, closed up. Closed off.

As he made his way to the staircase in the entrance hall, he saw a still-disheveled Cora caught in conversation with her butler. Coates genially chattered away as he sorted through a small stack of newly delivered correspondence. Nate, not wanting to alert Coates to his presence, nodded swiftly at Cora and started up the stairs behind them.

"Let's see, Lady Dane, there was a note for you somewhere. Ah—no. That's another letter from Mrs.

Carleton's cousin...hold a moment..."

"My cousin?" Mrs. Carleton's voice echoed down the staircase, halting Nate's progress.

Cora's eyes grew wide as she surreptitiously tried to smooth her hair. Nate's heart sank on her behalf; it was a lost cause.

"Is it from Prudence?" Edict Carleton elbowed past Nate and snatched the letter. "She's been unwell," she announced to the hall at large. "She takes great comfort in writing to me."

Nate rolled his eyes.

"And *there* you are, Lady Dane." Mrs. Carleton sniffed. "I've been meaning to speak with you since last night. There's been a recurrent problem with my laundry. But you insist on traipsing about all over the estate..." She paused, taking in Cora's bedraggled appearance.

"Good heavens, Lady Dane," she snapped. "You look a fright."

"Yes, well." Cora straightened imperiously. Nate wished she'd put her hair forward and cover her neck. "I was caught in the rain, during my ride."

Was she ever.

Coates looked immediately concerned. "Goodness, Lady Dane. You should have taken a groom."

"I was fine." Cora's cheeks mounted with a blush. "I was able to shelter in the hunting box."

"And what about you?" Mrs. Carleton eyed Nate shrewdly. "You're a mess too."

Nate fought the urge to look at Cora. "I...was on a walk. Unfortunately, I was *quite* affected by the storm. Thunderous crescendo, don't you think?"

Cora coughed, her face in flames.

"Hmph." Mrs. Carleton pursed her lips. "I wouldn't know. I was sensibly resting indoors." She waved her letter. "I must see to this correspondence straightaway. I plan to tutor Leo

this afternoon, and I expect I'll have a headache by the time we're through."

"You don't need to tutor him, Mrs. Carleton." Cora's voice was firm. "He has plenty of time for all that when he's older."

"I expect *you* would think that," Mrs. Carleton sniped. "He's dreadfully behind."

"Leo is four, Mrs. Carleton," Nate interjected in annoyance. "He's a little boy."

"Mr. Travers, I'll once again remind you, my nephew is none of your concern," she replied tetchily.

He internally flinched as her words hit the soft part of his belly, but Mrs. Carleton had once more swiveled to Cora.

"And when you have a moment, Lady Dane, I'll need to speak with a laundry maid about the starch."

"I have a suggestion for your starch," Nate started, but Cora laid a warning hand on his forearm. Fortunately, Edict had already turned away, sweeping up the stairs with her precious letter in hand.

Nate glowered after her. *What an absolute prune.*

His resolve solidified; it was inconceivable to leave Cora here without him.

Cora looked incredulously at Nate and Coates. "Am I a viscountess or not? How does she always manage to make me feel as though I'm naught but a girl of ten?"

Nate wisely bit his tongue; that very question had been driving him insane for the last two weeks. Why didn't Cora stand up for herself?

"Here we are, Lady Dane, a letter from your brother," Coates announced quietly, breaking the tension.

Cora took the letter, dropping Nate's arm.

"She's vile," she muttered, her narrowed eyes trailing the retreating shadow of Mrs. Carleton. "What in heaven's name is she going to tutor Leo about anyway?"

Cora broke the seal, scanning the contents of Gavin Sinclair's letter.

Nate hesitated. He should go to his quarters, clean himself up, and avoid his preparations for London...as well as avoid telling Cora about it. Should make for a pleasant afternoon.

“No...”

Cora's strangled voice drew him up short.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no.”

Nate halted, one foot on the stair. He pivoted back to Cora; her face was ashen. “What's wrong, love?”

She looked up at him, her eyes glazed with dismay. “Gavin...” She covered her mouth as she reread the letter. “Oh no—”

“Gavin what?” Nate thrummed with urgency.

She glanced around, shaking her head when she realized they were standing in the open with Coates. Nate abandoned the staircase, taking her arm and pulling her to the study down the corridor. Cora allowed him to lead her, still staring at the letter in her hand.

“What's going on?” he demanded once inside the study. “What does your brother have to say that has you so upset?”

Cora handed him the letter, her hand on her throat.

Nate skimmed the contents, swiftly taking in Gavin Sinclair's neatly penned and altogether dreadful news.

“He needs more *time*.” Nate looked at Cora in shock. “He can't make the case yet. He'll need to change tactics...”

“This...this *precedent* he was looking into...it didn't break in favor of the mother's suit.” Cora wrung her hands.

“What does that mean?”

“The court refused to overturn the father's will regarding guardianship. Gavin had been hoping it would serve as an example he could draw from.”

“So what happens now?” In light of this alarming setback, Nate tried to quell the selfish buoyancy rising through his chest. He would obviously need to remain here, and now he wouldn’t have to talk about it at all. “What do we do?”

“*We?*” Cora said faintly as she took the letter back.

“I suppose you’ll need me to stay on? To play out the ruse longer?” He kept his voice intentionally casual.

An uneasy expression shuttered Cora’s face.

“Oh...no,” she said firmly. “*No*. That wouldn’t be...a good idea.”

A flash of her dilated eyes, her thigh thrown over his hip, his name falling from her lips.

Seemed like a good idea to him.

“Cora...”

“Nate, listen.” Cora spoke over him in a rush. “This note from Gavin, it doesn’t change anything for you. You’re free to depart for London. And I should have been clear. Before we... well...” She motioned between them. “But I’ll rectify that now, at the very least.”

“What are you talking about?”

Cora backed away, behind the desk.

“I’m not...asking you for anything.” Her face was pale but determined. “You don’t need to worry, Nate. I don’t expect—I don’t *want* more from you.”

“Cora.” There was an uncomfortable weight on his tongue.

“It’s not a trap for a true betrothal. It’s not...anything. You’ve fulfilled your obligations. I’m not looking to force your hand, and I accepted that this morning.”

“*Cora.*”

Her voice grew stronger. “I should have said it straightaway, but at least I’m saying it now. It was only meant to be once. Please don’t think less of me.”

Cora decisively jutted out her chin. Her words hung in the air, so clear Nate could practically read them.

And they weren't the words he wanted from her.

I don't expect more from you.

I'm not asking you for anything.

Only once.

His stomach sank. Cora still saw him as a rogue, unserious and carefree. But Nate had never been more serious about anything in his entire bloody life.

He regarded her, his tumbling thoughts silently warring. And then, in a fractured moment of clarity, all of his disorientation, all of his uncertainty, made sense.

When he read Raymond's letter that morning, Nate hadn't been unsettled because his brother believed his pretension.

Nate had been unsettled because he *wasn't pretending*.

Not anymore. Not at all.

With a shock, as sharp and sticking as a punch to the gut, Nate understood he was very likely in love with Cora. He didn't know when it happened. He sure as hell didn't recognize the feeling, not even by its fearsome, daunting contours. But damn if he wasn't certain of it, all the same.

He was in love with her.

And she wanted him to leave.

"It's what we agreed on," Cora was saying now. She was beautifully, painfully oblivious to Nate's plight as she paced behind her desk. "Moreover, it's imperative you return to London. The earl is waiting to meet with you. You can't lose this opportunity."

She stopped and looked at him. She was wearing the dress he had opened, the dress he had closed, her eyes once again telling different stories.

But right now, Nate wasn't in the study at all. He was at the card table, staring at his hand, realizing they weren't

playing the same game after all. She didn't want anything from him.

It suddenly mattered, in a way it never had before, to be explicitly clear with himself. *This will hurt*. He had never had to weigh certain future anguish against present desire.

His old motto resurfaced, a pledge to prevent, a pledge to protect. *If you can't win, don't lose*.

"Nate?" Cora looked nervous from his prolonged silence. "We're clear, aren't we? I'll stay the course with Gavin on my own. But please ensure you leave the letters before you go. The ones you agreed to write for Gavin's case. We'll certainly need them now. I assume you've done them?"

The case. The evidence. The only things she needed him for.

Nate conjured every lump he'd ever taken, the way he had learned to let them roll off his back, the way he could drum up indifference to nearly every predicament.

If Cora didn't want him to stay, then he wouldn't stay.

A better man would be able to face this situation head-on; a better man would be able to confess his confounding change of heart.

But Nate had never been under any illusion that he was a great man.

"We're clear, love." His voice was rough.

He drank her in, digging greedy claws into this memory—her damp, curling hair, her flushed face, her scent mingling with his.

"It was a hell of a once though."

HE DIDN'T SEE Cora again that day. She was off on her own, presumably readying for tonight's ball as Nate was presumably readying for his return to London.

In reality, however, Nate was pacing his chambers like a caged animal, variously ordering Barnes to pack and unpack

his trunks and valise.

He could objectively see this was insane behavior. Nate needed to get out of Cora's way and get his arse to London. He should have already departed; it was drawing ever nearer to evening.

But he couldn't see it through. He couldn't leave her. Hell, he couldn't even bear to leave her the half-scrawled, confusingly wrought letters squirreled away in his bedside chest.

Nate took a swig from his decanter of whisky—he'd long ago eschewed the tumbler and gone straight to the source. From his window, he could see the eastern half of the estate, the stables, the wood, the sweeping, overgrown lawn.

If he left tonight, Nate would likely never return. It was a damn shame; Aldworth Park was an ideal sort of place, rambly and unfussy, sunny and slow. And everywhere was Cora's touch—color and warmth and something just to the left of proper.

He swore, recalling the exact sensation of falling against the tree with her in his arms. Her hungry mouth pushing into his. Her damp skin warming under his touch. The shattering pleasure of sinking into her, the exorbitant luxury of working himself inside of her.

It was really for the best, that he hadn't said anything to her. Things didn't have to be complicated now. Nate had left his own door wide open. He could ease himself out of this, just as he'd eased himself in.

Determining to give Barnes the final order to proceed, Nate turned, catching his reflection in the glare of the window. He startled, sloshing his whisky. He looked five years older. He hardly knew himself for the agonized expression on his face.

And yet...the look itself was familiar.

He had witnessed this bare, shifting unrest once before. But the last time he'd seen it, the eyes hadn't been his own gray.

They had been hazel-blue.

He stared, his heart thundering unevenly against his ribs.

Right now, Nate was wearing the exact expression Cora had borne when she saw him comfort Tess in the Wallaces' garden.

He had recognized it then.

He recognized it now.

Fear.

Cora's words tore back to him, *I'm not asking you for anything*. Nate froze, his hand clenching the bottle of whisky. He was shaky, he was half-drunk, he was all at once completely and utterly certain he was a goddamned idiot.

Of course Cora wouldn't ask him for anything. Cora would never ask anyone for anything. Her entire life was built around controlling every aspect of her own circumstances.

But this pull between them? It was uncontrollable. It was a living, breathing, independent entity, fully intent on twining them together.

And she was bloody terrified of it.

Oh darling.

"Stop packing." He heard himself speak.

"Sir?"

Nate started pulling his clothing from the nearest trunk. He tossed a shirt to a bewildered Barnes.

"Stop packing, mate." He felt a stirring resolve. "Final orders."

Nate was most assuredly about to throw away everything he thought he wanted. If he didn't go see Raymond, he was effectively cutting *himself* off. If he were prudent, he would bury these feelings, close out this contract, and resume his old life.

But no longer was his life in London.

The real stakes were here.

And Nate Travers was about to go all in.

July 1819

Barrister's Chambers, Gray's Inn, London

Cora,

I withheld sending this because I didn't want to unduly alarm you, but our guardianship petition has suffered a setback.

As you know, I had previously unearthed a similar case that went before the Chancery, in which the mother disputed the legitimacy of her child's testamentary guardian. Ultimately, the court ruled that while it does have the power to regulate these guardianships, the Chancery will not interfere with the father's will unless the guardian is unworthy.

I'm afraid, Sister, I won't be able to rely on proving why you should be named sole legal guardian. Instead, I will need to focus on why the Carletons should not hold that position.

The Chancery views guardianship as a trust; only if that trust is broken will the court intervene.

I'll need to pull in an investigator...and I'll need more time. This might not be concluded as quickly as we hoped. Still, Cora—keep hoping, anyway.

*Love from your Very Sorry Brother,
Gavin*



FOR WEEKS, Cora had been brimming with excitement for the Monmouth Ball. It was the very first invitation she received when her mourning period ended. Earlier in the week, her

gown had arrived from London, and she practically twirled when she got her hands on it—a gorgeous amethyst silk, overlaid with gauze, with the most delicious beadwork on the hem. It cost an exorbitant sum, but Cora found the price of anticipation well-worth it.

She didn't feel so eager anymore.

Talbot spent ages pulling jewelry and twice as long finishing Cora's hair. For once her stubborn waves were sleekly coiled, a gleaming topaz comb resting fabulously in her mahogany tresses. She was perfumed, gloved, and dripping in jewels.

But she still wasn't ready. There was one more task before she departed.

Cora hesitated outside Nate's door, Tess and Leo on either side of her like two tiny, oblivious sentinels. They, of course, didn't understand what was happening, but Cora wanted them to say goodbye.

She fidgeted in her satin slippers, roiling with a heavy sense of dread. What to say? Would she see him again? Would he write? Did she want him to?

The memory of Nate's hand sliding up her thigh burned beneath her gown. But more unbearable yet was the thought of his laughter, ringing in her ears as they raced through the rain.

It was a hell of a once.

But she'd made the right decision...hadn't she? Nate needed to leave. And she needed to return to handling her own affairs. It was exceedingly unwise, the way she'd come to rely on him.

Leo impatiently squeezed her hand, and Cora pulled herself together enough to knock.

Barnes, Nate's valet, opened the door. Behind him, she could see a mess of trunks and clothing, the detritus of packing.

"Is Nathaniel here?" Cora asked, holding Tess by the shoulder before she could barrel into Nate's room. "We'd like

to say...goodbye.”

Barnes’s face was unreadable.

“Mr. Travers has stepped out,” he said in his low, lilting voice. “I’ll pass along your sentiments, Lady Dane.”

“Stepped out *where?*” Cora felt a ripple of panic. “I have to leave. I need to depart for the ball.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Dane,” Barnes answered. “He said he needed air.”

She would have to go without seeing him.

Because of a *ball*.

A stupid, vapid, pointless exercise. But wholly unavoidable. Cora had to be seen in society, especially now.

If Barnes could see her frustrated, idiotic tears, he kindly did not let on.

“At least, have him stop by the nursery, please, Barnes.”

“We’d like to see him,” Leo said shyly. “Before his trip.”

Barnes nodded solemnly. “I’ll see that he does, Lord Dane.”

“I like your buttons,” Tess announced cheerfully, and Barnes winked.

It gave Cora a moment to absorb her sorrow.

After all, it was likely better this way.

IF CORA WERE ASKED to provide any details about the Monmouth Ball, she would have come up laughably short. When had she arrived? Who had she spoken to? Did she sip lemonade, make introductions, comment on the weather? She hadn’t the first idea.

Outwardly, she tried to appear gracious, interested, polite. Internally, Cora was in pieces, broken to bits on two equally painful swords—Gavin’s setback and Nate’s departure. One

problem completely out of her hands, and one entirely of her own sorry making.

She fervently believed Gavin would work his fingers to the bone to reframe his guardianship petition. His need for additional time was a delay but not a loss. He had been adamant in his letter; Cora need not feel hopeless.

Surely, there was some way they could show the Carletons were derelict in their duties. For heaven's sake, they hadn't even shown interest in the children until this year.

Nevertheless, Cora shuddered at the prospect that the summer might wax and wane and bring her no relief. Autumn, winter, spring. Seasons would pass, and she would still reside in this purgatory of uncertainty, her children hanging in the balance. She would need to rally her quickly failing endurance.

And she would need to do it alone.

After all, what choice did she have? Nate's offer to buy her time was completely unviable, especially after what happened between them in the cottage. She would never be able to maintain their pretense now that she had experienced the transcendent reality of their lovemaking.

She and Nate had gone too far, and it was time Cora rein herself back in. She had to focus on the real business of her life, the parts she could depend on, the parts she could control.

She couldn't lose her head to false hope and uncertainty.

Keep moving, she reprimanded herself as she made her required circuit of the ballroom. *Keep talking. Don't think of Nate.*

But Cora felt listless and distracted, even as every head followed her. An ill-disguised rustle of whispers hung over her like a shroud, snatches of conversation snagging as she passed.

"Lady Dane, yes, and Nathaniel Travers—Fordham's brother..."

"All but flung off her mourning dress..."

"Well. *You've* seen him. Can you blame her?"

“It was Dane, I’m telling you, I always thought he was foul...”

“Well, she’s not with Dane now.”

“No. Most certainly *not*...”

The gossip should bother her—but this, after all, was exactly what Cora required. She made her rounds, finding easy, offhand excuses for Nate’s absence—business in London, a meeting with his brother—and nobody in attendance seemed any the wiser. Cora never expected to be so efficient at spinning tales of a falsified life, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

And times were unequivocally desperate now.

“Lady Dane?” A woman’s voice came from behind her.

Cora’s skin prickled with ambiguous familiarity. She knew the voice but couldn’t place it. She turned, steeling herself for an unknown encounter, and startled upon finding the beaming face of...*Lady Fordham?*

Cora gripped her lemonade, praying her hands weren’t shaking. She hadn’t seen the countess in years. But sure enough, standing before her, flanked by two young women who looked astonishingly like Tabby, was Nate’s sister-in-law. The woman who all but raised him. Here. At the Monmouth Ball.

Cora felt faint.

“Lady Dane?” The countess’s heart-shaped face was drawn in a concerned frown.

“Lady Fordham.” Cora collected herself, frantically trying to remember how Nate had left things with his brother—what the earl’s family knew, what they didn’t. But Nate had never told her. She had no blasted clue. “What a surprise!”

“Lady Dane, you might remember my daughters. Lady Annalise Travers and Lady Viola Travers,” Lady Fordham announced warmly. All three women looked at Cora as though she had hung the stars.

Cora struggled to nod. *What was the decorum here?* She had never happened upon fake-future in-laws the same day she had sent her one-time lover packing.

“A pleasure to see you again,” she managed to say, nodding to Nate’s nieces.

Lady Fordham beamed. She had dark green eyes, silvery-blond hair, and a heartbreakingly kind smile.

Cora felt her abysmal mood shift. She had always liked the countess. Lady Fordham had certainly extended Cora great hospitality all those years ago.

“I...I didn’t expect to see you in Berkshire,” Cora prompted, trying to regain her footing. “I thought you were in London?”

“We’ve been in London,” Lady Fordham confirmed. “It’s why I must apologize for not writing to you directly yet. We were concluding the season and readying for our country estate. My daughters and I will be retiring to Hampshire for the remainder of the summer. Lady Monmouth is hosting us for the evening on our way south.”

“We couldn’t miss it.” Viola Travers twinkled. “This ball somehow ended up capping off the London Season, despite being both after the season and outside of London. Look at this crowd!”

Cora laughed, but her ears were ringing. Nate’s family was in Berkshire. “Is...Lord Fordham with you?”

If the earl was here...and Nate wasn’t...Cora wasn’t sure how she could possibly salvage that mess.

But Annalise shook her head. “Papa stayed behind. He had business in Town. He’ll join us later. Once he...” She broke off, blushing.

“Once he talks to Nate,” Cora finished faintly.

Of course. Nate, after all, had business in London too. He was off to secure his future.

A future without her.

Cora felt dizzy; Nate's family surrounded her, warm and lovely and full of knowledge of him she would never possess.

"I can't tell you, truly, Lady Dane, how wonderfully thrilled we are about your betrothal," Lady Fordham said, her eyes bright. "I have been positively levitating from this news. I couldn't have dreamed of a better match for Nathaniel. He just needed a little nudge, that's what I've always said, haven't I, dears?"

Viola nodded emphatically, and Annalise looked as though she wanted to hug Cora.

Cora almost wished she would; she could do with a hug.

"It's all anyone is talking about." Viola was quivering. "The day you were in Hyde Park together...Nate running off to the countryside with you...it's *so romantic*."

"Nate's never been romantic." Annalise grinned; her resemblance to Tabitha bordered on frightful. "But Papa showed us the letter he sent...how he'd pined for you, all through the years of your marriage, how he wouldn't lose his chance now. We had no idea."

No idea.

Cora felt as though she were going to fall through the ground. Maybe she should. Maybe there, she could find the decay of her own lost chances.

"And you have little ones," Lady Fordham sighed. "I always said Nate would make a wonderful father, but nobody believed me—"

"What are you on about?" Annalise teased her mother. "We've *all* been saying it, for years. It's one of Tabby's favorite theories." She smiled sweetly at Cora. "You should have seen him when I sprained my ankle. He came back from Cambridge to keep me company."

"Well," Viola smirked. "He also didn't want to finish his philosophy lecture."

Cora couldn't absorb any more of this. Annalise's words summoned the image of Nate holding Tess, perched in one

strong arm like a miniature Cleopatra. A little girl and her—

No. Don't even think it.

“Is Nathaniel here?” Lady Fordham asked, craning her neck around the ballroom.

“I...” Cora faltered, trying to collect herself. “Has he not mentioned? He’s returning to London. He left today, in fact.”

The women exchanged puzzled glances.

“Not that I’m aware. I know my husband requested, several days ago, that Nathaniel meet him in London.” The countess frowned, tapping her chin. “But Nate never responded. I assumed he was remaining here for the time being.”

Remaining here?

The countess and her daughters were looking at Cora expectantly. She was muddled and uncomfortable, having no idea of Nate’s plans regarding the earl. She didn’t want to land him in more trouble.

Why was she perpetually in the position of having to cover for him with his own family? His wonderful, gracious, kindhearted family. It occurred to Cora that if this engagement were real, she would be exchanging Edith Carleton for Lady Fordham and Tabitha.

“I’m sure Nathaniel is...” Cora broke off awkwardly, unsure how to finish that sentence. “He’s—”

“Oh!” Annalise suddenly smiled, nudging her mother. The countess peered past her daughter.

“Ah! *There* he is.” Lady Fordham smiled in satisfaction and discreetly pointed over Cora’s shoulder. “Just over there.”

What?

Cora turned, her gaze following the countess’s gloved forefinger to the ballroom entrance. Her heart crashed with a daring sense of premonition.

The milling crowd shifted, a sea of black tailcoats and bright dresses and—

Not possible.

It was like the morning at Dane House in reverse, catching sight of his broad shoulders from a distance. But the man Cora found tonight wasn't cocky or lazy or laced with bruises.

No. He was intent. He was agitated. He was so devastating in a navy tailcoat, Cora's eyes actually watered.

Viola was speaking, but Cora couldn't hear her. She had lost all her faculties, all ways of sense-making capitulating to sight.

What was this? How was this possible? Was he...

And then, from across the ballroom, Nate found her.

The moment his gaze landed on her, Cora stopped breathing. Or she would have, but her body seemed to understand she must keep taking in air, she must keep circulating blood, or she wouldn't survive to see his gray eyes lock on her with a burning, riveting pull.

Good God.

Nate's stare speared her, a piercing harpoon of want. Cora was dimly aware his family was still beside her, and they were very likely gaping.

But she couldn't see anything but Nate. He moved steadily through the crowd, all but pinning her to the wall.

"Oh my word," someone whispered. Cora couldn't be sure it wasn't her.

What was he *doing* here?

It was torture, this unspoken lure between them. His mouth bent into a seductive smile that transported Cora right back to the morning, to the moment he guided her over the edge.

And then, he was at her side, his hand sliding along her glove to take her fingers. Nate bowed low, his eyes sinking into her, drinking in her gown, forever coloring her dreams in shades of amethyst.

Every penny, she thought hazily. *This gown was worth every last penny.*

“Extraordinary, darling,” he murmured.

All of her senses returned. His voice, criminally low. His scent, sharp and aching familiar. His touch, steady against her gloved hand. His mouth—

“Nathaniel,” Lady Fordham said faintly, drawing his attention to his sister-in-law and nieces. They were gazing at Nate as though they had never seen him before.

“Rosalie?” He swiveled, and Cora felt a ridiculous pleasure at realizing he had been looking only at her. “Anna? Vi? What...what are you doing here?”

The trio exchanged delighted smiles, obviously enraptured by Nate’s distraction with Cora.

“Head in the clouds,” Lady Fordham trilled, looking as though she herself were soaring. “Look at you, Nate—”

“We’re traveling to Morrow Woods,” Annalise cut in. “We’re staying here for the evening, on our way to Hampshire.”

“Is...” Nate’s jaw ticked. “Is Fordham here?”

Viola shook her head. “Papa’s in London.”

Nate looked visibly relieved.

But an ache hewed deeply through Cora, leaving a groundswell of confusion. She still didn’t understand why Nate was here.

What on earth was going on?

The circulating crowd shifted; the musicians were assembling for the next set.

Nate looked down at her, his eyes blazing. Her breath hitched, and she blinked away. He fleetingly touched her arm, and it was all Cora could do not to launch herself at him.

“Rosie, ladies, ah...my apologies, but I didn’t expect to see you tonight. I came for Cora.”

“We didn’t suppose we would see you either.” The countess smiled at Nate, proud and earnest. “But I’m *glad*

you're here. We've missed you."

To Cora's surprise and immense pleasure, Nate softened.

"I've missed you too," he murmured, smiling almost sweetly at the women surrounding him.

Cora had assumed matters with his family were tense all around; judging by how he spoke of his brother, Cora thought feelings must be strained for everyone.

But these women were looking at Nate with nothing but love.

A melodious ripple unfurled over the ballroom, a bow dragging across a violin. The musicians were ready.

"Go." Lady Fordham all but shooed Nate. "Go, go, go—pay us no mind. I need to make an introduction for Viola, anyway, so don't give us another thought. We'll write to you, this week. And please, make a plan to see your brother," she added softly.

"I only have one plan right now." Nate's voice was husky as he looked over Cora. "Do you see her? I'm the luckiest bastard in Berkshire."

Lady Fordham made a sound that sounded very much like the one Cora would have made if her voice still functioned.

"I hope you aren't engaged for this dance, love." Nate's gray eyes smoldered. "Because I'm damn well taking the waltz."

"Nate!" Lady Fordham released an embarrassed laugh, glancing at her impressionable daughters. "*Oh my*. That's a bit..."

"A bit true," Nate rumbled.

A buzzing, secret feeling spread all the way to the tips of Cora's fingers. She had no idea what was happening right now, but she wanted to find out.

"Rosie, Anna, Viola." Nate nodded swiftly. "I'll see you another time. Safe travels."

“Go on.” Lady Fordham was beaming so hard she was bursting. “Please, Nate, we’ve been *waiting* for you to go on.”

Cora turned to bid a hasty adieu, the pleasantly shocked faces of Nate’s family warming her from the inside out. And then he was pulling her to the center of the ballroom. Cora only had a confused moment to marvel that Nate was voluntarily at a ball; Nate was voluntarily dancing.

Nate had voluntarily stayed?

He took position, his hand wide and warm along her back, his gloved fingertips touching the bare skin exposed by the scooping neckline on the back of her gown.

A thrill of nerves, of anticipation.

The waltz unspooled around her, the crowd of dancers moving in graceful harmony, but Cora was reduced to nothing but singular sensations, as though her subconscious understood she couldn’t manage the whole of her circumstances.

Had he come back...for her?

“Nate,” she started, her mouth clumsy with the memory of his lips, so close to hers. “You left.”

“Yes.”

“You came back?”

“Yes.”

The word landed on her ears, and everywhere else on her body. “And are you...are you returning to London? To see your brother?”

Nate’s eyes fused to hers. “*No.*”

The music changed, the marche transitioning to the pirouette, and Cora shifted, expecting Nate to take the customary posture for the next section. But instead of stepping to her side, Nate turned to face her. His left hand cradled the hollow between her shoulder blades as his foot came to rest between hers.

Cora had never danced this scandalous variation of the pirouette. She nervously placed her hand on his shoulder, hoping Nate knew what he was doing.

“That is, I don’t want to go to London with my brother,” Nate murmured. “But that’s up to you, Cora.”

His hand slid, imperceptibly, until he cupped her ribcage—an iron vise, his grip all the more punishing in its restraint. The lack of him alone was enough to make her clench with longing. Her nipples tightened, pulling toward the heat of his thumb against her bodice.

He had come back for her.

“But our contract—”

“I don’t give a damn about the contract,” he interjected. “I’m not taking your money. And that’s my final word on it.”

Nate’s conviction drew her full attention. There was nobody else in the ballroom; there was nobody else on earth.

“If I stay, Cora, I’m *staying*. I’m staying, and I’m going to help you.”

She could once more feel the sensation of her yoke, the many burdens she had been carrying, all this time, all alone.

But Nate’s hand was on her back too.

“This isn’t wise,” Cora whispered shakily, her self-preservation at war with her wishes. “What you’re suggesting...we can’t. It’s not...it’s not possible for me. I shouldn’t have even let you—”

“Not another word.” His voice was low and urgent. “I’ll let you do anything you want to me, Cora. But I won’t permit you to regret me.”

Her head was pounding. “I don’t have a choice.”

“You do have a choice. I’m offering you one.”

“Please.” She didn’t even know why she said it. The word meant nothing when he was withholding nothing. All day, Cora had carried him on her skin; she had borne the memory

of his mouth on hers, she had held the ache of his absence inside of her.

And she didn't have to settle for memory.

"There's the blue," he murmured, staring at her eyes, seeing on her face what he was doing to her. His forefinger teased the seam on the back of her gown.

"I've been blue *all* day," she found herself admitting, and Nate's pupils dilated.

"Hmm..." His voice was soft, but she felt each word land, even as the music swelled. "All day, *I've* thought of your back."

His fingers taunted her heated skin through her gown, sliding the smooth fabric back and forth. Each rub of silk against her spine set her nerves on fire. How she was standing, she'd never know.

"No stays, I see," Nate burred, following the waltz.

"I...no," she whispered, her voice strangled. "It's a boned chemise, actually."

"Christ, Cora," he groaned. "You've set my imagination ablaze."

He bent his head, bringing them nearer to cheek-to-cheek. In her mind, they were somewhere else entirely, somewhere where she could freely turn her head, take his sigh on her lips.

"Nate..." She meant to warn him. She was altogether unsurprised to find her tone was pleading instead.

His footing was sure as his fingers traced a triangle under her shoulder blade. "That damn triad of freckles is just here..."

She was going to combust. A human body wasn't made to withstand this.

"You have to stop," she choked, her jaw clenched so hard she feared she was bruising.

"I'll stop." His eyes burned with promise. "If that's what you want. After all, I'm a gentleman."

Nate led her through the steps, commanding and effortless, and she prayed he was keeping time, for she herself couldn't even hear the music, couldn't hear anything but the heavy, syrupy rush of her heartbeat.

He wanted to stay. With her. She wouldn't have to face this alone. The Carletons, the petition, the daily business of raising two small, needy hearts.

The dance was ending, but Cora felt herself at the cusp. Of what, she couldn't begin to say.

“Don't be.”

Nate's hand was firm on her ribcage. “Don't be what?”

She looked up at him, awash with daring. His gray eyes were hooded, the slate bleeding to black. She knew now *exactly* what that gaze portended.

“Don't be a gentleman.”

The music slowed.

“If you say things like that, I'm going to have to take you home, Cora.” He aimed for a taunt, but she caught his beseeching urgency.

There was a clear path here, as surely as there had been at the piano—the chance for more, the chance to try.

You have to be brave.

“Then take me home,” she whispered. “And stay there.”

July 1819

Finch Residence, London

Nate—

Yesterday, I was riding in Hyde Park, and I saw two small children picnicking with their governess. A boy and a girl.

It made me think of how you and I used to do the same. Specifically, one sunny afternoon before you left for Eton. You had fussed you were too old for picnics, but I must have insisted because there you were. I had forgotten my bonnet and suffered imminent threat of a dreadful sunburn. You gave me your cap, and it was your own face that turned red as a tomato.

Rosalie wrote to me, informing me she saw you acting wildly inappropriately with Cora at the Monmouth Ball.

Good for you.

Raymond will be in fits, I'm sure, that you are still not in London, settling matters as his future heir. But I, for one, am not surprised; you have always tended to lose your head around a woman in peril.

Love from—

Tabby



“I CAN’T BEAR TO MOVE,” Cora groaned.

“Then don’t.” Nate slumped, winded, against the wooden paneling of the tack room. Late afternoon sunlight slanted

through the long, narrow stable windows, turning everything as dusty and golden as the sweet bundles of hay.

Cora's groom had her mare at the farrier, and on a bribe from Nate, the stable boys had taken a few horses out for exercise. The empty stables were hushed and mellow; one crooked shutter on the courtyard door swung lazily in the warm summer breeze.

"Somehow, there's a bridle under my head," Cora said vaguely. "But I can't lift my arms."

She rotated her head, wincing. He couldn't blame her. It had been three days since the Monmouth Ball, and their physical exertions had left even Nate feeling muscles he didn't know he possessed. It turned out his boxing habit was merely a warm-up for round-the-clock dalliances with Cora.

He reached for her, massaging the kinks out of her neck. She moaned, and Nate spiked with aroused guilt at the tactile memory of his fist, tight in the tresses at her nape. He needed to leave her damned hair *alone*.

"Can you fix me?" she asked plaintively. "I'm too indisposed to care for my pride."

Nate chuckled as he stood and snagged Cora's discarded dress from a bridle peg. He passed it to her, proffering his other hand to help her stand.

The diffuse sunlight turned her linen chemise sheer. Through the thin fabric, Nate could see the flare of her hips, the curve of her bottom.

He'd only *just* had her—his psyche was still scorched by the memory of her stretched before him as he bent her over an ancient stone trough, her arms flexing in time to his splintering thrusts—but her state of unready set him simmering.

Cora turned, stepping into the pale pink muslin. Nate drank in her silhouette, instinctively stepping forward to admire the supple line of her back, all the way down to—

"Can you do the ties?"

Nate was already against her, his hands sliding into her open dress, pulling her back to his bare chest.

“How long do we have?” he murmured into her neck. He found her raging pulse and held it under his tongue.

Cora had been adamant after the ball. This could continue, but only on absolute unwavering terms—*never* when the children were awake, *never* when the Carletons were anywhere except their own guest quarters or off the estate.

Those two restrictions might have sufficiently curbed their ardor, but Nate had become remarkably motivated to maintain a schedule. Right now, for instance, he’d secured a precious pocket of time where everyone was where they were supposed to be. It seemed both precocious children and crotchety old coots were wont to rest during the heat of the afternoon.

Cora gasped as Nate lazily circled her nipple with his thumb.

“Leo will be up...from his nap...by three o’clock.”

“So we have more time.” He nuzzled into her hair, seeking out the lemongrass. “*Yes?*”

“Nate.” She ground against him—testing, teasing. “You can’t possibly...we’ve only just finished.”

He nipped the taut, salty skin of her shoulder, and Cora hissed, her hips following his wandering fingers.

“I wasn’t talking about me.” Nate grinned, spinning her around and perching her on a work table. He sank to his knees in the straw and fumbled in his discarded trousers for his pocket watch, handing it to Cora as he slid her skirts up her thighs.

“Can you keep the time, love?”

Cora skimmed one foot up his arm to his chest, her heel pinning his heartbeat as she arched one challenging brow.

“Can you be quick?”

His palms fell heavily to her knees, spreading her open.

“Who said anything about quick?” Nate mockingly admonished, gently scoring the tender skin of her inner thigh before brushing his lips to the damp apex of her legs. “Stop me at three o’clock.”

He dipped his mouth against her, a long, soft suck that had her arching her back with a guttural groan. *There*. They were still learning what she liked best, and Nate was readily applying himself to the task. He’d come to crave that sigh, the exact moment she surrendered, allowing him to momentarily hold her worries at bay.

What endeavor could be worthier?

The night of the ball, Nate had proclaimed he was the luckiest bastard in Berkshire. But that had been a feeble half truth; Nate was the luckiest bastard under the sky. There was no man in any constellation who he would trade places with.

Cora was magnificent in her quest to unearth what she had long denied, to tend and nurture the rare, exquisite wildness inside of her. Nate was aware he was merely a vessel, the means to her end, but he found he didn’t care.

Cora had been insatiable; she wasn’t the only one. Nate felt as though he were drowning, floundering while she tossed him mere scraps of driftwood—not enough, by far, to keep him afloat, but he wasn’t about to discard the only parts of herself she would give him. He would take every shard, fashioning a laughably inept raft, scrap by scrap, until the day he finally went under.

Nate feathered his tongue against her clitoris, watching her thighs flush. He glanced over her, rosy and slack, and experienced a violent pulse of pleasure at the privilege of looking up at Cora.

She shifted impatiently, and he sank two fingers inside her, purposefully rocking slower than she wanted. Ten exasperated fingernails dug so tightly into his hair, his eyes watered.

It was a *hell* of a way to go.

“MR. TRAVERS? Are you listening to me? I am trying to provide an update about my Cousin Prudence.”

Edith Carleton impatiently tapped her fork against the morning-room table, which was set for an informal luncheon.

Nate looked away from Cora’s glazed expression; he had been tracing her ankle with the tip of his boot under the table while mentally composing a new letter, explicitly outlining what he planned to do with the leftover Chantilly cream.

So the answer to Mrs. Carleton’s interrogation would be *no*. He hadn’t been listening. He snagged a handful of grapes from the bowl nearest him.

“Of course, Mrs. Carleton,” Nate said, still looking at Cora with a rakish intensity. “Your cousin has been afflicted with...” He trailed off, ponderously. “Gout?”

He winked at Cora, as though it were perfectly appropriate to flirt over diseased relatives. He waited for the sharp kick to his shins, but to his hot-blooded surprise, Cora deliberately lifted her napkin, dabbing at her lips, her neck, the tight swell of her breasts.

Nate shifted, eyeing the remaining lunch. Cora playing minx was tipping him right outside any remaining shreds of propriety. If they were alone, he’d have her on her back in under a minute.

He stared at her, his eyes dark. *Try me.*

“Dropsy.” Mrs. Carleton sniffed. “Not gout.”

Things were looking poor for both Cousin Prudence and Cora. Nate traced his thumb slowly along the stem of his wine glass, drawing her attention to the steady, insistent stroking.

“I ask you all to keep her in your prayers.” Mrs. Carleton looked around, shaking a long-suffering head, apparently deeming any prayers from them unlikely to be much assistance. “She’s not at *all* well, and it weighs so on my heart. You know, I feel things so deeply.”

“I’ve never much cared for Prudence,” Carleton piped in with a shudder. “She’s quite difficult...”

Nate and Cora studiously avoided each other's eyes at the prospect of Edict Carleton's husband finding a woman difficult.

Mrs. Carleton looked at her husband waspishly. "One would think you'd be a bit more charitably minded, Mr. Carleton, given the nature of your work. Poor Prudence can't even get her boots on anymore, her legs are twice their usual size—"

Cora coughed into her napkin.

Nate leaned forward, slowly raising one eyebrow. "Did you care for the soufflé, Cora?"

His voice was remarkably innocent for someone who had been wordlessly telling her he wanted to lay her over the table.

"Yes?" she squeaked.

"Would you like more?"

Cora's lips parted; Nate was immediately taken to last night, how he'd pressed her stomach into his mattress, his breath hot in her ear. *How much more, Cora?*

"Yes. I'd like more," she murmured, her hoarse voice indicating she, too, was remembering.

The vicar was staring at her quizzically. "The soufflé is right by your elbow, Lady Dane." Carleton pointed with his spoon, in case Cora was unaware of the location of her elbow.

Cora shook herself, and Nate suppressed a smug, anticipatory grin. She glared, warning him off.

"Mr. and Mrs. Carleton." Cora straightened. "I wanted to inform you, I've decided to host a soiree later this week."

"A *soiree*?" Mrs. Carleton looked as though Cora had suggested hosting a troupe of acrobats. "Why?"

Nate pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd forgotten about the bloody soiree. Cora had mentioned the idea yesterday, her fingers dancing far too lightly down the ridges of his stomach as she detailed her plan to extend their public charade as long as he was still at Aldworth Park.

Now Cora looked to Nate for assistance he was unable to provide. Yesterday, he hadn't taken in a single word of her plan until she was asking him to say *yes*, the only word he had been capable of saying.

"Well..." He thought fast. "Cora hasn't hosted all summer," Nate said, relieved to see Cora nodding encouragingly.

"I thought it was time I put a party together. We've been invited elsewhere, and it's rude not to return the hospitality."

"Do I need to attend?" The vicar had crossed the morning room to a side table, where he had messy piles of correspondence and paperwork strewn about. "Will there be dinner?"

"Yes." Cora was visibly withholding her aggravation that the Carletons would obviously need to be invited. "I was thinking of perhaps six or seven couples. We'll have dinner, cards, parlor games. I think it will be fun."

Nate seriously doubted the Carletons' presence would be fun, but they couldn't exactly leave them out. This was an ideal sort of opportunity to enact their ruse.

"Fine," Edict huffed, pushing back from the table. "Let me know the date. And don't start dinner too late in the evening, Lady Dane."

"My lady?" Coates strode in. "Annie has the children ready for their naps."

"Excuse me," Cora said brightly. "I'm going to tell them a story."

Mrs. Carleton swiveled her head. "On my approved list, I hope? You know my feelings, nothing immoral or overly scintillating, Lady Dane."

Nate rolled his eyes. "I believe Cora's been doing excerpts from Dante's *Inferno*, Mrs. Carleton. They left off at the Vestibule of Hell. Funnily enough, your portrait was hanging over the door."

Cora speared him a look, but Mrs. Carleton ignored him, griping as she followed Cora to the door.

“You can’t see them to bed every time, Lady Dane. You’re pampering them...”

The women swept out of the morning room, leaving Nate in the grizzled company of Ronald Carleton, which was far worse than no company at all.

“Well then,” he started, snatching one last handful of grapes. “I think I, too, will be off...”

The vicar was still at his side table, grousing over an assortment of papers. He looked up, regarding Nate with a frown.

“Say...” Carleton shuffled his papers, pushing the stack uncertainly toward Nate. “Travers, can you read this line here? My son’s penmanship is mere chicken scratch. Much to the chagrin of Mrs. Carleton.”

Nate stifled his irritation and strode over to Carleton. He took the paper, squinting at the line to which the vicar pointed.

It was a ledger sheet.

“Ah...*sash windows. 77 pounds, 4 shillings.*”

“Hmm.” The vicar frowned. “More than I expected....”

Nate stared at the paper. The sum jarred. *77 pounds?* For *windows?* He vaguely remembered Carleton meeting with the parish rector the day of the strawberry festival. Something about a tour...renovations...

Nate sank into the chair opposite Carleton, his curiosity piqued. “Are you having renovations done, Vicar?”

Carleton absently made a note on his paper, repeating the sum Nate had read aloud. “Eh? What’s that?”

“I merely inquired if you were completing renovations.” Nate eyed the ledger sheet with new interest. In addition to the windows, there were tabulations for plasterers, joiners, masons.

It was a substantial list.

Carleton snatched the paper away from Nate.

“Ah. Yes. I’m finally completing an addition to the vicarage. I’ve been waiting for *years* to have the funds, and isn’t it just my luck that now work is finally underway, I’ve had to leave my son to manage it, but he’s not one for bookkeeping...”

Nate stared, a memory snagging. The vicar was gibbering on about his son and some issue with supplies, but Nate was hardly listening.

His recollection was tugging him to last week, to Lord Wallace’s thicket the day of the shooting party, trudging back to the house with the other men as Carrington boasted about his cousin’s dubious financial arrangement. How he was drawing funds from his legal ward.

“Ah, that must be...frustrating,” Nate said slowly, studying the vicar.

But Carleton was absorbed, furiously penning a letter to his son.

Nate put his elbow on the table, right on top of several of the disordered papers. He shifted slightly, pulling the pile fractionally toward him. He peered down at the nearest item—a narrow slip, a string of numbers...an account?

Nate moved his elbow.

It was a partially printed draft from Coulter & Co., a bank in London. Nate recognized the name; Coulter catered to the aristocracy, he was certain of it. Fordham didn’t bank there, but Nate had friends who did. At any rate, it wasn’t the sort of establishment where a vicar would typically have an account.

But a four-year-old viscount might.

A barb of premonition pierced Nate, not unlike the familiar sensation of sitting at Madame’s Roost, drawing his cards and realizing he may have a good hand.

“I imagine your parishioners feel proud to have raised the funds for your repairs.” Nate forced himself to look at Carleton, even as he mentally tabulated sums. Nate was no

architect, but he suspected this was far too much for a modest renovation.

“Who? That sorry lot? Ha! Suffice to say the lesser tithes are *less*,” Carleton grouched. “No, no money from them...nor from the worthless squire. I’ve been on my own for years, Travers.” He grinned lewdly. “But the good Lord provides, that’s what I always say.”

Nate felt uneasy. How would a vicar suddenly come to money, if it wasn’t raised through his parish? An investment? Perhaps.

Or an inheritance.

Nate scanned the table—there were several drafts strewn about. Some of the cheques were still blank; a few, like the one nearest him, were made out to Carleton. One, half-hidden, was payable to a Mr. Burke. Nate visualized the ledger sheet he had read aloud.

The mason had been listed as Burke.

Nate drummed his fingers against his thigh. There was something *off* here.

Which is exactly what Gavin Sinclair needed. What had Sinclair written to Cora? *Prove the Carletons are unsuitable.*

“But it’s a damned nuisance,” Carleton said now, leveling his quill at Nate. “All this writing back and forth with my son.”

At that moment, a kitchen maid arrived with a tray of warm scones, and Carleton pivoted, eyeing the platter with interest.

Only one way to find out.

Nate glanced up; the vicar was fussing over his pastry selection.

Using the distraction to his advantage, Nate took a decided risk and inched the ledger sheet and nearest bank draft closer to him, casually setting his forearm on top of the pile. Keeping Carleton’s back in his sightline, Nate slid the small stack off

the edge of the table, into his lap, before hastily tucking them under his waistcoat.

Holy hell.

He had just officially robbed the Carletons.

As Carleton swiveled back with his scone, Nate jostled the table with his knee, knocking the remaining correspondence askew to cover over any gaps in the papers. Judging by the mess, the vicar wasn't much for bookkeeping himself.

Nate was counting on it.

"If you'll excuse me, Carleton," Nate said tersely, eager to put some distance between himself and the vicar. He needed to stash these documents away until he figured out what the hell to do about his suspicions.

"Travers," Carleton muttered absently, still scribbling to his son.

Nate made his way to the quiet corridor, his hand falling to the papers in his waistcoat. He pulled out the draft, studying it.

Of course, he had no proof of his misgivings. He wasn't even certain of what he had—a cheque from a numbered account, drawn from Coulter & Co., with a sum of twenty pounds payable to Ronald Carleton. Carleton himself had signed it.

Nate considered. Unless the vicar did, in fact, bank at Coulter's and was drawing against himself to withdraw coin or transfer between accounts, the other plausible explanation was he signed the cheque because the account belonged to his ward. But Nate wasn't positive which it was.

And even if it were Leo's account, so what? A legal guardian, accessing his ward's finances? It could be as suspect as Nate was making it out to be. Or it could be perfectly reasonable. Nate had no firm idea of what expenditures Leo and Tess might require.

Nate had nothing but his own instinct. But if there was one thing his instincts were good for, it was dubious activities. Something wasn't adding up. The renovation costs,

the random slew of accounts and funds. It smelled rotten. But Nate would feel a hell of a lot better if another nose could confirm it.

He had to write to Gavin Sinclair, that much was clear. But if his suspicion was correct, if Carleton *was* misappropriating Leo's money for this renovation, it might make all the difference in the guardianship petition.

Nate could *solve* this.

And Cora? Should he tell her?

Nate frowned, already disliking both options. He didn't want to keep this from her, but if he mentioned the bank draft and ledger, Cora would only fixate on the possible evidence. She'd likely ride to London and burst into the bank, waving the paperwork over her head like some sort of reverse bandit. At the very least, she'd confront the Carletons and bring this entire situation to a head.

No. If Cora got wind of this, she would never rest. She would make herself sick with nerves, and these documents might prove to be nothing at all. He couldn't bear to cause her more anxiety because he acted overly rash.

Wait, Nate decided, making for his guestroom with his evidence. *Wait to hear from Gavin Sinclair first.*

IT WAS LATE that night when Cora finally fell against him. Her skin was slick from their exertions as she burrowed into the crook of his neck.

"I should return to my own quarters," Nate reluctantly whispered, staring at the canopy of her bed. His fingers reflexively found the ends of her hair, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger. But he couldn't leave her bed. He couldn't leave her arms. He couldn't even leave the damned knotted tangle of her hair.

"No," Cora murmured. She slid her feet against his shins. "I want you to stay."

In half a moment, she was drifting.

He pulled her tighter against him, his heartbeat finding hers, slowing to the same rhythm through the walls of their ribs. Nate was exhausted, sated, as physically content as he'd ever been.

But he wouldn't sleep.

His mind was turning—Carleton's papers, the letter he'd sent to Sinclair earlier that afternoon. The possibility he could end this nightmare on Cora's behalf.

Was it sufficient? Was *he*?

That question had governed his entire life, and he still had no answer.

So for now, he lay awake, holding Cora, both of them cocooned in one-half of her bed.

July 1819

Finch Residence, London

Cora, darling—

I'm not at all used to being the half of our pair with the least excitement to report, but you, my dear, were long overdue. Rumor has reached Town even without my assistance—apparently, you and Nathaniel made quite a stir at the Monmouth Ball last week. I'm sure it can hardly be helped; I always thought the two of you would make a striking pair.

But rest assured, my sweet, I'm still assisting away. It's no small feat, mind you, to both feed the beast and keep him at bay. I'm giving just enough details of your courtship to whet the appetite of the ton, without inviting too many questions.

My suggestion for you?

Feed the beast, Cora. As for keeping him at bay...

Love from—

T.



“HANG ON NOW. You two are far too excitable. Let's try this again.”

Cora looked up from her embroidery, watching as Nate exasperatedly attempted to organize Tess and Leo's ruthless version of lawn bowls.

“Lady Dane, excuse me,” Edith Carleton huffed in irritation from where she sat beside Cora on the terrace, her own needlepoint in her lap. Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Carleton looked monumentally aggrieved. Cora wasn’t sure if it was due to the children’s games or her insistence on taking their embroidery outside.

“Yes, Mrs. Carleton?”

“You do, I believe, employ a household staff?”

Cora gritted her teeth. *What now?* She willed herself to relax and turned to Mrs. Carleton, who was grimacing at Cora’s embroidery.

“Yes, Mrs. Carleton. That’s correct.”

“So why, pray tell, are you hemming dinner napkins?”

Cora looked down at the row of bluebells she was restitching.

“Well, because Mrs. Bainsbridge informed me we are one place setting short for the party tonight, and I wanted all of the napkins to match.”

“Yes, but surely a maid—”

“I enjoy embroidery,” Cora said defensively. “It brings me a sense of calm and accomplishment.”

This was a lie. Nothing about the terrace was calm, and no embroidery would change that. On the adjacent lawn, Leo and Tess were sunburned, sweaty, and tormenting Nate.

He groaned, burying his face in his hands as Tess defiantly rolled her ball away from the makeshift pitch into a patch of wild lavender.

“Who’s winning?” Cora called, unable to stem her smile even while Edith Carleton sat reproachfully next to her.

“Certainly not me.” Nate winked. “But I can win later.”

Cora slipped, missing a stitch entirely. She absently shook out her hand, hardly noticing the needle’s prick.

“Speaking of your household...” Mrs. Carleton fussed, ignorant of the rosy sunrise inside Cora’s chest. “A *word*, Lady Dane.”

“Hmm?” She dragged her attention away from the trio on the lawn. Nate was swinging a little monkey on each arm as recompense for their blatant cheating.

“I don’t mean to intimate anything...unscrupulous.” Mrs. Carleton’s voice dropped to a nasty whisper. “But the vicar has noticed some missing items.”

That snapped Cora right to attention. “*Missing* items? What sort of items?”

Mrs. Carleton impatiently waved the question aside. “Some paperwork. But paperwork of import.” Her face was unpleasantly strained. “It has gone missing, and I don’t believe it was simply misplaced. I’m concerned a member of your household has *absconded* with it.”

Cora boiled with righteous anger. Her staff would never. She was positive not one person under her roof had given any article of the Carletons’ so much as a second look.

“I trust my household implicitly—”

“Perhaps you should inform your housekeeper,” Mrs. Carleton pushed. “Make her aware of suspicious patterns of behavior. It could be you’re too soft-handed. I’m certain nothing ever went missing when we visited Aldworth before, when my dear brother was still with us.”

Cora refrained from pointing out how Mr. Carleton was wont to stare at her serving maids. Cora had instructed Mrs. Bainsbridge to keep a close eye on *that* situation. And there was nothing soft-handed about it.

“I’ll speak to Mrs. Bainsbridge,” Cora said with a note of finality. “But I assure you, Mrs. Carleton, I don’t take accusations of theft lightly. My staff has been intensely loyal. Perhaps the vicar should conduct another inventory.”

Cora pointedly turned her attention back to the lawn, effectively ending further accusations.

“All right, you two, look here,” Nate was saying. “I’m trying a concept you don’t seem familiar with. It’s called aiming.”

Cora laughed, absently working her needle through the napkin as Nate pointlessly took his turn and was immediately sabotaged by Tess rolling his ball out of bounds.

“Seven!” She jumped up and down with such vigor her little stocking puddled around her ankle. Leo resolutely jogged off to retrieve the ball.

Nate tossed his hands up at Cora, but she was the one surrendering; his brilliant smile thoroughly upended her. She blinked slowly, entirely forgetting her embroidery.

The sensation of his eyes on her evoked her childhood. She used to lie on the sun-soaked cobblestones of her mother’s garden, the sky and ground warming her skin in tandem, gradually turning her dazed and torpid. Nate’s gaze took her right back to those dreamy afternoons. He had a way of making her feel supine in the sun.

“You’ll pay for that, Lady Swifte! A two biscuit tax, *minimum*.”

“Nate,” Tess squealed as Leo hung from Nate’s shoulders. “Chase me!”

Cora’s heart clenched tightly. Seeing the three of them together was a transcendent experience. Her children and a man with arms big enough for both of them.

For *all* of them.

Cora set down her embroidery, unable to look away.

The wish tearing through her was so enormous it seemed to unbury her past, to beckon the silent shadow of her girlhood, reminding Cora of how she used to long for exactly this sort of chaos.

They look like a family.

Mrs. Carleton scowled at Cora’s needlepoint.

“Truly, Lady Dane, you should have left it to the maids. You’ve gone over your bluebell row a half dozen times. It looks a fright.”

Cora looked down at her needlepoint, smiling in surprise at the messy explosion of flowers. It seemed fitting. After all, she *had* promised herself no more tidy rows.

“I will use this one, tonight.” Cora shrugged. “I don’t mind in the least.”

She tossed the napkin aside and joined the game on the lawn. What sort of punishment might Nate inflict if *she* went out of bounds?

Mrs. Carleton was calling after her, something about the housekeeper, but Cora couldn’t hear her. She wasn’t on the terrace; she wasn’t even in the garden.

No, Cora was on another plane altogether.

She was as high as the climbing ivy, as high as the rooftop, as high as the clouds.

Cora was floating, watching herself live the unwieldy, joyful life she always wanted.

AS THE SOIREE UNFOLDED, Cora could say, to her immense gratification, the evening was a resounding success. The Carletons were an unfortunate but predictable dose of dour, but her other guests were all getting along famously.

It had been far too long since she’d had a house full of people, everyone laughing and convivial. She and Dane hadn’t hosted a party like this since Tess was an infant. Those had always been horrifically drudging affairs, what with Dane and his cronies skulking off, leaving their boring wives to lament about cold hands and cold beds.

But not tonight.

Tonight, Cora was experiencing what it was like to entertain with Nate Travers at her side.

Nate was merry and attentive, doting on Cora, charming her friends, and it couldn't have felt further from pretense. Even as she applied herself to hostessing, Cora was aware of his smile following her, his eyes two warm beacons keeping her both distracted and glowing.

Irrespective of what Gavin was investigating for the case, Cora was certain she and Nate couldn't be more convincing. They were in complete harmony, a couple besotted, and everyone here could see it.

At least, that's what Cora thought.

The men retired to the smoking room for a few rounds of cards, Nate with far too much—albeit appealing—swagger. Cora took advantage of the interlude to nip upstairs and kiss her children goodnight.

When she rejoined the ladies in the drawing room, it was to the odious wind of gossip.

“You are all incorrigible,” Lady Wallace was chastising the group. “I've told you. Leave her well enough alone—”

“Leave who alone?” Cora asked, lowering to the settee next to Bianca Carrington. “What are we discussing?”

She hoped someone had an update about Mrs. Putnam and her engaged stable hand. There had been a drought of gossip all summer.

The room fell silent, every woman seeming in need of her ratafia at the exact same moment.

Cora cocked her head.

“Come now, ladies.” She narrowed her eyes. “If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were talking about *me*.”

Mrs. Carleton coughed. Cora grew uncomfortably hot.

It struck her that the dearth of gossip may be because every tongue was wagging about Lady Dane and Mr. Travers.

“Oh fine,” Lady Monmouth relented, setting down her glass. “I'll take the bait.” She swiveled to Cora. “It's only...we can't imagine how it happened.”

“How what happened?”

“Mr. Travers!” Mrs. Powell exclaimed in exasperation. “Don’t play coy, Lady Dane.”

“I truly didn’t expect to see him settle down,” Mrs. Carrington mused. “He hasn’t shown the slightest interest in anything even sniffing of respectability.”

“Remember that actress? Or was she a soprano?” Mrs. Powell pondered.

Unease tightened Cora’s spine until she was sitting ramrod straight. She refused to look at Edith Carleton, who was most assuredly absorbing every word like a sponge.

“She went to France afterward, I think.”

“Whatever she was, she had a good right hook,” Christine Carrington, the elder of the two unwed daughters, chimed in with a laugh. “Remember how she walloped him?”

“I hope Paris doesn’t feature in your honeymoon plans,” Lady Monmouth teased. “I think Mr. Travers is banned from the opera.”

The women looked at Cora in amusement. Cora tried to smile, but she feared it was more of a grimace.

Don’t panic, she warned herself. Don’t start picking away, don’t start peeling back the wallpaper, looking for cracks in the plaster underneath.

So Nate had a reputation; what did it matter? She *knew* he had a reputation. It’s the very reason she selected him for this hoax in the first place.

But Cora had been largely out of touch with society the last five years. While Tabby kept her generally informed, most of Cora’s time had been spent childrearing in Berkshire. Cora enjoyed the countryside; she *liked* raising her children here.

Until she was faced with the prickly reminder her friends and acquaintances had information she did not.

Such as Nate carousing all over London, fighting off actresses left and right.

“Lady Dane?”

“Yes? My apologies, Mrs. Powell.”

“I was inquiring *when* you became reacquainted with Mr. Travers? How did your courtship unfold? I don’t mean to press...but well, I’d be remiss not to.” She laughed, the other women joining the conspiratorial chuckling. “Everyone is simply dying to know how you changed him.”

Mrs. Carleton was staring at her. Cora needed to direct this line of conversation immediately. She couldn’t let her jealousy or confusion detract from the matter at hand, from the ruse. This was the prime time to divulge information these women might pass along to the Chancery if the court solicited character witnesses.

“He wrote to me, last summer.” Cora plastered on a bashful smile. “To express condolences for my husband’s passing. After that, we began to correspond...and then his sister, Lady Tabitha, reintroduced us properly in June. It all happened quite quickly after that.”

“It must have,” Mrs. Carrington huffed. “He disappeared with Isolde Simms at his own brother’s ball. I know because he missed a dance with Bianca.”

Cora startled. The Fordham Ball had been the night before she met Nate at Dane House. And he had been rendezvousing with another widow?

She felt a headache building; it seemed Nate had a type.

The type he didn’t need to marry.

Across from her, Edith Carleton leaned forward.

Blast it.

“Well.” Cora shrugged in a concerted effort to play blithe. “I think we all know we can’t assume what happens between a husband and a wife.” She gave a pointed look around the room, ending with Mrs. Carleton. “Sometimes, a gentleman appears to be a good match on paper, but the reality pales in comparison. And sometimes...it’s the reverse.”

The women exploded into another frenzy of questions and commentary, but Cora was altogether queasy now.

How well did she know Nate after all? And why did it suddenly matter? This was a sham engagement on one hand, a burgeoning affair on the other. She had no grounds on which to be bothered by Nate's past antics.

And yet here she was, *bothered*. Half of her was on the terrace, watching her children climb all over him; the other half of her was in his bed.

Cora was very, very *bothered*.

"I don't blame you for catching him, Lady Dane." Lady Wallace leaned forward, patting Cora's hand in something near sympathy. "His shoulders alone would make me turn a blind eye to the rest of it." She covered her mouth at her own audacity. "But do watch him. And that's all I'll say about that."

Cora was torn between wanting Lady Wallace to say much more and wanting her never to speak again.

At that moment, the very man in question strode through the door.

"Ladies," Nate called jovially.

He tossed her a wink. Cora suspected he'd won big at the card table. But whereas an hour ago, she might have found his smug confidence gratifying, now she only found it grating.

"Are you enjoying yourselves?"

"We will be soon," Lady Monmouth simpered, suggestively raising her eyebrow. Of course, now that they were faced with Nate, the women had returned to unabashed staring. "If you and the men are finished with cards, we were hoping for a parlor game."

Cora nearly rolled her eyes.

"A parlor game would be delightful." Nate grinned. "I'm sure you have something titillating up your sleeve, Lady Monmouth."

The Carrington sisters both turned pink.

“Why don’t you ladies select something for us?” Nate suggested. He regarded Cora, who was still notably stiff. “I need a word with my betrothed.”

“How many players do we have?” Lady Wallace started ticking off the guest list.

“Two less,” Mrs. Carleton declared, her sharp eyes focused on Nate. “The vicar and I will be retiring before any *parlor games*.”

Nate held out an expectant arm to Cora, motioning to the door. “Lady Dane?”

She stood, reluctantly following him to the corridor. She didn’t feel like being alone with Nate right now.

The raucous voices in the drawing room hushed as the door closed behind them.

“Did you need something?” Cora asked tightly, frustrated with how sore and put out she felt.

Nate leaned against the wall, and Cora resisted the instinct to step closer.

“I just wanted a moment.” Nate smiled, his eyes soft. “It’s a change, isn’t it? All of these people about? I’ve been accustomed to things being quieter.”

Don’t pick, Cora. Don’t pick.

“Well, yes. I suppose that was quite a change, wasn’t it? From what I can tell, *quiet* is a new look for you.”

Nate blinked, flummoxed. “What on earth are you talking about?”

There was no version of Cora that could remain silent. She folded her arms tightly. “Did you abscond from the Fordham Ball with Isolde Simms?”

Nate raised his eyebrows. “*What?*”

“Did you?”

Nate exhaled a soft laugh. “Is that what has you all”—he twirled his finger—“coiled?”

Cora pursed her lips and stared in the vicinity of his ear.

“Cora, love. Yes, I took a walk with Isolde Simms that night. And believe it or not, it actually was only a walk,” he hedged. “Mostly. But nothing...progressed between us.”

Cora’s teeth clenched. She felt childish and knew she was acting as such, which only made it worse. Nate didn’t owe Cora anything, least of all his past. But even still...

“You’re a rogue. You’ve been careless—”

“I’m *your* rogue.” Nate tried to tease her, but a fleeting tension shadowed his handsome face. “I assure you, I’ve never taken more care than I have with you.”

She wanted it to be true so much, her chest burned. But the women’s whispers had ignited a nagging sense of dread, and Cora couldn’t move past it.

“It’s embarrassing, to find out this kind of thing in front of a group...in front of Mrs. Carleton,” Cora whispered in irritation. “Surely, you can see my aggravation?”

“Cora...” Nate said slowly. “You have to realize. I’ve taken many walks with many women on many nights. You know my reputation.”

“Yes. Of course I do. But that was before—”

Cora broke off, her stomach twisting. Nate straightened, crossing his arms as he considered her.

“*Before?* Before what?”

Cora looked away.

“Before *what*, Cora?”

“I don’t know,” Cora mumbled, tangling her necklace. “Forget I said anything.”

Nate gently brushed back her hair, his eyes darting to the hallway behind them.

“Before *you*,” he breathed. “Before *this*.”

“I don’t know what *this* is,” Cora hissed, her eyes growing wet in frustration. “I hear these things and...what do I even know of you?”

“Still?” Nate laughed in disbelief. “Still you don’t know? You’d listen to those women over your own lived experience? All of these weeks together, this last week *together*?”

“They’ve been in your circle for years—”

Nate gave up all pretense of casual banter. He stared at her, his face thunderous. “Do you know where *you* have been? Do you know where you *are*?”

“Quiet, Nate,” she whispered, stepping away at the sound of footsteps rounding the corner. The rest of the men had finally finished with cards. Even as the group approached, laughing boisterously, Nate kept his gaze on Cora until she was forced to look away.

“Come, gentlemen,” she called, digging deep for a smile as she eased open the door to the drawing room. “I believe the ladies have prepared a parlor game.”

Cora and Nate trailed the group of men to find Lady Monmouth directing the players where to stand, arranging them in a single-file line.

She was inexplicably holding a blindfold.

“What game are we—”

“It’s a variation on Buffy Gruffy,” Lady Monmouth explained excitedly. “Similar to Blindman’s Bluff. But instead of guessing where, you’ll be guessing who.”

It was a testament to her terrible mood that Cora couldn’t even summon a laugh at the words *Buffy Gruffy*.

Lady Monmouth clapped her hands briskly. “I’ve seen it done this way at my cousin’s house, and it’s great fun. We’ll blindfold one person, but instead of spinning them loose, the rest of us will all shuffle about in a single line. The blindfolded player will approach the first person in the line, and only using *touch* must deduce who is in front of them. And ladies, that means no gloves.”

She smiled deviously as tittering excitement broke over the small knot of players. “Yes, yes, it’s quite scandalous. You don’t mind, do you, Lady Dane?”

Cora didn’t mind, because her mind was currently a foul cloud of displeasure. She hated arguing with Nate; she hated even more that she had reason for it. But there it was, hanging over her, the acute awareness that Nate was a gambler. He was conditioned to seek out games, the riskier the better.

Was *she* a game to him? It occurred to her that Nate had never furnished his falsified love letters when she had asked for them, the day he was supposed to leave before the Monmouth Ball. She still had no idea whether he had written them or not. Perhaps he hadn’t been taking her seriously all along.

Cora absently noted the group was waiting for her to give the word. Judging by the rumbling anticipation, her guests agreed this was indeed the perfect parlor game. Thank heavens Edith Carleton had retired for the evening.

At the back of the group, Nate glowered, the tension in his jaw mirroring her own. She had handled their conversation poorly, letting her anxious heart open her mouth. But how else was she meant to handle this? Of the two of them, Nate was the one perpetually at ease. Though, right now, he looked as if he wanted to break something.

“Fine,” Cora relented, blinking away. “Lady Monmouth’s suggestion is fine.”

The game progressed with the expected assortment of flirtation and hilarity. Bianca Carrington, blindfolded, spent an inordinate amount of time stroking the lapel of Lord Wallace’s cousin, visiting from Oxford.

Cora couldn’t relax. Each time a name was drawn, she worried Nate would end up at the front of the line and she would have to watch another woman’s hungry fingers find his chest, the square line of his jaw. But Nate idled consistently at the back of the line, showing less than no interest in the game.

Every time she looked at him, his eyes were on her.

And then Cora drew the next turn.

“Gloves off, Lady Dane.”

Never one to enjoy wearing gloves, Cora suddenly wanted very much to keep hers. She felt a reeling wave of nausea; she didn't want to play. She couldn't imagine touching another man, parlor game or not. All Cora wanted was to return to the corridor and apologize to Nate for her atrocious behavior.

She wavered. There was no way to bow out without being a spoilsport. It was her party, after all.

Cora slowly peeled off her gloves, profoundly aware of Nate's gaze on her. She glanced up; at the back of the line, his eyes were black.

This is a bad idea.

But Lady Monmouth was already lowering the blindfold.

The fabric bit into her skin, pressing hard against her eye sockets. She couldn't see anything. Lady Monmouth spun her in three dizzying circles, and Cora wasn't even sure she was facing the line of players.

There was a rustling as everyone scrambled to find new places in line.

“Right then, Lady Dane,” Lady Monmouth instructed. “Step forward...ah. The other forward...there we are. And now you can reach out.”

The room fell silent, laced with expectant tension.

Cora stepped forward as instructed, lifting her hands. At first, she found nothing and stumbled awkwardly, still reaching. Finally, her fingertips landed on the wool of a man's tailcoat.

She froze, too fretful to even draw a proper breath.

But when Cora inhaled, she found the scent of pine and leather...and her own lemongrass.

Her breath halted for another reason entirely.

No longer did she wish to withdraw. Instead, she pressed harder into the tailcoat. A wall of muscle met her fingertips through the fabric. Cora slowly flattened her hands, already knowing the shape of his shoulders, exactly how high to reach. If she was wrong—if Nate was only nearby in the line and not standing before her as solid and shielding as an oak—she dared him to find her, to step forward and pull her around.

But she *knew* him.

Her palm spread on his chest, and she could feel his steady pulse beneath three layers of clothing and the welcome shell of his skin. She had felt that heartbeat against her own; she had slept with her ear against it, until the sound became her internal melody.

A vicious tremble rocked through her as she touched him carefully, smoothing his lapel, finding the seam of his jacket over his shoulders. She swiftly traced a line down the ropes of his biceps, the arms that had pulled her against him, the arms that had held her children. She traveled lower, all the way to his hand, over his knuckles, finding the same fingers that had cheerfully botched Haydn, gamely making a fool of him for nothing more than her smile.

I know him. The thought snaked proprietary and hot, coiling inside of her. *I'm the one who knows him.*

Her hands slid back up his arms, over the knots of his cravat. She stood on tiptoe to gently cup his jaw. She was dimly aware of the crowd laughing, whispering, but she paid no mind.

Nate was leaning forward now, into her hand, imperceptibly seeking her touch. She could feel exactly where his shadowed stubble would grow overnight. She knew where the scar along his cheekbone bloomed white against his golden skin. She pressed her thumb there.

These women could gossip all they wanted, but Cora *knew*.

She knew what was real.

“Any guesses, Lady Dane?” Lady Monmouth called.

Cora remained determinedly silent, running her fingers lightly over Nate's brow, down the straight line of his nose, finally tracing his lips, remembering how he would kiss her fingertips, how she would pull his mouth to hers.

Cora felt tears sting against her blindfold. Because it wasn't only his surface she recognized. She was overcome, wanting to take his face between her hands, to cover his ears and shield his warm, clever mind from her ungenerous insinuations. She wanted everyone to leave her home so she could strip away his doubts and his clothing and let him crawl inside of her, where they could both be better.

I know him, I know him, I know him.

Her trembling finger was still pillowed against his bottom lip. He pressed once against it.

And then Nate was moving, his hands coming to the back of her head, his fingers working loose the knots of her blindfold with a reassuring confidence.

"She knows it's me." His voice was rough, reverberating over the crowd, suddenly silent at Nate's blatant reversal of the rules of the game. "She knows me."

The blindfold dropped and their eyes met, somber and seeing.

"It's true," she whispered. "I knew it was him from the start."

July 1819

Morrow Woods, Hampshire

Nathaniel,

I've arrived in Hampshire to spend a few days with my family, and Rosalie promptly informed me she saw you at the Monmouth residence last week. Once she stopped swooning, she intimated you are likely to remain in the countryside for the time being.

I cannot underscore how essential it is we get your finances in order. I know you are apt to make rather rash, impromptu decisions; I hope this whirlwind affair hasn't been one of them.

Lady Dane has a family, Nate.

A marriage is a serious undertaking under any circumstances, let alone when children are involved. But now you've decided to make something of yourself—to be a proper husband, a proper stepfather—my responsibility is to ensure you have the funds you will require. I hope you haven't forgotten that the earldom will pass through your future children.

I'll be with my family this week and then return to London. I entreat you to meet me there.

Fordham



WHEN NATE AWOKE the morning after the soiree, night still clung to the sky. A narrow strip of pale gray slashed across the inky horizon, quickening the sun to rise, tasking him to pull himself from Cora and return to his own chambers.

But he found himself unable to hurry. He relished these mornings, where he and Cora existed in half-time: somewhere apart, somewhere together.

She was cradled in his arms, snoring lightly, her hair everywhere. In spite of her slumber, Nate knew when she woke, he would spy dusky half moons under her eyes, the purple wardens of her anxiety. It seemed even Cora's dreams brought her no relief when it came to her fears for the future.

He guiltily thought again of the potential evidence he had swiped from Carleton. Awareness of the vicar's possible financial subterfuge might go some way to easing Cora's worries. But every time he considered telling her, his own nerves got the better of him. He didn't want to overstep and make everything worse for her. Especially since Gavin Sinclair still hadn't responded to his inquiry.

For now, Nate had no choice but to wait.

He rolled to his shoulder, fitting her back to his front. Gently, he pressed his whole hand against her stomach, his thumb secure against the taut plane of her breastbone, his pinky finding the yielding expanse below her navel, where her skin was loose and pliant.

In these intimate moments, Nate could fully appreciate that Cora was a mother, that the hollow of her hips had been a chrysalis for her children. Her body told the story of them—a thin web of white marks stretching along her flank; one areola darker than the other.

He had missed it—he had missed her becoming, he had missed the children becoming—the moment their slick heads separated from her, the moment their woolly eyes blinked into the light.

Did they cry? Did she? How had Cora looked, the moment she first held her babies in her arms?

The thought made him horribly lonely.

Tell me, he asked her sleeping form. *Tell me what I missed*. He was desperate to know it all—wobbly first steps and halting first words; Cora, round-bellied and barefoot, slicing a

plum in the darkened kitchens. He didn't know Leo's first bad dream; he didn't know Tess's first laugh.

This whole time, he had been carousing in the backstreets of London, making a mockery of life.

While Cora and the children had been here living one.

Raymond assumed Nate didn't understand the duty of care he owed to family. It was true, the version of Nate that Raymond knew would make light of this situation...because that version of Nate made light of every situation.

But Nate was shifting; no longer did he feel his ragged edges. He merely felt a bit...unfinished. And for once, it didn't feel like a flaw. Rather, it seemed as though it was supposed to be this way.

That all this time, he'd been waiting for her to finish him.

Through the eastern window, he could see the sun, now rising in earnest. Nate begrudgingly lifted his arm, carefully shifting Cora.

"One more minute," Cora groaned, rolling with him, pressing her face to his chest.

"One more minute," he acquiesced, stretching against her pillows. He slid one hand under her chin, raising her face to his. "But only because I want to look at you."

Sunlit, starry, shadowed, he could stare at every version of her under the sky. But his unequivocal favorite was Cora at dawn—dewy and slow, everything tangled with sleep and him.

She touched his mouth. "Only *look* at me?"

"Only look at you," Nate confirmed, kissing her fingertips.

And she smiled.

THAT AFTERNOON, Nate found himself in the most unlikely scenario yet in an entire summer chock-full of unlikely scenarios: in the Aldworth Park library, poring over a legal treatise.

Nate wasn't a worrier by nature, but he had started to wonder if he *should* be. He had written to Gavin Sinclair four days ago, informing him of his suspicions regarding the Carletons. Nate didn't claim to be privy to the inner workings of the post, but he really had expected a reply by today.

The guilt of his withholding from Cora was an ever-tightening vise; at all times, he could sense her disquiet, hovering under the surface. There were stretches where she managed to shove it deeper, letting the tides of desire and good humor rush into the vacated place, but like a buoy, her dread would inevitably resurface.

Nate couldn't shake his doubts that he *could* be wrong about Carleton. It was clear this guardianship petition involved legal intricacies so far over his head, they were in a different galaxy all together. And Nate *was* rash, wasn't he? This could be another of his mistakes—another railway debacle, only far, far worse. Raymond's disappointment would be Cora's, and Nate's anger would be shame.

And the loss would be far more costly than money.

He needed to solve this on his own first. Then, and only then, would he solve it for Cora.

That is, if he understood what the fuck he needed to do.

Nate hadn't the first idea what this looming custody petition entailed. All month, he had been in Berkshire, allegedly to help bolster Gavin Sinclair's case, and it suddenly seemed spectacularly irresponsible that he was ignorant of what such a case might involve.

And so he had taken advantage of the quiet afternoon to sequester himself in the corner of the library, huddled over Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Nate was compelled to see to his own edification on the issue. He had become alarmingly invested in the outcome.

His bleary eyes reread the passages before him.

The legal power of a father...for a mother, as such, is entitled to no power, but only to reverence and respect...

...this empire of the father continues even after his death; for he may by his will appoint a guardian to his children.

Nate flinched in disgust. It was wrong—even as he understood it was an unassailable fact—that men like Dane held every card. The mother entitled to *no* power?

He had witnessed a mother's power every day this month. Cora and her children shared a bond far deeper than ink on a page. She had nurtured them, sustained them, *loved* them. What power could be greater than that?

He frowned, flipping to the next chapter.

...In case any guardian abuses his trust, the court will check and punish him; nay, sometimes will proceed to the removal of him, and appoint another in his stead...

So the Chancery *could* intervene, revising the father's will, as long as such action was warranted. Nate cracked his knuckles, thinking of the pilfered financial documents. Surely, those had to work? What could make a guardian more unfit than outright stealing from a peer of the realm?

If, indeed, that was what Carleton was doing. And if Sinclair could prove it.

It was remarkable, really, what Gavin Sinclair was doing, opening his life to possibly months of litigation—petitions, rejoinders, depositions, appeals. He had a career he was likely putting on the line, all to immerse himself in Cora's plight. What a man he must be, to willingly take on all of this for his sister.

Nate sat back, raking his hands through his hair.

Would he do likewise for Tabitha?

It was a hard question to answer—not the least because he was laughably ill-equipped to file a petition to the Court of Chancery. But Nate would do anything for Tabitha.

He'd do it badly, to be sure, but he would do it.

He rubbed his neck, remembering his small sister, standing over her smashed little teapot, their father screaming at her.

Nate hadn't been able to stop the earl, but he had stolen a coin from his father's study and taken Tabby to buy a new teapot. It was hardly a Gavin Sinclair-worthy endeavor, but it made Nate feel a little better, all the same.

Some men were better at this. Better at life. Raymond was one; Sinclair was another.

And Nate?

At the sound of footsteps, Nate turned to find Cora slipping into the library looking flushed and secretive.

"There you are." She smiled, taking in his rumpled, ink-stained appearance. "Well if *this* isn't a sight."

She tilted her head in amusement. "I would posit this is how you must have looked bent over your texts at Cambridge, but seeing as you failed every course the term of my season, I suppose your university-era self was more likely to be disheveled at taverns than libraries."

"Come now. I passed my mathematics lecture." He took in her loose hair, her sun-tinged cheeks. "Though, had I known you haunt libraries like a schoolboy fantasy, I might have applied myself more readily to my books."

He pushed back in his chair, making his lap available, and with a glance over her shoulder at the closed library door, Cora slid into his arms.

In spite of her teasing, she seemed a bit melancholy.

"No word from your brother yet?" he murmured with forced nonchalance as he propped his chin on her shoulder. Nate wondered if Sinclair had also been unresponsive to Cora this week.

"Nothing." Her voice was tight. "I expect soon. He tries to update me every few days."

Cora idly reached for Nate's discarded book, splayed open across the table. She picked up the thick volume, flipped it over, and flinched.

"*Blackstone's Commentaries*," she murmured, tracing the title with her finger. "You have no idea how many times I've

read these passages this year. Gavin brought it for me last summer. When we learned about the Carletons.”

Nate lightly stroked her arm. “I...” He cleared his throat. “I was curious. About the bill of complaint...”

Her thumb found the crumpled page marking the place where he had been reading.

“Over and over, I’ve studied these texts,” Cora said softly. “I was looking for humanity; fruitlessly willing the author to have been kinder. These laws are supposed to be about people, after all.”

She ran her finger over the passage he had marked. *The mother has no power.*

A divot of rage pressed upon Nate, as though her finger stabbed the words against his skin.

“It’s wrong, Cora,” he said flatly. “Dane was wrong; these scholars are wrong. They have no knowledge of you, of your life, of what you’ve endured. They don’t know you like *I* know you.”

She tilted his face to meet hers; her gaze was fiercely hazel in the late afternoon sunlight. At the untamed look in her eyes, Nate’s blood darkened under a curtain of desire. His hands fell to her waist. He licked his lip, his eyes darting significantly to the doorway of the library.

“Cora, love. We can’t right now.”

She lowered her voice. “Everyone is gone.”

Nate froze, his hands flexing against her bottom. Cora moaned softly, shifting on his lap. *Schoolboy fantasy, indeed.*

“What’s that now?”

“Everyone. Is. Gone,” she whispered, stroking under his chin. “The Carletons are visiting the local rectory. *Again.*” She planted a trail of swift kisses along his brow. “The children are on a picnic with Annie.”

Her lips found his jaw, and Nate swore.

“Are you certain?”

“I’m positive. I was looking in my scheduling diary this morning.”

“You and your damn timetables.”

“Are you complaining right now?” Her fingers determinedly loosened his cravat.

“No, you’re brilliant. I could *kiss* you...hell...” His lips fell to her neck, pursuing her unspoken desire all the way to her ear. “What’s stopping me?”

“Not me.” Cora angled her neck to give him access. “I’m not stopping you...”

As she turned her head, her eyes fell once again to the legal treatise on the table. She stiffened in his arms; a tight crease worried her brow.

He paused, his eyes traveling Cora’s face. She was impossibly beautiful. She was impossibly strong.

But she didn’t have to bear this all alone. He still meant what he had told her that day in the rainy woods. He’d mean it every day for the rest of his life.

Let me ease your ache.

“Do you want to forget, love?” He kissed her slowly, opening her mouth with his. “Just for a little while? If you want to give it over to me...you can.”

She shuddered, closing her eyes as Nate knocked the book aside.

“Yes.”

Cora,

It's the strangest sort of reversal, but I know you sleep now. I know it because I'm the one who lies awake, feeling the moment your bones grow heavy, the moment the bed changes from "we" to "me."

I'm no great thinker; I have no patience for philosophy. I know facts, I know probabilities: what I'm allotted, what I should expect. I've turned my sleepless nights into calculating our odds.

And what conclusions have I drawn?

At the end of the day, I'm a poor match, love. I have nothing to offer you. At least not yet. I don't have the faintest idea what I'm doing, and I fear my paucity will become the greatest sum between us.

But when you smile at me, your eyes hooded and heavy in the first light of day, it's gold in my pockets, gold in my hands, gold in my unformed heart.

Gold, gold, gold, Cora.

I'll gather your smiles, and they'll make us rich.



A DOZEN TIMES in the last week, Cora thought she had lost her mind. But now, pressed to a library ladder as Nate thrust shallowly inside of her, she knew she was well and truly losing it.

No sane person could endure this onslaught. Time had become meaningless. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours, it could have been half her life.

She turned more selfish with every rock of Nate's hips, her fingernails creasing half moons of frantic greed into his shoulder blades. Again, again, *again*, he had brought her to the edge—he allowed her to see the crumbling brink of the abyss, taking her so close she could almost crest the twisting pressure, tight and heavy at her core—only to pull her back, keeping her with him, withholding her release.

Nate smoothed back her damp hair and groaned softly against her gasping mouth.

“Shh...Cora...easy—”

“Nate...” She gripped him so hard, she was likely bruising him, but there was no space inside of her for an apology.

“Do you need a moment?” He rubbed one hand soothingly over her shaking thigh, where her leg was bent against his hip. Her bottom felt half-numb, balanced on the step of the library ladder.

“Yes,” she murmured, burying her face in the salty skin of his collarbone. “Yes, please...”

Nate exhaled slowly, his cock sinking fractionally deeper. A sob built inside of her burning chest. The ladder dug into her back; the pain was exquisite.

“Ready love? *Again...*”

Her head hit the rung behind her as he slowly stroked forward, once more beginning an unhurried drive to her ascent. Cora tried to rock toward him, but the ladder was propped at an incline against the bookshelf, making it nigh on impossible to find leverage. Her pleasure was entirely in Nate's hands, and the devil was taking his sweet, methodical time in unleashing it.

She shifted, aching to fully meet his length, to draw him deeper inside of her. If he wished, there was an angle he could hit that could undo her within minutes. But Nate sighed, further slowing his hips.

“Christ, I love this. Look at you, Cora. You're so damn good.”

She loosened a strangled cry. It wasn't possible, was it? To be so aggrieved from wanting him, even while she was having him. As certainly as she searched for him, Nate was already there, steady inside her. They were readying her place in Bedlam right now, and she would gladly go—she'd order the carriage herself—if only he would stop teasing her and send her soaring.

“Cora. Arch your back, darling.”

“I can't...I can't bend like that.” She gasped, digging the fingers of one hand into his shoulder, clutching the ladder with the other. The ladder shifted, and they moaned in unison.

“You can do anything you want.” He barked a ragged, helpless laugh as he sucked the sensitive skin under her ear. “You can do anything *I* want.”

Nate pressed on her lower back, and Cora whimpered, her spine arching of its own volition—of *Nate's* volition—and she was immediately rewarded by his right hand sliding roughly under her bottom, lifting her incrementally higher, affording a slightly deeper angle. His every insufficient thrust set her teeth on edge; she was malleable and melting, her blood simmering in the oppressive heat of the library.

If Nate had sought to distract her, he was doing a damn fine job of it. There was a fevered hum building inside her skull.

“Please...”

“Yes, Cora. That's it, love.” With his free hand, he cupped her breast, slick with sweat, and rolled her nipple until she hissed.

Cora could feel him *everywhere*; she was certain there was no sensation they didn't share. Her arms were quaking from the strain of holding Nate and the ladder. She wasn't sure she could last much longer.

“Now,” she breathed. “We need to come now.”

She pulled up against him, her hips quickening, urging him on. Nate panted, his mouth dragging against hers as his hand flexed around her buttocks.

“Not yet, Cora. Stay with me—”

“Let go.” She gripped his bicep. “Let go, Nate.”

Every muscle in his neck was taut, his hair sticking slick to his forehead. She grasped the thick strands, and he groaned.

“*Not. Yet.*”

She could feel him, rigid and relentless and still intentionally avoiding the depth she craved. She knew how ready he was, what he was denying himself, and the knowledge tipped Cora closer to the edge.

“You’re close, Nate, I know you’re close—”

“Then make me wait for you.”

How could he endure this? Didn’t he share her frenetic need? In her remaining shreds of coherence, Cora knew Nate was withholding only because he thought she wished it, but the frailest part of her feared his rationed control only signified she must be alone in the madding spiral.

And Cora couldn’t withstand any more loneliness.

She twined both of her legs around Nate’s waist, digging her heels hard into the backs of his thighs as she lifted her hips away from the ladder.

“Take me apart,” she pleaded. “You know you can. I *want* you to. I want you to take us both apart, Nate.”

He half-growled in defeat, rocking harder now, just shy of where she pulsed in agony. *Almost. Almost...*

Cora felt herself at the very center of the storm. Every base human instinct hovered below the surface. And in these moments, when he unraveled her to nothing, she felt all of it at once.

“Please...” Her fingers curled to fists, pushing against his shoulder. “*Please.* Nate, I can’t take anymore.”

The words dissolved in a sob. Cora only understood how profound was her desperation when Nate abruptly withdrew from her, worriedly ducking his head to meet her burning eyes.

She cried out at the loss, but he steadied her on the ladder, his hands heavy against her hips.

“Cora, Cora, what’s wrong?” His thumbs trailed reassuringly along her stomach as she frantically sucked in weak, ragged sips of stifling air. “I’m sorry, love. I’m sorry, it was too much.”

Her face was wet; she was crying. She had never felt so bereft, so lacking. And it wasn’t just this moment, it wasn’t just Nate. It was her family. Her *life*.

The scale of her wanting seemed insurmountable.

“It wasn’t too much.” Her voice was frayed. “It wasn’t *enough*.”

Her head dropped heavily to his shoulder. On the floor at his feet, she could blurrily see the discarded *Blackstone’s Commentaries*.

“Cora...”

“It’s not enough, Nate.” She took another heaving breath; her vision swam. “*I’m* not enough.”

“Look at me,” he demanded, his hand sliding up her back to tangle in her hair. He gently tugged as he leaned her back against the ladder. “Look at me, Cora.”

His eyes blown black, Nate stepped forward, returning to the cradle of her thighs. He lowered his damp forehead to hers.

“It will be enough.”

He dipped his mouth, capturing her in a searing kiss. The press of his tongue was so insistent it seemed to erase the self-censure from her mouth, to obliterate all awareness except the erotic slide of his cock as he slowly sheathed himself once more inside of her, finally giving her his complete length.

“See?” His voice was muffled, his face buried in her neck. “Do you feel what you do to me? Don’t say it’s not enough.”

Cora’s eyes flickered, so sublime was the tender relief of stretching fully around him. She instinctively wrapped one

arm around the broad expanse of his back, holding his chest to hers.

“*Oh...*”

Nate’s hand had fallen to where they were joined, two of his talented fingers dragging against her center. His teeth lightly grazed her jaw as he circled her, his thumb applying steady, unbearable friction. Cora was winding tighter, compulsively clenching around the overwhelming press of his cock.

And then Nate bit her ear, light enough to burn, hard enough to throb.

“*You’re enough, Cora.*”

Cora was *gone*; she was falling hard, harder, *hardest*.

Her head almost slammed into the ladder, but Nate’s hand was behind her. And then he was finally moving—no more tight circles or shallow thrusts, but long, limber strokes that had her instantly climbing once more, unfurling around him as his hips snapped, his free hand clenching the ladder so hard it was rocking along with them.

“Say it again,” she gasped. She was uninhibited and untethered, her arms and thighs shuddering from exertion.

“You’re enough.” He licked the sweat beading her throat, thrusting faster, his restraint slipping as he slammed against the ladder. Two books tumbled from the shelf behind her. “You’re enough, you’re more than enough. Cora, you’re *everything*.”

In that moment, Cora couldn’t conceivably be closer to him, but it was all she wanted. She dimly realized she had released her grasp on the ladder, she wasn’t holding on to anything but Nate, and the dawning awareness that she could do so, that he wouldn’t let her fall, that he would bear her weight and her woes shattered her.

Nate jerked her hips tightly to his, sinking so implausibly deep, he expelled the air from her lungs. She hit her peak so fast the library burned white around her.

Cora was singed from feeling; she was consumed by relief.

Nate paused only long enough to lower them to the ground, laying Cora against the pile of their hastily discarded clothing. She pulled him over her, and he clenched his jaw, grasping her leg and driving into her anew, finally turning to his own release.

She raised her eyes to his; she wanted his climax as much as her own, keenly needing to return it to him.

“Everything, Nate,” she crooned into his searching mouth. “*Everything.*”

And then, with a muffled shout, he finally broke, his head sinking against her breastbone, his hips stuttering, once, twice, as he spilled on her thigh.

“My God,” Cora gasped.

For a long moment, she stared at the bookshelves above her; everything was hazy and loose. She felt Nate gently wiping her leg with his handkerchief. Her breath gradually slowed even as her head remained scrambled and dizzy. The intensity of what had just flared between them was shocking. She couldn’t wrap her mind around how easily, how *gladly*, she’d simply handed everything over to him.

It terrified her, to rely on him this way. It terrified her to rely on him at all. Nate thought he could single-handedly unencumber her...but he couldn’t.

Her uncertain future had no simple solutions.

Nate’s eyes were soft. He reached for her, carefully rolling her to her stomach, pillowing her head on his discarded shirt. For a quiet moment, he calmly rubbed the sore spots on her back, where the ridges of the ladder had indented her skin.

“Cora?” His voice was hoarse, but unwavering. He sprawled next to her, carefully cradling both of her hands in his own. “Do you care to discuss it?”

She didn’t know how to give words to the enormity of her fear. But he was here, enveloping her, centering her. He was trying to understand her.

She kept handing him these broken pieces of herself. He kept holding them.

“I...I *can't* forget, Nate. Not even for a little while. Not even with you.” She bent her head to the soft linen of his shirt, breathing in the scent of pine. “If Gavin fails, and the Carletons realize what I tried to do, they'll show no kindness. It will be over. My family will be...gone.”

She could feel the fabric grow damp from her stubbornly leaking tears.

“And I can't lose them.” Cora shook her head numbly. “But not for *my* sake.”

A terrible wave of anguish tore through her. Nate's thumbs patiently traced the ridges of her knuckles.

“I already know—I've long accepted—if it comes to it, I will have to survive. I'll be nothing, I'll be alone, but I'll endure because I won't have a choice. My children will be out there, somewhere. They might need me one day. So...I can survive, in some version of survival where being alive looks nothing like living.”

She closed her eyes, her fingers curling inside Nate's hands.

“But what I can't bear is their hurt. They're too young—they won't understand. They need someone who cares about them. I can't imagine...what their lives will be like. The children I bore in all-consuming love, raised by two people who will show them nothing but indifference. How can I so much as take a breath, knowing that Tess and Leo are alone, that they're sad or afraid or confused?”

Nate's hands reflexively tightened. She looked up, taken aback by his grave expression.

“Nate, I'm sorry. *You* don't need to be concerned about any of this—”

“How could I not be?”

She tilted her head, confused, and pushed to sit up against the bookcase. Nate knelt in front of her.

“Cora, I *care* for Tess and Leo. I care about all of you. I want...” He trailed off, his voice halting. “I want you to be together.”

He was quiet for a long moment.

“You know, I was only seven years old when my mother died.”

Cora winced, but Nate simply shrugged.

“I *was* too young. I didn’t understand. For a while, it seemed like there wasn’t anyone who loved me. But I never, ever felt like my mother was gone. I felt her...all the time. I know it brings you no comfort now, when you are trying to hold on to them, but Cora, you’ll never be apart from them.”

Nate brushed back her hair, his eyes locked on hers.

“*You* are their mother. Their hearts beat your blood. Their fingers feel with your prints. And their eyes see the world in two parts, just like you.”

Cora’s heart was breaking and scarring over at the same time. Nate laced his fingers through hers, holding fast.

“Leo and Tess will want for nothing, Cora, because they are *yours*.” He held her gaze. “And that makes them strong.”

She soaked up his words. Everything still hurt, but somehow, not as much as it had mere minutes ago. It was the first time someone had acknowledged to Cora she might indeed lose her children.

But Nate was right; losing them didn’t mean it would be over. Nate had *lost* his mother—she had gone to a place no little boy could follow.

But Cora would still be here.

She stared at him, absorbing his meaning.

You’re strong.

You’re enough.

You’re everything.

“And Cora...” Nate swallowed hard, his throat bobbing convulsively. “You won’t be alone.”

And suddenly, she knew. As surely as she had recognized him at the soiree, by touch alone, she recognized the words he was holding on his tongue.

Nate leaned forward, cradling her chin between his fingers.

“I love you,” he whispered. At the bewildering sensation of saying it out loud, he couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m in love with you, Cora.”

Something tenuous and stubborn rooted inside her, finding purchase on untended ground. The roots dug, the branches spread. Cora was splitting, a birth as painful and glorious as when she had pushed her children into the world.

She reached for him, holding his face too. Both of them, in lockstep, even if only one of them could say it. Her eyes brimmed with emotion, but her lips remained stubbornly sealed with fear.

But Nate saw her.

“I love you without condition.” He drew her against him, brushing an achingly soft kiss against her mouth. “That means I love you even if you don’t say it in return.”

In a hundred unwitting moments, Cora had tripped, she had stumbled, she had pitched halfway in love with Nate Travers.

And on the most ordinary Thursday in July, she fell the rest of the way.

July 1819

Finch Residence, London

Nate,

I thought long and hard about sending this letter. Despite all evidence to the contrary, I don't relish interfering in matters of importance.

I've engaged in more than my fair share of teasing this summer. But as you and Cora seem to grow ever closer, I feel I must be explicitly clear. So here's my piece, and I'll only say it once:

Cora is my truest friend, and there is nothing I want more than to see her happy. Anyone else would have been defeated by her circumstances, but Cora somehow remains indefatigably hopeful. Even after Dane, even with the Carletons.

Nate, I know your heart is enormous, but you have a penchant for avoidance when things turn difficult. And Cora's life is very, very difficult.

It's wretchedly unfair of you two, my favorite people, falling in love. It makes things quite stressful for my otherwise unworried heart.

Please, Nate—be careful.

Tabby



“AND THEN, the dread Pirate Blackbeard gave signal to his men—”

“Ahem,” Cora called, flicking the page of her own novel, from where she sat curled up in the corner of the family parlor.

“You’re using the wrong accent. That’s not your Blackbeard.”

Nate huffed. “Technically, this is the narrator, love, not a pirate.”

Against Cora’s better judgment, he was reading the children *A General History of the Pyrates*. It was winding them right up. Leo had insisted they enact the scenes with props, and Nate couldn’t fault his logic. How else were they meant to spend a rainy afternoon?

If Cora recalled how Nate had adamantly opposed playing pirates that day in Hyde Park, she graciously didn’t mention it. And a good thing too. He did a damn fine Blackbeard impression, and he didn’t need it spoiled with points being made.

Nate started again, this time as the narrator. “And then, the dread Pirate Blackbeard gave signal to his men—”

Leo nudged Tess. “Go on—give a signal.”

Tess stood on the stool and thrust her chubby fist forward; she had Nate’s cravat tied around her forehead. “Signal!”

Leo looked at Nate, aggrieved. “Is that a sufficient signal?”

Nate winked conspiratorially at Leo from where he was imprisoned against the mast—otherwise identifiable as a mahogany hall chair. His sloop had unfortunately been violently pillaged. “It seemed like a signal to me.”

“Say...” Leo circled Nate, his little wooden sword trailing on the ground. “You ought to be tied up, you know. Blackbeard wouldn’t permit his prisoners to lounge about.”

“Hmm.” Nate nodded seriously. He flicked his gaze to Cora sitting by the window, pretending to read. “What do you say, Lady Dane? Do I need to be *restrained*?”

Cora rolled her eyes and fought a smile, even as her cheeks turned pink. “I don’t think there are any knots quite up to the task,” she replied archly, turning her page back.

“Or you need to make them tighter,” Nate smirked.

He leaned forward, inadvertently demonstrating the hazards of an improperly secured prisoner, and Tess whacked him in the shin with her sword. Cora gave him a look that didn't completely rule out any pillaging of her own, which was all the victory Nate required.

"I'm going to send for tea," she announced, moving to the door. "Leo, please inform me if you need any more rope."

Minx. He loved her.

"Never mind," Leo said impatiently. "Just don't move around too much. Except when you're reading."

Nate turned back to the book, scanning the next passage to ensure there was no profanity he'd need to avoid. It took him but half a moment to find his place.

And that's when Nate learned something new about small children: half a moment is all it takes.

There was an almighty crash, a muffled shout.

Leo screamed before Tess, but that was because Tess was crying the sort of tears that suck all the air in, in, *in*, her curdling sobs barricaded behind a silent wall of shock.

Nate was on his feet, the book falling to the floor, trying to figure out who was hurt and how. He swiftly appraised the situation—Leo, wailing, his face in his hands, a toppled stool, and Tess, her back bowing into a little bridge of incredulous pain.

It had been a *half* a moment... *less* than half a moment.

"I didn't mean to." Leo was sobbing. "I didn't mean to—"

"What's wrong?" Cora skittered back into the parlor. She took in the scene—both children crying, but one of them *crying*. She'd go to Tess, Nate could see it on her face, so Nate pivoted to Leo.

"Wait, Nate—first, call for Annie—or Mrs. Bainsbridge. Or both!"

"I swear to God, Cora," Nate called as he strode to the corridor to shout for assistance. "I was looking at the book, it

was hardly a minute! I didn't see it happen."

"I didn't mean to, Nate, I really didn't." Leo's face was streaked with tears.

"Leo, darling, you need to tell Nate exactly what happened." Cora's voice was remarkably calm as she knelt next to Tess. "You aren't in trouble, don't worry, but we need to know."

"She was standing on the stool," Leo managed over great hiccuping sobs as Nate returned to his side. "I asked her to do the topsail, like the real pirates—"

"Pirates?"

Nate swiveled, Leo still under his arm, to see the Carletons darkening the doorway, drawn to the commotion like buzzards.

Goddamnit.

"Where did you learn to play such a rotten, vile, insidious game?"

"Nate plays it with us," Leo said defensively. "He does the voices."

Nate felt queasy, looking guiltily over at the discarded book.

Fuck.

At his wife's significant glare, the vicar heavily tromped over to squint at the book.

Tess was still wailing, her red face pressed to Cora's skirts while Cora ran her fingers lightly over her body, feeling for bumps.

"Pirates," Carleton grunted, holding the book aloft. "Despicable."

"This is *inexcusable*." Mrs. Carleton breathed through her nostrils. "It's going to rot them from the inside out. Their tender ears, their tender hearts."

Nate brushed off the lecture; he couldn't be dragged into her browbeating right now. He crouched next to Leo.

"How did she fall, mate? Can you be a big gent and tell us what happened?"

"Her hand, I think," Cora murmured to her housekeeper, who had joined the rapidly crowding parlor with Annie on her heels.

"Yes," Leo confirmed. "She fell on her hand. Like this—" He did an awkward half-somersault, demonstrating a complicated bending of his wrist. "Except not as good as me."

"It's swelling," Annie murmured, her dark eyes worried. "Her wrist...perhaps a sprain?"

"I don't like crying." Tess was moaning over and over. "I don't *like* it."

"I'll get a basin," Mrs. Bainsbridge said. "Let's get it in cold water."

Nate and Leo stood to the side, both of them riddled with ineptitude and guilt. *Poor doll*. He should have known better. If there was trouble to be had, his devil girl would find it.

"Mrs. Bainbridge," Cora urged. "Have Coates send someone to the Downing farm; see if Mary Downing is there." She gently pulled Tess into her lap, stroking her hair. "She has six sons, that's about the equivalent of one Tess. She'll have seen it all. Let's have her come take a look."

"A *woman*? From a *farm*?" Mrs. Carleton interjected. "Are you mad? We need a physician. Mayhap a surgeon—"

Cora turned to her, gaping. "A *surgeon*? So he can blood-let my two-year-old daughter for a fall? If you think for a second I'm sending for a surgeon, you're the mad one, Mrs. Carleton. I'll not have her poked and prodded at—"

"Now, Lady Dane." Ronald Carleton frowned. "No need to get hysterical."

Leo started to cry again, and Nate clapped his hands over his ears. He needed to get the boy out of here.

But he couldn't leave Cora.

"I'll not see my brother's child treated by some half-wit from your village. This is wretchedly irresponsible, Lady Dane. Honestly, have you no care—"

Enough. Nate's brain was fracturing, all of his senses sharpening for a fight. He couldn't listen to one more bloody minute of this. He might not have received marching orders from Sinclair yet, but he was damn well fixing at least one mess in this house.

"Tess's injury will be treated how we see fit, Mrs. Carleton," Nate snapped.

"They aren't *your* children, Mr. Travers," Edith Carleton spat, her eyes darting over him in disgust. "They are my brother's. Don't get me started on how you've swooped in here, playacting at another man's life. Look at the damage you've caused!"

Nate felt an odious sense of culpability. He glanced at Cora, but she and Annie were attempting to lay Tess back, a cool cloth pressed to her red cheeks. Tess was whimpering. Cora was caught in a wary half crouch, trying to tend to her daughter, trying to stay ahead of the Carletons.

Nate stepped closer to the vicar and his wife, not even caring that he was blatantly using his stature to impose. Or that he was wildly overstepping.

"I'll remind you, Mrs. Carleton, this was your idea. Your advice for Cora was to remarry. It's what you were most concerned about, was it not? That the children not be raised by their mother alone?"

"Yes." Mrs. Carleton sniffed, her face growing tight. "I suppose it was. But I can now say, unequivocally, it was a sore misjudgment, on my part. There's no *raising* here at all."

Cora stopped short; her face white except for two high, dark splotches of color.

"I don't know what you two are playing at, but I am through with this unscrupulous household," Mrs. Carleton said briskly. "I've seen enough."

Nate's eye twitched. "Speak plainly," he gritted out, sparing a glance at Cora's terrified face.

"Only that we'll be cutting our visit short," Mrs. Carleton announced, turning to her husband. "We've been discussing it and have decided we're needed in London, to see my indisposed cousin and conduct some overdue business. But after this debacle today, we shan't put off our departure any longer. The vicar and I will leave straightaway tomorrow."

The news should have been a relief, but Nate tempered his reaction at the glint in her eyes.

"I won't stand for another day of this havey-cavey business. It's bad enough someone in this household has been *stealing* from us, but now this disrespect too. It's too much. For us. And for the children."

Mrs. Carleton paused significantly, and Nate's anger curdled. Next to him, Cora's eyes glittered with rage. The vicar's wife stepped menacingly forward.

"I'll remind you, Lady Dane, you have only tenuous rights to these children. And from what I've witnessed, you're lucky you have any rights at all. When Tess's arm heals—after you've likely maimed her with your maltreatment—you're to bring her to us. Both of them. I want them in London, with their things, within the fortnight. I'm *finished* permitting you to do things your way."

Leo's head swung from Nate to his mother. Nate gripped his arm; the boy shouldn't be hearing this.

"I've seen, all summer, how you let them run wild." Mrs. Carleton pointed accusingly between Tess and Leo. "Sloppy, slovenly children. Speaking their mind and out of turn. Half-dressed and stained. Pirates and who knows what other wretched tales you've spun. And now, the complete disregard for sensible medical treatment. It's blatantly clear we cannot allow you to raise them any longer, impending marriage or no. *You* can't be reformed, Cora Dane."

Nate saw red. "You aren't taking the children—"

"Stop, Nate," Cora warned. "Don't make this worse."

Mrs. Carleton laughed humorlessly. “And on what grounds do *you* deign to prevent me from doing so? You have no standing here. Those children are legally ours. We have as many rights—if not more—to physical custody as their mother. But it’s clear we’ll need to take matters in hand. This arrangement won’t signify any longer.”

She narrowed her beady eyes at Cora. “Because I am a charitable woman, we will allow you the rest of the summer to secure yourself a dower house. If we are to assume custody of the children, we will also, of course, require access to Aldworth Park.”

Conniving, wretched, greedy old hag.

Nate straightened. “I won’t permit this—”

Mrs. Carleton’s eyes flashed. “Then you will be jailed.”

Nate scoffed. He’d been threatened with worse. “As if such lazy intimidation would ever ruffle me—”

“Nate, stop!”

Mrs. Carleton fisted her hands at her hips as she jerked her head to Cora. “Then *she* will be jailed. For perversion of justice. Do you care about that?”

Tess started wailing again as Annie tried to keep her arm still.

“Enough!” Cora was on her feet. “Enough! All of you! Every single person in this room—unless you are a capable female—I want you out of here. Out, out, *out!*”

Nate clenched his jaw. He’d gone too far, but what was he supposed to do? Allow Cora to be bowled over because of her fear?

Mrs. Carleton seemed unbothered by this dismissal. “We’ll need to secure transport, Lady Dane. For first light tomorrow. And again when you arrange for the children to come to Cheapside. I’ll leave Cousin Prudence’s address.”

Cora’s eyes were wet and stormy as Mrs. Carleton swept out, followed by her husband.

Nate stepped toward her. “Cora—”

“That’s you, as well, Nate. I’m sure you thought you were helping, but that was no help to me at all. I don’t need a third child to mind.”

Her hands were clenched.

“I didn’t—”

“I *know*,” she snapped, then her eyes briefly softened. “I know you didn’t. But I cannot think of this right now. I need you to take Leo out of here so we can see to Tess.”

“Fine,” Nate muttered, backing away. He kept his eyes on Cora, who was carefully laying Tess on the settee. Mrs. Bainsbridge had procured a bucket of cold water from the kitchens, and they were slowly immersing the afflicted wrist.

He didn’t want to leave her. This was his fault.

“Nate?”

Leo was watching Nate carefully, trying to understand what was happening, trying to filter through Nate the appropriate reaction to this unsettling turn of events.

Nate needed to correct course; if he were unnerved, it would only make this worse for the children.

“Come, Leo,” he relented. “We’ll leave the ladies to it.”

Cora kept her back to him as he retreated.

NATE SET Leo up in the nursery. He had no idea what they would do with Tess, but since he was apparently in charge of this decision, he decided to make the easiest one.

Leo had stopped crying and was now arranging his dominoes with measured efficiency. Nate watched him, elbows on his knees, his heart in the parlor downstairs.

How bad was it?

Not only Tess—he was worried for her, of course, but he agreed with Annie that it looked no worse than a mild sprain. Lady Swifte was much too fearsome to be taken out for long.

Far more concerning was the very real damage inflicted by the Carletons.

Taking the children...within a fortnight.

This was because of Nate. Because of his crooked reputation, because of his immaturity, because of his inability to bite his damn tongue.

“Nate?”

He tilted his head at Leo’s careful tone. “Yes?”

“It was an accident,” Leo said quietly.

Nate dropped his hands from where they had been pressing to his aching head. “I know.”

Leo was silent for a moment, fussing with his dominoes. He slid his basket over to Nate. “You can do some too.”

Nate ruffled Leo’s hair before taking a handful of small blocks.

“Well, I suppose I’m not a very good brother.” The boy sighed matter-of-factly as he adjusted a domino. His round cheeks pulled his mouth downward.

“Why would you say that?” Nate looked up from the line of blocks. “You are an exceptional brother.”

“I let Tess get hurt.” Leo grimaced.

“Tess is *going* to get hurt, earnestly and often.” Nate shook his head. “That’s not your fault, son. Unless you’ve done the hurting, of course. But you didn’t. You wouldn’t.”

“How do you know?”

Nate groaned, his thighs burning from the crouch. He properly sprawled next to Leo, as befitting a conversation of this magnitude.

“Because I know all about brothers,” Nate said slowly. “I have an older brother, you see.”

Leo looked surprised. “Is he a viscount?”

Nate laughed. “No, he’s an earl, actually, if you’d care to hear the nuanced differences.”

Leo wrinkled his nose in confusion. “But...aren’t *all* men viscounts?”

“No, and thank God for that.” Nate chuckled as he reached over and squeezed Leo’s hand. “Only *some* men are viscounts.”

The boy still looked contemplative. “But *I’m* meant to be one?”

“Well, I guess officially, you must be. But don’t worry—you won’t have to act as such until you’re older.”

“When I’m grown.”

Nate smiled sadly.

“Right.”

“But my father was a viscount.”

Nate quieted, sensing Leo’s concern. He watched the boy closely; the corners of his little mouth were drawn, his shoulders slumped as he looked at his blocks.

“Is something on your mind, Leo?”

Leo bit his lip. “Are all boys the same as their fathers?”

Nate rocked back. *Christ*. What a question.

He cleared his throat. “Ah. That depends. Much like viscounts, some are. And some...are not.”

Leo looked at his small hands. When he spoke, his voice was very quiet. “I think...it might be good to be the *not* kind.”

Nate swallowed against an intrusive lump. He looked at the small, somber little boy next to him, his eyes the same blue as the rings of Cora’s irises. Leo’s face was guarded, as though he’d already learned something fundamental. Nate supposed he had. Leo had been only three years old when his father died.

Three years old, and already indelibly changed by a man who hadn’t really loved him.

And it was high time he be changed by a man who *did*.

There was a deep, resonant clattering inside Nate's chest, as if a rusted key had finally found purchase, a latch clumsily engaging, a heavy door slowly opening.

Everything shifted; everything was upside down.

Everything made no sense and all the sense in the world.

You should have been mine.

The realization crashed over him, primal and petrifying. Nate couldn't breathe. His ears were ringing. So much he could have done differently, done *better*, so much he could have prevented, repaired, cherished.

All of you should have been mine.

Nate reached down, taking both of Leo's small hands.

"You can be any kind of man you wish to be, Leo. Any kind at all. And you can keep becoming him for as long as it takes."

Leo stared at Nate, and it felt as though it was the first time another person really, truly saw him. It was impossible, and yet Nate was certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, he was looking into the face of his son.

Finally, Leo smiled shyly. "Maybe...I'll be like you."

And that's when Nate understood his brother had been right.

Raymond had been right about all of it.

Nate did have a duty to his family.

IT WAS evening when Annie returned to the nursery to settle Leo for his supper and bed.

"How is she?"

"We dosed her with a spot of chamomile, and she's been resting quietly since." Annie smiled reassuringly. "She's bandaged up, and we'll keep her comfortable. But I really do think she's just fine, Mr. Travers. Mrs. Downing said one of her boys was far worse when he hopped a fence last summer."

Nate nodded, relieved.

“Lady Dane inquired if you could come for Tess, if you would carry her up here to her own bed. We figure you’re most likely to lift her comfortably. She’s with Lady Dane now.”

“Of course.” Nate nodded. “I’ll bring her right up.”

He bid Annie goodnight, and started down the stairs, following his well-trod path to Cora’s chambers. Through the windows, he could see a violet, violent sunset. The house was eerily silent; everyone, it seemed, was on edge.

But nobody more so than Nate.

Ever since his conversation with Leo, Nate’s thoughts had been riddled with men. Men who took, men who gave, all the many tyrants who set circumstances in motion.

Nate’s father. Ronald Carleton. Frederick Dane. Gavin Sinclair. Raymond.

And one day Leo.

What a duty, to be a man. What a duty, to *raise* one.

Nate had never given it much thought, but Raymond would have been about his age when Nate and Tabby’s mother died, leaving them to the dubious care of their father alone. Raymond would have just started his own life, newly married to Rosalie, establishing their home on Hill Street.

Raymond could have simply kept moving forward, untethered from the Old Earl, unaffected by the plight of his young half siblings. But he hadn’t hesitated. Not even thirty years old, and he *chose* them. He came back for Nate and Tabby. And he didn’t have to. He had stood his ground, over and over, demanding better from his own father until the day he did it himself.

His brother was a good man. To be sure, an annoying man.

But Nate knew. He had always known.

His real problem with Raymond wasn’t financial; it was personal. Raymond had constantly seemed a world apart—

impossibly mature, impossibly decent. It was the Old Earl who seemed most relatable. He had taken Nate under his crooked wing, and Nate had felt content to stay there.

It irked Raymond to no end, but Nate had never felt able to live up to his brother's expectations. So he hadn't even tried. After all, Raymond could never understand what it felt like to fail before you started.

But there was a point both brothers had missed. A man couldn't be forced into becoming; he had to *want* it.

And what Nate wanted was impossible.

He wanted to shake loose the entire fabric of the universe until it unspooled into a version of the world that made sense. It should *never* have been like this—Cora, fiercely proud, afraid to let go of anything, least of all her heart. Leo, already worried he would become the wrong sort of man.

Nate wished more than anything he could go back, back to five years ago, to restitch the threads of time that kept the most trustworthy version of himself in her present, and the most trusting version of Cora in her past.

But what he could offer Cora and the children was a future.

Nate was finished idling about, waiting for a response from Sinclair. He had evidence, he had suspicion. The Carletons sure as hell weren't waiting to act, and he wouldn't either. In his last letter to Cora, Sinclair had said he needed to prove the Carletons unworthy. And Nate was taking a healthy bet he could do just that.

He might have made matters worse today, acting out as he did in the parlor. But he was going to fix this.

He was going to save this family.

No matter the cost.

Cora,

You probably don't know I lose my mind in the morning.

It's when the unraveling begins.

Every day, you slowly unmake me. From sunrise to sunset, I shift with the restless awareness that I can't be half a man anymore.

How to tell you?

Cora, you're my morning. You're my advent; you're my dawn.

You were created to be the beginning of me.

And I want to create for you.

How fantastical, how romantic you must think me. But, love, I assure you, there's nothing more pragmatic.

I'm capable. I'm ready.

I'll reach, I'll stretch, I'll climb along the shell of myself until I'm made for you.

If you asked me for the goddamned sun, I would make your life a perpetual July.



NATE CAME TO COLLECT TESS, cradling her sleeping body against his chest, her soft curls splayed against the crook of his elbow. In her rest, her daughter seemed as tiny and fragile as a doll.

Cora fell into step beside him, hardly able to cage her raging urgency. All afternoon, she had brooded over today's catastrophic turn of events.

They were taking her children.

She had been half dreading, half expecting this since last summer. In a way, it was almost better it had finally come to pass. Now, at least Cora could act. Everything in the open.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” she whispered hurriedly as they made their way to the nursery. “It feels like Edict Carleton’s pronouncement should change our strategy. But I don’t think it does, Nate. The boot’s quite on the other leg. We’ll revert to the *original* plan. Ready or not, Gavin’s going to have to file that bill of complaint.”

“Careful, love,” Nate murmured as she tripped up the stairs.

She was so tired, her eyeballs itched, but a current of resolve swept through her.

“It’s not over—far from it. We’re just getting started. We laid all the groundwork, didn’t we? The Carletons believe we are marrying; everyone believes it. All my tenants, my entire household, the *ton* is rife with rumor.”

He nodded soberly. “Yes, but—”

“And your letters, of course—did you remember to write them, Nate? It’s imperative I gather *all* the proof I can for Gavin.”

“They’re in my bedside chest.” Nate’s face was oddly flushed. “I need to...sort them a bit.”

Cora’s stomach dropped. “But you’ve *finished* them, haven’t you? You promised you would.”

“Don’t worry,” he said tightly, and she was uncomfortably reminded Nate had a proclivity for handling things in his own impulsive manner.

Just as he had earlier today, when he inadvertently made tensions higher and matters worse.

“Gavin only has two weeks now,” Cora muttered as they approached the third floor. Tess was still dozing against Nate, her small hand under his chin.

“About that, Cora—”

“That damnable woman said she’d allow us a fortnight for Tess’s sprain to heal. Honestly, the swelling has *already* improved. I imagine she’ll be back on her feet in a matter of days. But we won’t let the Carletons know that. They’ll be gone, and we’ll use the full allotment of time. Gavin will have to make do with whatever evidence he has.”

“Cora, *listen*. I need to speak with you, as soon as Tess is settled—”

But she was hardly paying attention, so caught was she in a maelstrom of conviction. “This *will* work, Nate. I refuse to accept it won’t.”

They reached the hushed nursery, and Cora quieted, her furious plotting waylaid by the somber reality of the two tiny people most affected by today’s events. She watched Leo sleeping soundly in his bed as Nate gently lowered Tess to her cot, the nursery glowing in the blue halo of early nightfall.

She took her time, kissing their smooth, placid cheeks and tucking their blankets under their chins. She usually cherished these quiet moments. But tonight, the comforting gestures triggered a tiny web of cracks, pushing relentlessly against her composure.

Through the fissures seeped a sinister shadow; every one of her worst nightmares blanketed her like an oily, insidious shroud. She had tried to protect her children from these exact circumstances, only to have them thrown into the center of the storm.

At the prospect of their confusion and fear, she felt the precipitous grip of true panic.

“I’ve got her, Lady Dane,” Annie murmured from the rocking chair, mistaking Cora’s desolation as worry for Tess’s wrist. “You get some rest. We’ll see you in the morning.”

Cora lightly stroked Tess’s hair. Her daughter was fine. She had a bandage and a poultice. She had her soft blanket and a spoonful of tea with a drop of laudanum. Tess would sleep

deeply and comfortably, only to wake tomorrow, hostile at the requirement to sit still.

But Cora wasn't fine at all. She might never be fine again.

NATE WAS WAITING for her in the corridor outside the nursery, his handsome face serious and sympathetic.

"Right then," Cora sighed. "What did you need to speak to me about?"

But Nate took her hand. "In a minute. First, how are *you*, love?"

The sincere pitch of his voice, reserved for her alone, was all it took.

The last tether of her control over this abysmal day was a wire, pulled so tightly it was liable to snap at any moment, sending her flailing and adrift. Cora felt as if she were standing on treacherous rocks in the midst of a rushing river.

And there, right before her, solid ground.

In nearly every regard, she was powerless. For God's sake, they were taking her children away.

But Nate was here.

Nate was *hers*.

Something dark rioted inside of her, the confines of her body a feeble fence for the size of her ferocity. There was too much happening without her agency. Never before had she felt such a heedless compulsion to have something beholden to her.

The latent power of his body sang to her. He towered over her, and the hazy sense that she could bring him to his knees suddenly turned Cora feverish and irrational.

"Your chambers," she murmured, tugging his hand.

Nate didn't budge. "Cora, no. We need to speak. It's important—"

“Later,” she urged. “We’ll speak later. But after this day... Nate, I *need* you.”

He sighed—an acquiescence, as though he sensed her shift, as though he understood what she was truly asking. Wordlessly, he took her hand, pulling her through the dim, quiet house, all the way to his chambers.

The door latched softly, and Cora eased him against it, sliding flush along his body.

“The bed?” he murmured, his fingers already threading through her hair.

“Here,” she insisted, arching into him, tilting her face to his. “Right here.”

Nate kissed her with the possessive surety of a man who knew exactly what he was doing to her, and Cora was glad for it. She *wanted* him to know. She wanted him hard and aching for her as she sank against him, his mouth accepting the guttural hiss of her longing.

His fingers skidded down her thighs, bunching her skirts in his fists. Cora pushed him against the closed door of his chambers. He bent before she could pull him down, her lips moving swiftly along his jaw.

Nate dropped her skirts, sliding his hands up her bodice, teasing the curve of her breasts, and she moaned, grasping his wrists.

“Don’t touch me. Please don’t touch me yet.” Her ragged plea tore against her throat.

She wanted his hands on her so badly she was vibrating. But if he touched her, she would capitulate to him, and it had never seemed more imperative to remain in possession of her faculties.

“Then what *can* I do for you?” Nate’s voice was rough, dipping into her desire. “Tell me what you want, love.”

“I want...” She wavered, curbed by the frustration that she couldn’t verbalize her fantasy; she didn’t have a vocabulary for it. Cora wanted him in her thrall. She wanted sole authority

over his pleasure. She wanted to have the final word on *one* blasted part of her life.

He saw it on her face.

“Ah,” Nate whispered hoarsely. “I see.”

Slowly, slowly, his hands fell to her waist, gently pushing her back, away from him. For one fretful moment, she felt a sweep of embarrassed nerves.

But Nate smiled and raised his hands to his cravat, his gaze locked on hers in wordless, heated devotion.

There was a potent, masculine manner in how he undressed. Unknotting, unbuttoning, every motion fluid and purposeful, until inch by agonizing inch he revealed himself to her—his chest, his stomach, his arms.

Nate took her hand, moving it down his abdomen to his buckskins. He twined his fingers with hers, deftly working the buttons on his fall. She used her free hand to help tug his clothing to the floor, and then he was standing before her, completely exposed. His cock was rigid.

Cora’s throat tightened. She didn’t feel in possession of her faculties, after all.

It was hardly the first time she’d seen him this way, but it might as well have been. Cora was still fully clothed; it was Nate who was vulnerable. She could see what he was giving to her, how much she needed it.

He slid their joined hands up his body, pressing her palm to his heated skin. His other hand snaked into her hair, drawing her face to his. He pressed his lips to her forehead.

“Take what you need,” he murmured, his eyes flickering. “Take anything you want.”

Boldness erupted within her. Cora dragged her palm down his stomach, her forefinger trailing the line of hair. She lightly circled the concave beneath his hip bone, gently scratching with her fingernail, and Nate swore fantastically.

When her knuckles finally brushed his hardness, Cora’s breath hitched.

Nate sighed as she grasped his shaft, her hand working tentatively, stroking with her fingers, circling with her palm. His very quiet rumble was both confirmation and kindling—more, more, *more*.

She traced her lips along the bare skin of his chest, flattening her tongue against his nipple. Her hands turned confident, directed by the slight rocking of his hips. His cock tensed with every stroke of her fist, even as the rest of his body loosened. His shoulders, his breath, his hair falling over his brow. All of him, gradually uncoiling under the heated compression of her hand.

“Is this...is it good?” She searched his face. “Is it good for you, like this?”

“Yes,” he urged. “Christ, Cora. *Yes*.”

Her thumb came around his tip, finding a sensitive spot that sent Nate’s head falling back against the door. She stretched up to kiss his neck, reveling in the satisfied groan she felt in his throat, how it reverberated under her lips.

He was hers, all for the taking, all for the giving. This beautiful man was at her mercy; *she* was driving *him* to his own edge. It was exhilarating. A tremendous surge of desire rocked through her.

“Cora,” he gritted, his hand tightening at her hip. She pressed her face to his chest; his heartbeat staggered against her cheek.

“Don’t fight it, Nate,” she murmured hoarsely into his skin. “*Feel*. Let me do this for you.”

But he seemed unable to help himself. Nate grasped her arms, drawing her against him, his tongue working along her collarbone, down her bodice. He cupped her breasts through the soft muslin, rubbing it over her nipples, teasing them to peaks before his mouth lowered, sucking hard through the fabric until the responding dampness tugged painfully at her core.

“Are you certain?” he grunted into her neck. “What about you—”

She slid her fingers faster along the hard column of his shaft. “This *is* for me. It’s for me, Nate. It’s for both of us.”

She sank to her knees and licked her bottom lip.

Nate’s face transformed. “Holy...Cora. *Ah...*”

In that moment, Cora was power personified, as vindicated as any fabled queen. But this wasn’t make-believe. Nate’s flesh was hot and hard under her hand, his desire complying with her demands, and she was flush with the sense of her impending triumph.

“I love you,” he breathed.

His hand stroked her hair, firm and warm. His hand was as real as her worry; it was as real as her grief.

Her last rational thought was that Nate had fallen in love with her during the strangest month of her life. Now he would need to decide whether he could love her through the hardest.

I love you without condition.

“Show me,” she murmured.

And he did.

WHEN CORA WOKE in the early morning, her first frantic thought was of the children.

A sharp guilt pierced her; she should have stayed with Tess and Leo in the nursery. What if Tess had a bad night? What if she was asking for Cora? What if Leo had nightmares, colored by pirates who hurt his sister or stole him away? What if Edith Carleton changed her mind and took her children in the dark of night?

It made little difference to know that one of her dozens of servants would most assuredly have found her if any of those events had transpired. Even still, she should go to the nursery to check on them. She trusted only her own eyes.

Cora rolled gingerly, careful not to wake Nate. He was sprawled on his stomach, his head under his pillow. She

briefly delayed her rising, lulled by the deep, even rise and fall of his back.

She felt the stirrings of recollection; hadn't he wanted to speak to her last night? Something urgent...

It made her uneasy. She should leave him a note, letting him know she went upstairs. She didn't want him to wake and think things were strange between them after yesterday's calamitous events. Or that she had no care for what he wanted to tell her.

Slowly sliding from his bed, she looked about, wondering if he had a quill and paper on hand. Her eyes fell to his bedside chest as she tied his dressing gown around her slight frame.

And that's when she remembered the letters. Last night, Nate had told her he kept them beside his bed.

Cora bit her lip. She was in critical need of those letters. There was no telling what Edith Carleton would claim, and some sign that Nate and Cora were earnest in their affections might help Gavin's case.

But last night, when pressed, Nate had acted rather cagey about them.

He *had* written them, hadn't he?

She felt a slow ripple of foreboding. Nate had no problem stepping up when it suited him. But he was impossible when required to do something he found onerous. Look at the way he had skirted her all spring, the way he had ignored his brother all summer.

She should drop the issue, but it nagged at her, as festering as a raspberry seed wedged between her back teeth. Cora recognized her agitation was only partially about the fake letters themselves, and wholly about her ability to trust Nate's word. But the thought had taken hold now, and she was helpless to redirect course.

She had to be certain.

Cora silently knelt next to the bedside chest, easing open the drawer, wincing at the creaking of the sticking wood. She

checked behind her, making sure Nate was still asleep, tamping down her racing heart and escalating guilt.

She made gradual progress on the drawer, wiggling slightly where it was wont to catch. The contents were incrementally revealed to her—a stack of letters, a quill, an inkpot.

Cora could feel the disagreeable turn, how she was becoming restless and thorny, fully aware and yet unable to halt the horrible, slithering sensation of her own mind encouraging her worst behavior. It was the same sort of irritable nitpicking she had tried to avoid at her soiree when the women had gossiped about Nate.

She knew she shouldn't do this.

But she had already started.

Cora reached inside the drawer for the piled correspondence. She fanned out the letters, quickly skimming the contents of Nate's chest.

Letters from Lord Fordham, letters from Tabitha. A sheet from a ledger, listing repair work.

That's odd.

Slowly, she picked up the ledger, looking closely. Her brow wrinkled in confusion.

This paper...belonged to Ronald Carleton.

Frowning and fully absorbed in her task, Cora rummaged once more, knocking aside the remaining letters, searching for what had been under the ledger.

She withdrew her hand, her stomach sinking when she realized what she was holding.

A bank draft from Coulter & Co. in London.

Cora stared. It took her three tries to read it, as though it had been transcribed in a foreign tongue. Bits of it *were* confusing—a string of account numbers, a series of abbreviations she didn't understand. But she was also in shock

from the very plain English that had been scrawled across the cheque.

Pay Ronald Carleton, from m/a, the sum of twenty pounds. £20.

Cora sat back on her heels, her vision tunneling as Edith Carleton's accusations floated back to her. *The vicar has noticed some missing items...Someone in this household is stealing from us...*

She felt a foul sense of trepidation. Why did Nate have these items in his possession? Was he *stealing* from Ronald Carleton? How could he? It put them at a terrible risk; it could ruin...everything.

In a fog of confusion, Cora turned around to look at him. But instead of her sleeping lover, all she could see was the Nate she had known all those years ago—charming, playful, teasing. And desperately irresponsible.

But he had *changed*.

Hadn't he?

Cora's thoughts were a house of cards, tumbling, crashing around her. She was going to be sick. Literally, viscerally sick.

"Cora?"

She froze, the papers still clutched in her hand.

Nate was sitting up, rubbing his eyes. "What are you doing down there?"

It didn't even occur to her to deflect. Cora was half-furious, half-frightened. *What had he done?*

"What is this, Nate?" She couldn't believe how steady her voice was.

Nate blinked away sleep and confusion as he stared at Cora, disheveled and wrapped in his dressing gown, standing angrily next to his open bedside chest. She watched it happen, his bemusement clearing, then shifting, darkening to something closed and guarded.

"Hold now...are you...going through my belongings?"

“I was going to leave you a note.” She crossed her arms defensively. “I was looking for a quill. But then I found—”

“Odd.” Nate mused, studying her carefully. “I don’t remember storing my writing materials *under* all the papers.”

Cora flushed, and Nate tilted his head.

“If you needed something, Cora, you could have asked me.”

“What *is* this, Nate?” She stifled a surge of guilt as she paced the length of the bed.

Nate watched her, his expression carefully blank.

“Why do you have paperwork in Carleton’s name? Why have you squirreled away an exorbitant bank draft that doesn’t belong to you?”

“I see we are ignoring your infractions then.” Nate crossed his arms over his bare chest and leaned back against the headboard. He was maddeningly calm right now.

“Did you *steal* from the Carletons?” Her voice dropped to a strangled whisper. “Did you put my children at risk for your own purposes?”

Nate groaned, lifting his gaze to the ceiling. For a seeming infinity, he was silent, his jaw working so hard she could hear it pop.

“Nate?”

Finally, he pushed his tousled hair off his brow and dragged his gaze back to Cora.

“Yes.” He sighed, relenting. “And no.”

At his admission, Cora froze. She had expected him to deny it, perhaps to scold her for prying. She hadn’t thought she could be more upset than she had been yesterday during the debacle with Tess’s injury. But this was worse...because she expected better from Nate.

He had made her expect better.

Nate regarded her evenly. “That ledger, that draft...yes, I took them from Carleton. But not for my own purposes, as you so kindly suggest.”

His gray eyes were dark, and Cora felt another stab of remorse, even as her confusion mounted.

“I have reason to believe Carleton might be withdrawing from Leo’s accounts. The vicar is having a major renovation completed. He said himself it cost more than his living, and his tithing is paltry. And...” Nate paused significantly. “And he’d come into the money *recently*.”

“You mean...” Cora stared at the bank draft in her hands.

“If I can prove Carleton is using Leo’s money for his personal benefit, then your brother will have his proof the Carletons are not suitable guardians.”

Cora’s heart pounded in double time, racing away to this possible future where the Carletons were gone from her life.

A way out of this? Nate had found a way out of this?

But...her relief halted in its tracks.

“And you weren’t going to tell me?”

Nate winced, then raised a shoulder. “What would be the point? I don’t yet know anything for certain. Besides, there’s nothing you can do about the money, love. I wrote to your brother, seeking counsel. Since I haven’t yet heard from him, I didn’t want to raise your hopes.”

“My hopes?” Cora laughed, incredulous. “My *hopes*? Have you seen me all summer? Anxious and sleepless and afraid? And you had an answer right here?”

Nate scrubbed his hand over his jaw.

“I didn’t want to give you one more thing to worry over,” he started. “I figured I should see what’s what first—”

“That’s not your decision.” Cora stopped her pacing and raised a trembling finger. “You can’t decide anything for me. I refuse to go backward. I won’t again be controlled by a man ___”

Nate's eyes flashed. "Do you see Frederick Dane here? I'm not trying to *control* you. Cora, love, I'm trying to help you. I'm trying to shoulder some of your strain. I've told you, time and again, you need to trust me—"

"Then you should have acted trustworthy!"

The words tore from her unbidden, but Cora had never felt so frustrated, so blindsided.

"And there it is." Nate's voice was quiet, his face stony.

Cora raised one hand, biting her lip. That hadn't come out right. "Nate..."

But he shook his head slowly. "You don't trust me; you never have. Nothing has changed for you, has it? Why else are you sneaking around, making sure I'm behaving? Why else would you doubt me all month? Pestering me about my brother, my investments, my past liaisons? Do you *want* to see only the worst in me?"

Cora's eyes were leaking; she was so aggrieved she couldn't hold it in her own body any longer.

"How can you say that? I want to see the *best* in you. You're a *good man*, and you're better than this withholding, treating me like something fragile that needs your protection —"

Nate stood. His mouth was tight as he wrapped the bedsheet around his waist, crossing his arms to form an indignant wall of skin. "I don't think you're fragile, Cora. I think you're foolish. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to sit idly by and watch you struggle? To sit back and watch you fear? You make everything harder for yourself, by yourself."

She came up short, standing opposite him, his rumpled bed between them. A tremendous pressure was building inside her skull, pushing her anguish into words.

"Do *you* have any idea how difficult it is to not be allowed to sit with it at all? This is who I am. The struggle is in my bones. I am a woman fully realized from fear. It's not pretty,

it's not pleasant. But it's who I am. I don't need you to change me."

Cora raised her hand, cutting off his protest. "Can't you see, Nate? You only love my lacking. You only love the version of me who needs you—"

Nate's nostrils flared. "And *you* don't love any version of me at all."

His words hit her chest. Cora took two swift, staggering steps back. She was winded, her lungs aching as though she'd run a great, cold distance.

It hurt to breathe; it hurt to think.

"That's not true, Nate. *That's not true.* I love you, of course I love you...but you kept this from me!"

He fleetingly looked like a boy, and then all at once, like a very tired man. "So there *is* a condition then."

A beat of silence stretched painfully between them.

"I'm not saying any of this right." Cora's fists clenched so tightly, her fingernails bit into her palms. She stepped closer, rounding the bed. "You *know* I'm not saying this right—"

"Look, Cora," he sighed, running his hand through his hair. "We can't become waylaid with this, right now. I have to go. It's imperative I see those papers to London and sort this out with your brother. That's what I wanted to tell you last night."

"You can't go yet." She closed her eyes, trying to quell the rising tide of her panic. "Not like this, not when you're upset."

"So you'll detain me for a forcible cooling? I thought time was of the essence."

Cora stepped closer to him. "Nate, *listen to me*, you can't do anything rash. You can't do anything reckless—"

He laughed grimly. "Don't worry, Cora. I'll keep Gavin out of it."

He was so obtuse, she wanted to scream. "That's not what I meant, Nate. I only mean you don't need to prove anything to me!"

He forced a somber half smile. “Don’t I?”

“No! No, you don’t. Nate, please. We need to talk about this!”

Cora felt a trill of hysteria. He was retreating, right in front of her. Because she couldn’t let anything go. Her compulsion to interfere had caused this. But then again, so had he.

She pushed; he avoided. And they were making each other worse.

“Do you want me to stay and talk about this?” He cocked his head. “Or do you want me to take this evidence to London?”

There was no good answer to that question, and he knew it. She lifted her hands, covering her face.

“It’s...it’s not about us, Nate. Not right now. Tess and Leo...I have to think of them.” At the realization of just how tightly her hands were tied, Cora started to weep in earnest. “This time, I truly *don’t* have a choice.”

His face softened, but there was a new wariness to him she found more alarming than anything else that had so far transpired.

Nevertheless, he came closer, taking her in his arms.

“I know, love.” He slowly drew her to him, a queer, unreadable look on his face. “I know you don’t have a choice. And I don’t have one either. You and I both know I need to find your brother.”

“But you’ll be back?” Cora breathed unevenly. “You’ll come back here, won’t you?”

Nate brushed a soft kiss to her temple. When she tilted her face to him, he swept a second, slower kiss over her lips. It was reverently restrained and wholly unfamiliar.

It tasted like a beginning—the start of something hard, the start of something necessary.

When they broke apart, Cora realized he had never answered her question.

But she was too afraid to ask again.

July 1819

Barrister's Chambers, Gray's Inn, London

Travers,

Sincerest apologies for the delayed response. My incoming correspondence was inadvertently sent to a colleague's chambers, and it took several days to sort out.

I received your note, regarding the information you procured from Ronald Carleton. I agree with your assessment of the situation: something smells rotten to me too.

My petition to the Court of Chancery, as I'm sure Cora has told you, has suffered a delay. What you have found may be exactly what I require.

Would you be amenable to meeting in London, as soon as feasible? I would like to examine the documents you obtained. I don't want to risk the post.

I've about reached my capacity for risk-taking these days.

Sincerely,

Gavin Sinclair



WHEN NATE ROUNDED the corner to Fleet Street, he immediately spotted the figure of Gavin Sinclair, pacing outside Coulter & Co. Bank like an informant of the Crown.

He could understand the barrister's impatience. They had originally planned to meet yesterday, but Sinclair had been

called to plead a case. Nate, too, was riddled with tension; he'd been in London for two days, and he had yet to make any progress on helping Cora.

He felt despicable about how they had left things between them. Nate had reacted badly—defensive and snappish—but it had been so bloody chafing to catch her meddling, to see she hardly trusted him to write a handful of letters. How was he ever meant to believe she would entrust him with her future? With her *family*?

Cora had tearfully vowed he had nothing to prove to her, but it was a lie. He yearned to build an entire life with her, but it seemed Cora only needed him to provide ornamentation. Nate wanted to be more than a good time. Hell, for the first time, he was trying to be a good man.

He didn't merely want to receive her love; he wanted to deserve it.

By any means necessary.

"Sinclair," Nate called gruffly, drawing the barrister's attention.

"There you are." Sinclair whirled to face him. "We were supposed to meet at half past."

He hastily gripped Nate's arm, turning him away from the crowds of Fleet Street and pulling him down a side alley.

Miffed, Nate reached for his fob, checking his watch. "It *is* half past, Sinclair."

"Well, if we wanted to execute our plan at half past," Sinclair fumed, "then you should have arrived before then, so we could sort ourselves out—"

"Then *you* should have told me that." Nate jerked his arm free.

Sinclair looked affronted. "Have you any idea what I have been suffering this summer? Do you understand the *paperwork* alone? Sorting, filing, gathering cases and evidence, taking meetings, trying to make inroads with the clerks at the Chancery...not to mention my regular caseload."

Nate tried not to react as he listened Sinclair's familiar, exasperated tirade; the barrister even had the same habit of fisting his hands while he fretted.

My God, there are two of them.

Nate refastened his watch. "And I suppose you think that I've been sitting idle in Berkshire. Perhaps I should remind you, Sinclair, I had a part to play this summer too. Do you or do you not intend to make your case partly on the legs of my ruse?"

Sinclair didn't seem to notice Nate's caustic tone. A cart was slowly rumbling past them in the narrow alley, and the barrister was nervously eyeing it.

Nate used the opportunity to pull himself together. He was entirely too on edge. Already, he'd endured two sleepless nights at the Albany, and none of his typical diversions held remote appeal. London felt *wrong*; it was a garment that didn't fit, like the only time Barnes had ever slipped up and given the tailor Nate's incorrect measurements. He'd split the shoulder seams on his tailcoat and ended up having to shell out for a repair.

Now he was once again paying the price for growth.

"Look, Sinclair, my apologies that I wasn't here earlier. But I'm here now. Let's go over the plan, figure out what we have."

He started to pull out the papers he'd slipped from Carleton.

"What are you *doing*?" Sinclair all but yelled, shoving the papers back into Nate's pocket. "We're twenty paces from the bank. Anyone can see us."

Nate looked around the dank alley. They were surrounded by crates and entirely alone except for two sweeps congregating at the apex of Fleet.

"I don't think the chief cashier of Coulter & Co. is masquerading as a street sweeper, Sinclair," Nate pointed out.

“Right.” Sinclair reddened in embarrassment as he withdrew his spectacles. “Of course, you’re right. Well, let’s see it then.”

Nate handed him the paperwork. Sinclair narrowed his eyes as he studied first the ledger sheet, then the draft.

“This was the only draft I could filch,” Nate explained. “But there were quite a few more, all partially made out. Some to Carleton, some to other names...one made payable to this Burke, here.” He pointed to a line on the paper, indicating the mason he had identified. “Not to mention any funds back in Essex at his vicarage or what his son had *already* paid for the renovations.”

“I concur,” Sinclair said, his eyes roving the ledger sheet. “This seems far more extravagant than the usual repair of a vicarage. Besides, Coulter, while a large bank, primarily caters to the wealthy. There’s no reason a vicar would have business with this establishment.”

The same conclusion Nate had drawn. “So you think it’s Leo’s account then?” He rocked back on his heels, thrumming with anticipation.

Sinclair was still scanning the ledger, mumbling sums under his breath. He looked up at Nate.

“Well...as Leo’s testamentary guardian, Carleton has access to Leo’s finances. What we have here seems to indicate Carleton *might* be drawing more than is strictly necessary, and for his own personal benefit. But...” Sinclair pointed to the top left corner of the draft. “The issue is we only have this account number. No name. And without knowing for certain it’s Leo’s account, it’s not proof enough.”

Nate thought it over. “So what now? Carleton already signed the draft, and he didn’t designate a bearer. We can’t stroll in there with an obviously stolen cheque.”

“True,” Sinclair muttered, still looking at the documents. “Very sticky situation.”

“Unless...” Nate twisted a cuff link. “Unless we pretend to be Ronald Carleton, come to cash out his draft.”

Sinclair blanched. “Absolutely not. Travers, are you out of your very mind?”

“Please.” Nate put up a hand, pacing the alley. “Don’t write me off yet. Go through this, Sinclair...if we presented the cheque, what would happen? What would it tell us?”

“We’ll have to sign for it,” Sinclair said slowly, ruminating uncomfortably. “Which is the first problem, as the signatures won’t match. But *theoretically*, we would receive a receipt of the transaction. And *theoretically*, the receipt would contain Leo’s name and not only the account number.”

“Which, taken together...” Nate prompted, seeing a way forward here.

“Which, taken together with the ledger of Carleton’s personal expenditures, would be enough to warrant an inquiry,” Sinclair tensely allowed. “It would be enough to stick my foot in Edith Carleton’s slamming door.”

“All right.” Nate exhaled, rubbing his hands together. The end was possibly in sight. He felt good about this. This was going to work. “Let’s get on with it.”

He started toward the main street, motioning Sinclair to follow. But the barrister hesitated.

“What are you waiting for?” Nate called.

Sinclair looked exceedingly nervous. “Well...you see...I can’t actually do the exchange myself.”

Nate glowered. “Do you mean to tell me that *I’m* to play the part of Ronald Carleton, villainous vicar, in addition to *also* playing the role of your sister’s betrothed? Does this look like the stage of the Theatre Royal?”

Sinclair shook his head. “I’m a barrister, Travers. I can’t be embroiled in any sort of scandal concerning a trust fund.”

Nate scoffed. “But I suppose I can?”

“Are you suggesting this is the first time you’ve been involved in dubious activity?”

Nate's nostrils flared. He could do without the constant reminders that he carried a questionable reputation. Especially when he was trying to improve himself.

For Cora.

It's all for Cora.

"Fine." He snatched the papers from Sinclair.

"I'll just wait—" Sinclair gestured to the busy street.

"You'll wait at my elbow, Sinclair."

The pair approached the imposing stone edifice of Coulter & Co., and a liveried footman opened the door to the wide lobby. There were men gadding about everywhere. In the echoing space, it was as loud inside the bank as it had been on Fleet Street.

Across the cavernous interior, Nate could see a line of high, sloping desks, behind which clerks sat on tall stools. Nate and Sinclair found a place in line for the receiving counter, Sinclair jerking his head around so often he nearly lost his hat.

"Would you pull yourself together?" Nate muttered out of the side of his mouth. "You look like you're here to rob the place."

"Are you mad?" Sinclair hissed. "Uttering the word *rob* in the middle of a bank—"

Nate threw back his head, laughing. Sinclair was as nervous as Cora. "You don't have a lady in your life, do you, Sinclair?"

Sinclair colored. "I'm very busy."

Nate clapped him on the back. "Might be good for you, mate."

At that moment, the elderly man in front of them moved to the side, and Nate was ushered forward.

He straightened his hat. "Good afternoon," Nate said confidently. He slid the draft across the polished countertop. "I need to cash this draft."

The cashier pulled the draft toward him, reading carefully over his spectacles. “Your name, sir?”

Nate kept his face relaxed. He could sense Sinclair sweating next to him.

“Ronald Carleton.”

“Just a moment, Mr. Carleton.”

The cashier handed the draft to a clerk next to him, who turned through the pages of a leather-bound book. Nate tried not to watch too closely as the clerk began entering the draft into his records.

“Ah, sir? Mr. Carleton?” The clerk looked up. “You still need to endorse this cheque.”

Shite. Nate had been half hoping they could skip the signature part. Beside him, Sinclair coughed.

“My apologies.” Nate nodded tightly. “I’ll do so now.”

The clerk handed the draft back to the cashier, who put it on the counter with a quill. Carleton’s original signature was already on the front of the cheque. Nate’s pulse spiked. He slowly picked up the quill in his left hand, feigning a grimace.

“You’ll forgive my messy scrawl.” He smiled remorsefully. “My signature will be frightful, but I’ll need to sign with my off-hand. I’ve sustained a boxing injury to my right.”

Nate forcibly held his hand steady as he put nib to paper. He visualized Carleton’s signature—mostly a looping C.

Using his left hand, he scrawled the name, satisfied with the sloppy approximation.

“There you are.” Nate slid the draft back to the cashier, who skimmed it, nodded, and handed it to the clerk.

“That’s all in order, Mr. Carleton. I’ll retrieve your coin. Will half sovereigns suffice?”

Nate nodded, his eyes on the clerk, who was preparing a receipt of the transaction.

His mouth was as dry as it had ever been. If this receipt turned out to be useless...

“Here you are, sir.” The clerk handed over the record for Nate’s approval.

He stared at the paper in his hand.

And stared and stared.

The Viscount Dane, Drawn to Cash, R. Carleton.

The account was Leo’s.

Nate had been right; Carleton was cutting himself cheques from his ward’s personal funds.

He silently handed the receipt to Sinclair, who accepted it reverently, as though Nate had given him a page of the Holy Bible. Nate nearly closed his eyes, so overwhelming was his sense of relief.

But then he hesitated. Was this single transaction enough? He didn’t want to push his luck.

If you can’t win, don’t lose.

Nate considered Tess and Leo, and knew he had no choice but to win.

“Sir,” he hedged, smiling genially at the clerk. “I’ve been meaning to update my account pass book. You know how these small local banks can be, not nearly as neat with records as your fine establishment.”

The clerk beamed. “We take great care, Mr. Carleton.”

“That you do.” Nate nodded encouragingly. “In that vein, would you be able to provide a list of any other transactions drawn from Lord Dane’s account to my name? My solicitor here will make up my book accordingly.”

Nate clapped Sinclair’s shoulder; the barrister startled.

“Yes...” He nodded, recovering quickly. “I’m transitioning to a new...bookkeeping system. I need to copy everything over.”

“I would be happy to, Mr. Carleton.” The clerk glanced at his book. “But it’s a lengthy transaction list, as you know. It will take me some time to go through it all.”

It seemed prudent to get the hell out of this bank, considering Nate had just committed both theft and fraud. He shouldn’t extend this excursion, but further evidence of Carleton’s deceit was too tempting to pass on.

“We’re on a bit of a tight schedule today.” Nate delivered his best approximation of Raymond’s harried posture. “Perhaps you could copy just the most recent transactions?”

“I can do that while we secure your coin, Mr. Carleton.”

“Much obliged.” Nate stepped to the side of the counter and gestured for Sinclair to join him. The barrister’s face was white. He looked torn between intense relief that the initial transaction was complete and abject horror that Nate was digging a deeper hole. His hand was affixed to his coat, where the receipt was tucked inside his pocket.

Nate stared at Sinclair’s slightly quivering fingers. His blood raced with the intoxicating sense of impending victory. He hadn’t fully appreciated how much he’d needed a win, how much he’d needed to achieve something.

About damn time.

“Your funds, Mr. Carleton.” The cashier reappeared. He counted out the gold for Nate’s verification, then handed him the small, heavy purse.

For a moment, Nate and Sinclair both stared at the money—Leo’s money—realizing in unison they hadn’t planned on what actually to *do* with it. Obviously, it would need to be re-deposited. But Nate couldn’t very well do that on the spot without drawing curious attention.

He hesitated, then slipped the coin purse into his own coat.

“And here is a list of your last dozen transactions.” The clerk slid a paper over the counter. “If you require more, we can write to your solicitor—”

“I’ll be in touch.” Nate nodded curtly, even as his excitement surged. “Thank you.”

Nate handed the record to Sinclair, who carefully tucked it alongside the withdrawal slip. The men exchanged a swift glance. There it was—proof the vicar had been misappropriating Leo’s funds. A full inquiry by the Chancery would surely make mincemeat of the Carletons.

“Straight to your Chambers,” Nate muttered, nodding at Sinclair.

The barrister swallowed hard and turned, immediately making for the entrance of the bank.

“Good day, Mr. Carleton,” the clerk called as Nate tipped his hat and backed away after Sinclair.

“Say...did you say Carleton?” A new clerk had appeared at the counter, frowning. “Has Carleton returned? I worked with him on a transaction yesterday. He had only just arrived in London. He seemed pleased with our business. Was there a problem?”

Half of Nate wanted to freeze, but the sensible part of him knew he had to keep moving.

“He’s right there.” The cashier nodded toward Nate. “He had another transaction...”

Walk, walk, walk.

Nate pushed behind two men grumbling in line. He surreptitiously looked back at the counter.

The clerks and cashier were in animated discussion. The cashier was pointing to Nate, but the other clerk was vehemently shaking his head, his hands flapping in front of him. Nate realized he was gesturing in description—short, round—and the clerk who had assisted Nate paled in panic.

Nate could pretend to be many things, but short and round were not two of them.

Fuck.

“Excuse me, sir!” the clerk called after Nate. “Mr. Carleton...er...well. Mister...*you*. You, there!”

The echoing lobby disguised the clerk’s insistent appeal. Nate kept moving; nobody was paying any mind. He could see Sinclair’s hat bobbing ahead.

“Wait!” The cashier and the clerk were both shouting now, waving their arms. “Wait, sir!”

Nate craned his neck. Sinclair was a dozen paces from the door and still none the wiser. *Keep going, Sinclair.*

“Sir, we need you to return to the counter at once!”

The busy crowd started to take notice of the commotion. A wave of bumbling hats and swiveling shoulders momentarily blocked Nate’s path.

“That man—there—not that one...*that* one! The tall gentleman...somebody stop him, please. We need to apprehend that man for questioning—”

But nobody seemed quite sure which tall gentleman the cashier was frantically pointing to. Nate grit his jaw and kept walking.

“Sir!” A third clerk was now shouting. “Return at once, or we’ll send for the constable.”

Nate swore as a portly guard abruptly blocked his progress, his arms crossed self-importantly over his chest.

“I believe you’re wanted at the counter, sir.”

Shite. Just what he needed, an aspirant hero in Coulter & Co. Bank.

Sinclair still seemed unaware of the shifting tenor of the bank interior. Through the crowd, Nate glimpsed him in the entrance vestibule, nodding to the liveried footman. All of their evidence was in Sinclair’s pocket...

Except the sack of gold on Nate’s own person.

Go, Sinclair. Nate silently swore. *Get the hell out of here.*

“Did you hear me?” the guard demanded, stepping closer.

Nate cracked his neck, considering his options. He had promised Cora he'd keep her brother out of it—the custody petition would be a complete failure if Sinclair were arrested for fraud. Sinclair had everything they required, but he needed to get away from the bank before he could be collared as Nate's accomplice.

“That's him. Hold him, please.” The clerk hurried down from his counter. “We have reason to believe that man has committed a crime.”

Nate had to buy Sinclair time. And he had the steadily sinking suspicion it was going to cost him a hell of a sum. This couldn't look worse for Nate—forgery, fraud, a pocket full of stolen gold.

He wavered, ignoring all of his carefully-honed selfish instincts. Nate was accustomed to getting himself *out* of trouble; it had been a while since he had jumped in with both feet. Somehow, through all of his many escapades, he'd avoided the rather unpleasant chore of getting arrested.

The footman held the door open for Sinclair.

“Sir! You leave me no choice—” The guard was now attempting to manhandle Nate toward the counter.

His penchant for self-preservation took the reins. He instinctively cocked his arm, pulling back, holding tense. For one moment, he enjoyed the superlative satisfaction of knowing he could have this fusty bloke on his back with two jabs and a hook.

But then Nate had a sudden flash of Leo's small face, his nose wrinkling under its tiny constellation of freckles.

Are all men like their fathers?

Not all.

Some men, it turned out, were like their sons.

Nate lowered his arm, the stinging shame of forfeiture loosening his fist. He'd never before gone down without a fight. But if he pummeled a guard, he'd be detained even longer than he was about to be.

Cora wanted him to return. He *needed* to return.

And then, as Gavin Sinclair stepped into the sunshine, Nate Travers turned to the guard, raising both hands in a gesture of reluctant surrender.

There was a first time for everything.

July 1819

Finch Residence, London

Cora,

I normally avoid serious affairs, but I won't do you the disservice of pretending your situation hasn't grown exponentially more stressful: Tess's injury, the Carletons' threats.

If your nerves are delicate, they most certainly have earned the right to be.

If you want me to come, I'll come. Say the word, and I'll be on my way.

I know my brother is with you, but I also know men are of little use when it comes to matters of importance.

I'll be thinking of you, dearest.

Tabitha



“WHEN WILL WE SEE THEM?” Leo whispered impatiently, stretching his bare feet on the blanket beside Cora.

“Soon,” she murmured, dropping a kiss on his head. “But not until the sun sets, all the way down. They’ll peek first, and when the coast is clear—”

“Stars!” Tess wiggled, trying to unwind her bandage.

“Stars,” Cora confirmed, halting Tess’s fidgeting fingers. She wrapped an arm around each of her children, holding them against her.

Three days had passed since Nate and the Carletons had departed on their separate journeys to London, and Tess, as predicted, was already on the mend. Children are resilient; their tiny bodies graciously forgiving the infractions of playtime.

The hardest part of the last several days was simply keeping Tess still. But even that was preferable to the insufferable task of *waiting*.

Cora had heard from neither Nate nor Gavin. Presumably, they were together, but she couldn’t be sure. She carried her worries as constant companions—the hateful determination in Edith Carleton’s eyes, the guarded tension stiffening Nate’s mouth.

Cora had no sense of what was happening. Had they reviewed the evidence? Were they able to prove anything? Was all well? Would she keep her children? Would Nate return to her?

Everything was happening elsewhere, and because it was completely out of her hands, Cora was in her head, an altogether traitorous place to be. She had become a testament to worse-case scenarios, convincing herself the Carletons would win and take her children away. Or Nate would fester on every cowardly word she had said to him and decide to remain in London where his life was easy.

In an attempt to keep both busy and calm, Cora found herself composing scenarios that brought the children joy. She didn’t want them—especially sensitive Leo—to perceive even a fraction of her woes. A person is gifted with a finite number of summers, and she wouldn’t see her children waste one of them on worry.

And so tonight was a particularly rare treat—an evening picnic and late bedtime.

The fading sunset saw Cora and her babes lying in a little row on a pile of blankets, the children nestled against her like puppies. Cora was enveloped by the sensation of downy hair and the vinegary scent unique to bare little-boy feet. Leo was resolutely waiting for the stars, but Tess was already drifting, breathing heavily against Cora's shoulder.

Cora had a particularly fond memory from her own childhood of lying outside on a drowsy summer night, tucked between her father and brothers, looking at the stars. Gavin had patiently tried to teach her the names of the constellations, but Cora had preferred to make up her own. It had been a game, gazing at the scattered skyward jewels, pretending to make sense of them.

Now she wished she had paid attention.

Every day, she found more she wanted to show her children, more she needed to teach them. And every day, she sensed her time was running out.

If Nate and Gavin's last effort failed, Leo and Tess would need to go to the Carletons in London. Even if she found another way to fight, in the short-term, she would lose them.

She had a duty to prepare them for that eventuality. As their mother, it was her responsibility to make the hard things easier.

"The stars are taking a long time," Leo murmured, his voice sliding into a sleepy whine.

Her sweet boy. Leo had no idea what was possibly on the horizon. She had meant to shield him, but that was unfair. Leo didn't handle change well; he always fared better when he had a chance to ease in.

Nate's words from that afternoon in the library were branded on her heart. *Leo and Tess will want for nothing... because they are yours. And that makes them strong.*

Cora was silent, searching out the first stars in the purpling sky. It was a strange comfort. The heavens passed no judgment; they held no sympathy.

They simply endured.

“Do you want to know something wonderfully special, Leo?” Cora murmured against his temple. “The sky is the same. Always. Wherever *you* are, or wherever *I* am, I can see the same stars as you.”

Cora swallowed very hard, trying to keep her voice steady. “Even if we are far apart.”

But Leo remained quiet, his curled hand slipping heavily from hers. When she shifted, his head lolled on her arm; his long, dusky lashes rested on his cheek.

Already asleep.

Cora’s vision swam. She squeezed Leo closer, Tess closer, both of them as tight as she could muster. She’d try to explain again tomorrow.

For now, they waited together, under the infinite weight of the uncaring stars.

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, Cora was sequestered in the study, attempting to manage her lagging correspondence. Honestly, she was no better than Nate these days. But she was glad for her procrastination, for now it meant she had another way to stay occupied. Busy hands, busy head, fearful heart.

Four days.

It had been four days.

A knock interrupted her work; her butler stood in the doorway. “Lady Dane? Mr. Sinclair is here.”

Cora stared at Coates as though he’d grown a second head.

Mr. Sinclair?

She leaped to her feet as Coates blinked in alarm.

“Gavin? Gavin is *here*?”

Cora felt immediately, thoroughly ransacked. There were no lucid thoughts left in her head. There were only two reasons Gavin would be in Berkshire right now instead of London.

Good news or bad news?

“Shall I send him in?”

“Yes.” Cora spun in a circle, as though the reason for Gavin’s visit were hiding in this room. “Yes, send him in at once.”

Gavin appeared a moment later, hat in his hand...and a smile on his face.

Good news.

Good news?

“Well.” Gavin bounced into the room, cheerful and unencumbered. “How about that? What a thing, Cora. Can you believe it?”

“Gavin?”

Cora’s hopeful relief wavered. What was he talking about? Had she missed something important? She looked at her desk, wondering if she’d overlooked a letter.

“I know you’ve heard already, but I couldn’t help myself. I had to see your face, Cora.”

“Heard...what, exactly?”

Gavin cocked his head, smiling ruefully. “Travers told you, I imagine. I can’t fault him for that. I know he had a two-day head start back here. But even still, it was you and me, Cora, all year, and I wanted to pour a drink with you. I wanted to celebrate.”

Celebrate.

“It worked?” She gasped. “The bank draft? It worked?”

Gavin paused, peering at Cora as if she were having a go at him.

“Hang on a moment...did Travers manage to keep this from you?” He looked inordinately pleased. “He left the news to me, after all, and I still managed to bungle the delivery.”

Cora’s mind was overflowing. One thought replaced another; she couldn’t keep up.

“Cora, *yes*.” Gavin spread his hands as wide as his smile. “The account was Leo’s. We have a transaction receipt proving it. Moreover, I have an additional record of every transaction between that account and Ronald Carleton in the last two months. The vicar has been repeatedly drawing from Leo.”

Every transaction. Leo’s account. Proof.

“Oh—*oh*, Gavin!”

“There is no way—none—the Chancery will permit the Carletons to remain your children’s guardians. Leo is a peer. The Crown protects its own at all costs. They’re done for.”

Cora’s hands covered her face. This was too much to take in.

“Did you...did you submit your petition then?” Cora managed. “How *over* is this?”

Gavin grinned. “I submitted the bill of complaint yesterday. It’s why I was detained arriving here. The Chancery will review, and then the Carletons will have an opportunity for a rejoinder. It’s not finalized yet, and I don’t know how long the court will take to get to us. They have a historically lengthy backlog. But with this evidence, I can’t imagine this case will be drawn out. I think we’re on our way to saying *good riddance* to the Carletons, Cora.”

Cora couldn’t speak. She was crying, she was laughing, she was climbing over the desk like she was seven years old and running into her big brother’s arms. Gavin swung her around and around and around—and every rotation unburdened her.

Good riddance!

Gavin set her down, both of them winded and excitable, and he made his way to her tantalus. He poured a measure for each of them, but Cora already knew nothing could lighten her spirits more than Gavin’s news.

“To the viscountess.” He laughed, lifting his glass. “You made it, Cora. Just a little longer now.”

To the viscountess. Cora couldn't believe it. Great bubbles of relief kept lifting right out of her. She'd come full circle; nothing could hold her back.

"Shall I pour one for Travers too?" Gavin asked, fussing by the drinks cabinet. "He deserves it. You should ring for him. Truly, Cora, he was marvelous the other day. It was appalling at the time, but I can't stop laughing now. He *pretended* to be Carleton—he even had sort of a voice. It was incredible, really..."

But Cora's levity was draining with every word from Gavin's mouth.

"I would have come here straightaway with Travers, but I, of course, needed to finalize the petition—"

"Why...why do you keep saying that?" Cora asked slowly.

"Saying what?"

"Saying...things about Nate." She stared at Gavin. "He's not..."

Gavin's excitement tipped toward confusion.

"He's not what?"

Cora faltered. "He's not *here*."

She broke off at Gavin's strange expression.

"He's not here?"

She silently shook her head.

"And you...you haven't heard from him?"

"I...I haven't had word in four days," Cora murmured, the back of her neck prickling. "Since the morning he left. I thought he was with you, in London."

Gavin frowned.

"I haven't seen him since I left the bank two days ago. We had agreed to go separate ways as soon as we finished... because of all the fraud, you see. But I assumed he would have returned here by now."

Gavin swilled from his tumbler, a deep furrow forming between his eyes. Cora stared, lightly swaying, trying to make sense of these disparate pieces of information.

Nate hadn't come back.

His business was concluded, but he'd stayed in London. He hadn't so much as written.

No.

A great, inescapable coldness was sliding through her.

No, no, no.

"Maybe he had other business." Gavin was pacing. "He could be with his family."

But Tabitha had just written to her, and she, too, thought Nate was here.

"He's not on business," Cora croaked. "He's not with his family. He's just...not here."

He left her.

Cora's fingers were numb around her glass. She realized she was standing in the exact spot where she and Nate had mock-toasted the Carletons at the beginning of their ruse. Right there, leaning against her desk, was where Nate had first demanded her trust.

"Gavin." Her voice was faint. "*Thank you.* Thank you for coming, for telling me, for doing all of this work. But..."

"I'll give you a moment," he finished quietly, seeming to comprehend that Nate and Cora weren't simply coconspirators. She nodded, her neck jerking tightly.

"I...I'll find you in a bit." Her words came haltingly. "Are...you visiting for long?"

"Only tonight." Gavin worriedly looked over at her. "I should return to my offices, be ready in the event they call our case."

"Very well." She was hardly listening.

"Take your time, Cora. I'll go say hello to the children."

She stood rigid, clutching her rummer, until the door latched behind him.

There was a terrible, painful rupturing inside of her. The children, Nate. Gains, losses. Cora frantically sifted through everything she had just learned, unable to keep it all straight.

Her deepest hopes for her family, fully realized.

Except...not quite.

Nate was gone.

With aching clarity, she recalled the night at her piano. Nate had dared her to try, but he couldn't see she was already trying. She had tried for years to do it all, all on her own. Cora had tried to temper her expectations, to want less, so that when less was given to her, it nevertheless felt like plenty. She had thought by withholding, she could keep herself safe.

But at what cost?

She had become a one-handed sonata, a melody with no counterweight. A pale approximation of a song, a pale approximation of a life.

She had tried at all the wrong things.

I love you without condition. He had given the words to her, but she had ruined the receipt. Cora had forbidden herself from trusting him because she couldn't trust *herself*. She was still too wary of her own reckless heart, never falling in line.

The study grew blurry around her; her heartbeat clogged her throat. Cora had assumed Nate was a safe choice, an unreliable sort of man, someone she could put in a box marked *rogue* and tuck away until she needed him. But like an indefatigable mechanical jack-in-the-box, he wouldn't stay put. Everything about him was more than she had expected.

And she had let it terrify her.

She had caused this rift. She had driven him away. She had done so time and time again; she sent him away before the ball, she confronted him at the soiree, she hadn't let him help with Tess's injury.

And she had selfishly allowed him to believe his love was insufficient.

Why would he ever come back? How could such an easygoing man love under such punishing constraints?

Cora quaked with an unwelcome series of sickening, splintered visions of her future.

Nate in a distant ballroom, silver in his temples, his wife on his arm.

Passing him in Hyde Park, remembering his fingers, tangled in her hair.

Meeting his sons at a house party, forced to watch Tess and Leo befriend the children who had the father they wouldn't.

Her life, her family, without him.

Her sorrow crested inside her skull, swelling in great pulsing waves that pushed against her eyes, sending runnels of inept longing rolling through her. Gullies of grief ran down her cheeks, over her lips, along her neck. The places Nate had touched were now streambeds of all the ways she still chose by half.

Undo it, she thought brokenly. Go after him. Pull him back to four days ago, where you don't pry, where you don't doubt, where you simply let a good man love you.

Her whisky fell to the floor, the glass breaking, the sour liquid splashing, the fumes curdling in her nostrils and closing her throat.

Undo it, undo it, undo it.

Cora turned, her hands in her hair, and in the mirror above the mantel, she caught sight of her pale, terrified, tearstained face.

All alone, rattling the broken bars of her empty cage.

July 1819

Aldworth Park, Berkshire

Travers,

My forthcoming rudeness is regrettable given I thought we collaborated rather well this week.

But kindly—where in God’s name are you?

My sister is suffering. She needs you, Travers. If you are up to any unsavory business, you can damn yourself to hell.

But first, get to Aldworth Park.

Sinclair



NATE SUPPOSED the magistrate’s townhouse wasn’t so bad, all things considered.

It wasn’t jail at least. Instead, Nate was essentially a forced houseguest. He had his own room. He ate three hot meals a day. He could play cards with the magistrate’s footman.

But he couldn’t fucking get to Berkshire.

After Nate had surrendered in Coulter & Co., there had been a confusing stretch of time where nobody was quite sure how to proceed, given Nate had committed a crime with an absentee victim. Finally, Nate was escorted to the home of

Reginald Peters, the local magistrate, and predictably, an old friend of the Fordham family.

As in all criminal accusations, Peters was meant to conduct a preliminary examination to determine whether the case warranted prosecution. Nate was no expert, but he would guess the magistrate didn't typically take two days to make a decision.

He suspected the true reason behind Peters's delay—the magistrate knew *exactly* what family he was dealing with. He was reluctant to remit Nathaniel Travers, heir presumptive to the Earl of Fordham, to the Old Bailey to await criminal trial because he was bloody *terrified* of a misstep.

Nate nearly felt sorry for the man. Peters was trying his damndest to make sense of this case.

But he didn't feel so sorry he was willing to relinquish his nap.

“So you admit you committed fraud, resulting in the theft of twenty pounds?”

“Yes.” Nate was lying on a sofa in Peters's study, a hat over his face and his feet propped on the armrest. They'd had this circular conversation half a dozen times in the last two days.

“But you *also* maintain Ronald Carleton *himself* was committing theft?”

“Yes.”

Peters pinched his nose. “This is...”

“Think of it a bit like a Robin Hood situation, mate.” Nate lifted his hat and opened one eye. “I was stealing for a noble cause.”

“You can't steal for *any* cause,” Peters lectured. “What we need is to get Carleton here to sort this out.”

Peters's investigation had determined the Carletons were from Essex, but he was none the wiser that the victims-turned-possible-culprits were currently in London. Nate wasn't about to correct that point; he didn't want the Carletons to learn of

the bank scheme until he was certain Gavin Sinclair had filed his petition.

As it were, Peters seemed determined to keep Nate here under pseudo-house arrest until the vicar could be summoned and brought to London to force a case. But until then, it was this damnable purgatory—Nate wasn't guilty, but he wasn't free either.

And Cora had no idea.

“Am I yet permitted to write to my betrothed?” Nate asked, swinging his legs to the floor and leaning his elbows on his knees.

“No,” Peters snapped. “You are not writing to anybody. The Coulter clerk intimated you had an accomplice. We can't even track *him* down. Who knows what you're liable to communicate.”

“You can read the letter first,” Nate offered. “I'll refrain from any salacious mentionings...” He paused. “Unless that's appealing to you, in which case—”

“Good God, Travers, is this a joke to you? You were caught committing *fraud!* You could be transported. You could be sentenced!”

Nate closed his eyes against a cold wave of sick. Of course he knew this was serious, but Cora didn't. What must she be thinking right now?

“Look, Peters.” Nate sighed. “I just want to write to her. She doesn't know where I am. I've been gone four bloody days now—”

“Well, you've only been here for two of them,” Peters huffed. “You should have written to her before you got yourself arrested.”

Nate clenched his jaw. Peters, unfortunately, was right. Nate *should* have written to Cora the moment he had arrived at the Albany. He should have told her, straightaway, that he was sorry for the tension left between them, that he understood they both made poor choices for good reasons. That he was coming back.

That he loved her.

“No letters,” Peters said decisively. “Not until I discern what the hell is going on here.” He pushed back from his desk. “I am, however, going to have to write to the earl again.”

Nate rubbed the back of his neck uneasily. “You haven’t word from him?” He kept his tone intentionally casual.

“Not yet.” Peters flipped through a sheaf of papers.

“What...have you told him?”

Peters glowered over the top of his spectacles. “I told him his brother was being detained at my home pending investigation for the charges of forgery, grand larceny, and fraud.”

Christ. Another queasy wallop of shame. He had dreaded the magistrate’s initial letter to his brother, figuring Raymond would be apoplectic. But there had been no response in two days, and Nate was beginning to fear that he had finally gone too far.

It turned out Raymond’s silence was far worse than his interference. Nate was loath to admit it, but he *needed* his brother if he had any shot at clearing his name.

“I see...” He slumped back in his seat.

Peters looked over at Nate, sighing in resignation. “And before I forget, Mrs. Peters has inquired how you most enjoy your potatoes. Apparently, she’s having a special dinner for you tonight.”

The women of the Peters household seemed less aggrieved about their prisoner than the magistrate was.

Nate stared at the ceiling. “Roasted is fine.” He paused, considering his grim circumstances. “With butter.”

And so he would wait.

THAT EVENING, after his buttered potatoes, Nate sat alone in the small back garden of the magistrate’s home. He’d begged a pipe from Peters’s footman but hadn’t yet lit it. He rolled it

between his fingers as he slumped on a wrought iron bench, thinking of Cora.

All summer, he had studied her, and it was a good thing too, for he was now in possession of a hundred considerations to fill the void of her absence.

The back of her neck, the curve of her wrist, the dip of her collarbone. The discrete parts of Cora should have been too slight to sway him, yet here he was, brought to his metaphorical knees from nothing more than the recollection of her lashes brushing his cheek. It was ludicrous to imagine that the small bones of her hands would ever hurt him, but those hands held his heart. And he was too far away to ensure she knew that he *wanted* her to have it.

He was losing his goddamned mind.

The time itself wasn't the issue—four days, a week, a month—yes, he missed Cora and the children, but missing could be tolerable with the assurance that the separation was temporary.

But he was stuck, indefinitely, with no answers.

Nate had really landed himself in it this time. He was besieged by the very real fear he would be detained far longer than expected.

“Excuse me, sir.” A small voice poked into the garden.

Nate turned to see Peters's little daughter standing in the doorway. She was about Leo's age, maybe a bit older.

“Can I help you, Miss Peters?”

“I need to let Mabel out to piddle, but Papa said I'm not to disturb you, seeing as you are a hardened criminal.”

“Is that so?”

“Also because Mama thinks you're handsome.”

Nate suppressed a laugh. “You and Mabel won't disturb me.”

The girl shrugged, and a moment later a tiny puppy, ears as long as her feet, came somersaulting outside. Nate watched the

girl lead the dog to the back patch of the garden.

“She’s a fine dog, Miss Peters,” he said, fully cognizant he had now become a man who voluntarily spoke to children.

“Thank you,” the girl said proudly. “She’s all mine. Papa got her for me so I wouldn’t be frightened of dogs anymore.”

A vision of terrified Tess, running to his arms.

“That’s a smart idea your papa had,” he mused.

“He has them sometimes.” The girl shrugged again.

“You see, I know someone who is afraid of dogs too,” Nate said slowly, watching the girl’s small hand scratch the dog’s ears.

“Who?” She looked up, suspicious she could have anything in common with a convict.

Nate stared at her, unseeing.

“My...daughter.”

He tried the words, just once, and closed his eyes against the horrible spasm of pain reaching through his stomach to clutch his throat.

“I didn’t know you were a papa,” the girl said, ushering Mabel back toward the house.

“No,” Nate said softly as he watched them go inside. “It took me by surprise too.”

On the garden wall, a starling chattered noisily at him, tossing her head in annoyance, as though he was spoiling her evening.

“You and everyone else,” he muttered, rolling his pipe on his thigh, watching her work.

The industrious bird evoked a memory...another back garden, another lifetime. A morning when he had been very small, still at the Old Earl’s home, not yet living with Raymond.

Nate had gone to the garden alone to poke sticks at anthills. But he had been distracted by a starling building her

nest.

The small bird had been rushing about, collecting straw from the stable, twine from the garden shed. She was in a hurry, her oily black feathers glinting with a greenish-purple sheen.

“All that fuss,” Nate had said when Raymond’s long shadow came to stand beside him. “And for what?”

“For a bird, it’s all for fuss.” Raymond had laughed. “Every twig, every scrap. She’ll collect all of them, until something hard becomes soft, until something resistant becomes ready.”

“Ready for what?”

His brother had clapped his shoulder. “Ready for it to happen.”

It hadn’t made sense at the time—why would it? But that’s exactly what Nate had been doing this summer. For weeks now, collecting bits of Cora, of Tess, of Leo.

Readying himself.

Days of familiarity, of softening, of learning. Once, he had been inhospitable, unwilling, resistant. And then...

It happened.

Nate finally lit his pipe. He took a single hit, holding the burn in his lungs. Then he watched the smoke unfurl until the plume bled away into the night.

Cora—

For most of my life I've only thought of myself in terms of my deficiencies. I assumed my shortcomings marked my path whether or not it was one I wanted to trod. My future became a series of unsatisfying, half-asked questions.

For a long time, I thought I didn't know what sort of man I wanted to be. It seemed my brother, my peers, all possessed some innate quality I lacked.

But I was wrong.

You made me wrong, every single day this summer. I do, indeed, know exactly what kind of man I want to be—

Yours.

I long for you every moment of the day, and the longing is visceral and immutable. It's never been this way. Not only for me: for anyone. I can't imagine anyone in the business of being human has ever felt this need, this compulsion, this answer.

Finally, love: I have an answer.



“LADY DANE?”

Cora looked up from her uneaten breakfast to see her housekeeper waiting anxiously at her elbow.

“Yes, Mrs. Bainsbridge?”

“Once your brother departs for London, shall I have the housemaids close up the guest rooms? Are we expecting anyone else?”

Cora blinked slowly; her eyes were red and sore.

What had Mrs. Bainsbridge asked her?

The guest rooms. Of course. They weren't being used anymore.

Beside her at the table, Gavin and the children were having an in-depth conversation about the calico cat living at his barrister's chambers. Tess, now bandage-free and no worse for the wear, was demanding her uncle draw a picture of it wearing a hat.

Right now, her children were happy. And once the Chancery reviewed Gavin's petition, they would remain so. And that made Cora happy. She was happy about this. She really, truly, was.

She was also torn in half from anguish.

Cora was adept at operating in this space. She had always held too much, and now she would also have to bear the many facets of her feeling—joy, regret, despair, longing. All equal, all hers.

“Ah, Lady Dane?”

“Yes, Mrs. Bainsbridge.” Cora foggily snapped to attention. “The Carletons' rooms can certainly be cleaned. They won't be returning. And Mr. Sinclair's room can be tidied, as well...”

Cora trailed off, swallowing painfully.

“And Mr. Travers's room, my lady?”

Cora felt Gavin's worried glance and she quickly shook her head. *I'm fine.*

Nate's face burned behind her eyes. *I'm not fine.*

“Yes, please do Mr. Travers's as well,” she managed. “But...I'll take a look first. Just to ensure he hasn't left anything behind...”

Us. He left us behind.

SHE KNEW it was a pointless endeavor, but Cora nevertheless found herself circling Nate's guest room, wanting to be here one last time.

One last time, before the maids scrubbed the floors and beat the curtains and changed the linens, wiping out his trunk and his bedside table, erasing the scent of pine, the scent of rosemary, the layered aroma of their lives together.

Cora bit the inside of her cheek. She was acting frightfully melodramatic.

And yet she felt it was justified; she had never before experienced a broken heart, and from what she gathered from poems and stories, this was exactly the way she was meant to behave.

Nate's bed had been remade. She trailed her hand over the counterpane, remembering how his bedsheets tangled around them, how she would share his pillow as his drowsy laugh puffed against her hair. Behind her, the door stood open, but in her mind she could still hear the *click*, the latch softly closing them off from the rest of the world as her bare feet tiptoed to him across the carpets.

And there, of course, his bedside chest.

The locus of her discontent.

Why, why, *why* had she intruded? She was her own worst enemy, a traitor to her very heart.

And yet, it drove her half-mad that after everything, she had never found her answer about the letters.

Cora approached the chest, recalling the piles of correspondence she hadn't managed to review. She was Pandora, easing open the box and expecting a different outcome. But Cora had already unleashed the horror; Nate was gone.

No longer needing to be quiet, she slid open the drawer, fully expecting to find it empty, to see Nate had packed these papers with everything else he took to London.

But to her surprise and shame, the drawer hadn't been emptied. The letters were still there.

Or...were they?

Cora tilted her head in confusion.

There *were* letters here, but not the ones she had seen before.

These letters weren't creased and rumped. They were carefully gathered in a small, tidy stack. On the top letter, above the fold, a single word was written in Nate's messy, masculine scrawl.

A name.

She gently lifted the bundle, sinking to her knees, fanning the letters across her lap where her own name greeted her in a strange, hopeful chorus.

Cora,

Cora,

Cora—

She held her breath.

All of these letters were addressed to her.

Cora skimmed one, then another, catching random sentences at odd intervals. She couldn't make sense of what she was seeing.

Her heart was in her throat. Her heart was in her eyes.

Slow down, she commanded herself. *Slow down.*

She tried again, reading more carefully, the words first taking the shape of her longing, then transforming into something altogether new.

You smiled at me twice.

When I awoke, my first thought was you.

Gold in my pockets, gold in my hands, gold in my unformed heart.

I would make your life a perpetual July.

Cora's heart was so full it hurt, but the hurting was wondrously welcome. She couldn't believe what she was reading; her eyes probed every word like a multifaceted gemstone, holding it to the refracted light.

The most recent letter tumbled to her hands, and Cora could hardly see it through her brimming, incredulous tears.

Finally, love: I have an answer.

Nate had written her *love* letters. And nothing in these precious and rare words rang false. He had endearingly pressed his quill to paper, crossing out and restarting, her name the most careful word on every page.

And he had left them for her to find.

My God.

A loose tear dropped, smudging the ink, and Cora slid the letters away. She dabbed her cheek and drew a deep breath.

A revelation was breaking over her, turning her blood as bubbly and bright as the coldest bottle of champagne. Every fizzing burst sent her higher. She read, she read, she read again.

Cora had thought last summer's news of Dane's death would be the most important words she would ever read. She had assumed the letter that made her a widow would be the letter that changed her life.

But it wasn't news of an ending that altered her. It was the promise of a beginning.

Nate was in love with her.

He had been falling in love with her in the same slow, inevitable rush she had experienced this summer. It was all here, in a month's worth of letters. When he had told her his feelings that afternoon in the library, it hadn't been an impulse; it had been a reckoning.

And he knew her, didn't he? He knew her. Cora felt it in her bones, as surely as he'd left these letters where he had expected her to find them. Surely, *surely*, he must also know

her intentions, how hard she would find this, how hard it was for her to try.

He did. Of course he did.

From a great distance, Cora could plainly see what she had overlooked these last painful days. Yes, there was the certainty she held of her own heart.

But there was also the certainty she held of *his*.

Cora's understanding of Nate was elemental, it was intimate, it was profound. Why had she denied it? She could see him, exactly as he was, but also as the limitless man he was capable of becoming. He wasn't afraid of his feelings for her; he was sure of them. He was sure *because* of them.

It was there, undeniable in his own hand: Nate wanted to be hers.

And if he hadn't returned to her by now, there was a reason for it. A problem, a delay...

Some kind of trouble.

Her burgeoning hope crashed in a spiral. She had no sense of what nefarious ends might befall a man of Nate's erstwhile reputation. Moreover—another swoop of terrified guilt—she was certain he must be hurting. Either because he assumed she didn't *want* him back, or because he couldn't get to her.

Regardless of where Nate fell on the continuum of those wretched scenarios, one thing was clear—Cora needed to bury her fear and find him. It made her sick, to think of his determination to prove himself. What had her resistance cost him?

Clutching the letters, she stumbled to her feet, running for the doorway. Gavin would be departing for London at any moment. Was she too late? Again?

“Talbot!” Cora cried, skidding into the hallway as she called for her lady's maid. “Talbot!”

Talbot appeared at the bottom of the staircase.

“Is my brother still here? Has he already gone to London?”

“He’s getting in the carriage now, my lady—”

“Stop him.” Cora hurtled down the staircase. “Tell Gavin to wait. And...and I need a travel cloak—*oh!* And the children. Well, and *Annie* too...”

She deflated slightly. So much for an expedient departure. “And our things, I suppose.”

Cora looked dejectedly around her front hall, calculating the bare minimum she would need for this whirlwind journey.

But she had to go to Nate.

“Blast it!”

“Lady Dane? What’s all this?”

Cora turned, breathing hard. A faraway part of her brain realized the irony; for the second time this summer, she needed to find a man.

“We’re going to London.”

July 1819

Fordham House, London

Nathaniel,

Why have I returned from Hampshire to find not one, not two, but three increasingly urgent missives from the magistrate regarding serious business with my brother?

Are you not in Berkshire with Lady Dane?

What utter failing is this, that I'm always the last to know what the hell is going on with you?

Fordham



NATE SPENT his fifth morning in London loafing in the magistrate's kitchens. Superficially, he was organizing a game of whist, but inwardly, his nerves were as sharp as the knives on the prep table. He couldn't remember ever feeling so frustrated or helpless. What the hell was going to happen?

And when?

Five days. He'd been in London for five bloody days, and he still couldn't get word to Cora.

"Travers?" Peters appeared at the kitchen door, frowning as Nate absently dealt another hand. "You're needed upstairs."

The magistrate's groom, seated across from Nate, groaned. "I have a good hand too."

"Do *none* of you have anything to do?" Peters snapped, looking around. "It can't be helped. The earl is here."

The earl. So Raymond was finally finished giving him the cold shoulder.

Nate steeled himself as he followed Peters up the narrow stairs. There was no doubt this encounter would go poorly for him. He still recalled with displeasure the afternoon Raymond found out about the failed railway investment. The brothers had shouted themselves hoarse. And that time, Nate hadn't even broken the law.

At least they were already at the magistrate's house. If Raymond throttled him, justice would be quickly served. *Or perhaps not*, Nate conceded, knowing what he did of Peters's sense of criminal urgency.

Peters showed Nate to his study.

"Strictly speaking, I should be present for this conversation," Peters pointed out. "But the earl insisted he speak to you first. And...well..."

Peters trailed off, but Nate understood. Raymond was an *and well* sort of man.

"Your brother, my lord," Peters called, alerting Raymond to their presence. "I'll leave you to your privacy. *Briefly.*"

Nate stepped into the study and the magistrate closed the door behind him. Raymond was silhouetted against the sunny window.

At the sound of the latch, he turned, his hat in his hands. His face was hazardous.

"Nathaniel—"

"Fordham," Nate's voice was gruff.

"Sit down." Raymond jerked his head to the chair opposite the desk.

"I'll stand."

“You’ll sit,” Raymond growled. “You’ll sit because this will not be a brief conversation. You’ll sit and you’ll talk until you tell me what in God’s name is going on here!”

Raymond paced in front of the magistrate’s desk like Nate was a schoolboy called to the headmaster’s office. Nate glowered, then begrudgingly lowered himself to the indicated chair. He was twenty-seven years old, for Christ’s sake. He’d been living on his own for half a decade.

But it was impossible to feel like a grown man when his brother was in the room.

“*Explain.*”

“So...” Nate leaned back, folding his arms. “What finally brought you here? Was it the letter enumerating my charges? The thought of the family name tarnished by crime?”

Raymond’s dark eyes were leaden with an unreadable emotion.

“I was in *Hampshire*, Nate,” he finally said. “I returned late last night. I had no idea the magistrate was writing. I had no idea you were here. I have...no idea what’s been happening at all.”

Nate’s guard slipped at the admission Raymond hadn’t been intentionally cutting him. And that’s when he realized Raymond didn’t seem angry.

He seemed...regretful.

“Can you tell me, Nate?” Raymond suddenly sounded exhausted. “For the love of God, just *tell* me what the hell is happening.”

All summer, Nate had essentially rebuffed Raymond. But he had come for him anyway.

He recalled his last conversation with Leo, the disquieting awareness Raymond had once been in the same unsteady shoes as Nate.

“What’s happening is trouble.” Nate groaned, dropping his head to his hands. “I’m...in trouble, Raymond.”

Nate hadn't called his brother by name in years. The word felt awkward on his tongue. But his brother was here. In his own difficult way, he always had been.

And Nate was finally ready for him.

“Oh but fuck”—his voice cracked—“I need your help.”

IT TOOK Nate nearly a quarter hour to explain, his brother interjecting with questions more often than Nate could provide explanations.

“And then Sinclair had all the documentation he needed. But I had to get him out of there. Raymond, the money was in my pocket, but I wasn't going to keep it. I would never. Well, I suppose I might have before. But...”

“So you confessed to buy Sinclair time.” Raymond closed his eyes. “Christ, Nathaniel...”

“The Carletons did this. They've been stealing from Leo. And if we can prove it, then that's enough. Cora will be with her children...*that's* what I care about. I don't care about the rest, about—”

“You don't care about what happens to you?” Raymond resumed his pacing.

Nate shook his head defiantly. “No. I don't. And I know what you're going to say, about our family's reputation—”

“Too bad.”

Nate paused, unsure. “Er...what?”

“I said *too bad*. I don't care if you don't care what happens to you, Nate.” Raymond sank into a mahogany club chair. “Because *I* do.”

Nate bit his tongue. This was a new development.

Raymond was quiet for a moment.

“You've been ignoring my letters,” he said slowly. “Asking you to come so we can discuss your future.”

Nate twisted his cuff link. “I couldn’t leave her.” His voice was hoarse. “And I couldn’t explain it to you.”

“Have you tuppèd her?” Raymond asked warily. “She’s a reputable lady, Nate. And if she’s with child, that child must be legitimate. That’s your heir, brother.”

Nate surged with feeling at the question, at what it signified. As though he had spent his summer dallying with Cora instead of *falling in love* with her.

He laughed raggedly, and Raymond stared at him.

“A future with Cora isn’t the problem, I assure you. I’m in love with her, Raymond. I love her, I love her children—” Nate broke off, his voice oddly thick. “I feel thunderstruck, every moment of the day, by how it happened. I don’t understand. But they’re *mine*. They’re my family. They were always meant to be.”

He swallowed hard.

“I belong to them.”

Raymond regarded Nate, his jaw working back and forth. In the filtered sunlight, Nate could see the silver threading through Raymond’s dark hair. His brother was nearing fifty years old. It didn’t seem possible.

“So you know then,” Raymond sighed. “*You* know what *I* know.” He stood and walked to the window. “There’s no preparation for taking over the care of a child. And there’s no preparation for relinquishing it either.”

Nate stared at his brother’s shoulders. He used to sit on them when he was small. They had seemed impossibly wide, wide enough to block Nate’s way.

But also wide enough to shield him.

“I’ve been hard on you, Nathaniel,” Raymond said quietly. “Harder than you deserved...*most* of the time.” He grimaced. “But there was an ease about you, an ease I never possessed, an ease I couldn’t even *understand*, except to see our father’s shadow in it.”

Nate was silent. They had never spoken like this before. Not even close.

Raymond paused.

“I was so afraid you would be like *him*, I was blinded to your inherent, essential difference. Yes, you have an ease about you, but you use it to the benefit of those around you.”

Raymond shook his head.

“I owe you an apology, Nate. I tried to force you down my path, instead of letting you find your own. You were a happy child, a lively youth, a charming man. I thought it made you irresponsible. But it was merely...you. And there’s nothing wrong with moving through the world unburdened.”

Nate was wholly unsure what was happening right now. Raymond, Lord Fordham, was *humbling* himself. His bending was so unexpected it seemed to fractionally lift the air between them.

Perhaps Nate could do his own part to clear the fog.

He clung to the understanding he’d had that final night with Leo. Nate could now appreciate that no man is born knowing how to be a father; many never learned at all. Nate, most assuredly, would never have learned without his brother.

Raymond had made mistakes, but he was the one who had tried. He was the one who had stayed.

Nate stood, meeting his brother’s somber gaze. “Raymond, I shouldn’t have spurned you for so long. And I suppose I shouldn’t have blamed you either. I sure as hell didn’t make things easy.” He laughed ruefully. “I can see...a bit of what it must have been like for you. It’s bloody hard to know where to put your foot, especially when you have nobody to show you the way forward.”

Raymond guffawed.

“Dear God, Nate. It’s fucking impossible. You’ll understand, soon enough. If you’re going to marry Cora Dane, if you’re going to raise her children...it’s no small feat.” He sighed. “That’s what I meant to say when I wrote you. I didn’t

say it well, evidently, but I'll try again now. If you're willing to take this on, then I'm willing to help you do it."

Nate studied his brother. There were a hundred unsaid words between them. Years of misunderstanding, of comparison, of judgment.

And one very small step toward the middle.

It wasn't enough. Not yet.

But he had meant what he told Leo: *You can be any kind of man you want. And you can keep becoming him.*

Maybe Nate and Raymond could become something too.

"It won't be as hard as all that." Nate finally lifted the corner of his mouth. "I *do* have some idea where to put my foot. A path, someone once laid for me. That is, if I choose to take it."

Raymond's head jerked up; he appraised Nate in a single, swift glance. When Nate nodded, Raymond hesitantly clapped him on the back.

It was a start.

"Right then." Raymond's tone was once again businesslike. "Let's call the magistrate back in here and figure out how the hell to clear your name."

Nate shrugged gloomily. "He won't even let me write to her. Cora has no idea where I am. I don't even know if the guardianship petition is underway. I don't know what's happening to them—"

"Nate."

He blinked away a surprising, alarming burn. He couldn't weep in the magistrate's house; he couldn't weep in front of his brother.

But damn if he didn't want to.

"I *have* to get out of this, Ray."

His brother straightened, every bit the powerful aristocrat.

“Then it’s a damn good thing you found yourself a master.”

July 1819

Aldworth Park, Berkshire

Lord Fordham,

I'm sending this note ahead of my person—I hope you receive it in a timely fashion. I have critical business to discuss with you regarding your brother's whereabouts...or lack thereof.

I plan to call this evening, as soon as I arrive in London. Please send word to Dane House on Park Street if you are unable to receive me.

Sincerely,

Cora Dane



“MAMA, DID YOU BRING MY JACKS?” Leo shouted from the top of the staircase at Dane House. “I only see my dominoes.”

“You have jacks here already, Leo,” Cora called from the hall, where she was trying to hustle Gavin out the door. Cora was so anxious, she felt two feet off the ground. This entire day had been impossible, one delay after the next. It was late, she needed to get to Lord Fordham on Upper Grosvenor—but apparently, she had to rescue bloody jacks before rescuing Nate.

“Annie will have them in your nursery.”

“*What?*”

“In your nursery!”

“What about my nursery?”

“*The jacks are in your nursery!*”

“Oh. Well, what about my dominoes?”

At that moment, Annie blessedly called, and Leo scampered off to see what playthings she had unearthed.

“Good heavens,” Cora shrieked, shoving Gavin out the door as her footman impassively held it open. “Poor Nate. God only knows where he is! Hurry, hurry. We need to go before Leo starts in about his marbles...”

She practically flew down the exterior stone stairs, churning with worry.

“Careful, Cora, don’t push. We’re going, we’re going now.” Gavin held her arm as she nearly slipped in haste.

“We’re the world’s worst rescue party, aren’t we?” Cora asked woefully.

“Well, yes. Unfortunately, I don’t think most rescuers have to stop in the kitchen to inquire about the pudding first.”

For the entirety of the sweltering carriage ride to London, Cora had schemed. She would go *straight* to Fordham House to implore the earl to track down Nate. She knew matters were unfriendly between Nate and his brother, but surely, Cora could plead her way to securing Lord Fordham’s assistance.

She would find Nate without him if she had to, but she was a heroine of a pragmatic nature; this would all be much easier with Fordham in her corner.

But as the day unfolded, Cora’s romantic gestures had stalled time and again. She couldn’t, of course, go straight to Fordham to prostrate herself before her lost love’s estranged brother. First, she had to see a nurse, two children, and three trunks properly installed at Dane House. Cora loved her children, but they were so terribly inconvenient sometimes.

Please, Nate. Please be all right.

All through her journey, Nate's letters returned to her, planting her feet in solid ground even as her heart soared. She was in the rain, running to the hunting lodge with his slippery hands in hers. She was at her soiree, finding his beloved face under her blind, reaching fingers. And always, she was laughing at the piano, not even realizing she was on the precipice of the rest of her life.

But now, she was finally on her way to find him.

It was only as their carriage bumped along Park Street, at last en route to the Fordham residence, that Cora realized how absolutely mad this was.

She was about to arrive at an earl's home, uninvited, to tell him his wayward brother was most certainly in some sort of vague danger, and her only proof was a handful of letters and her heart.

"If Fordham won't help him, *I will*," she reminded Gavin fiercely as their carriage turned from Park to Upper Grosvenor Street. "I'll see to it myself."

Cora had a purse full of funds—the payment Nate had refused to take a fortnight ago. She supposed the money was Nate's due, after all. She would pay every private investigator in London if she had to. Whatever it took. She would do anything.

This was all her fault.

Nate had landed in trouble while trying to prove himself to her. Cora could see it, plain as anything; he'd gone off to save the day accompanied by a frightfully large chip on his shoulder. It was a terrible combination for a reckless man.

Her reckless man.

"What are you going to tell the earl?" Gavin asked nervously. "Do you have a plan, Cora? I mean an *actual* plan? Not just a vivid fantasy of storming into his study and tearfully throwing yourself to the ground?"

Cora glared. "Yes. I have a plan." She drew a deep breath, erasing the very mental picture Gavin had suggested. "I'm going to confess. I'll tell Lord Fordham everything—the ruse,

the end of the ruse, how Nate came back, how he stayed. I'll... I'll show him the letters, if I have to."

She fervently hoped she wouldn't have to.

"He's a reasonable man. He's a *kind* man—he's done everything for Nate and Tabby. I know Nate's shirked him all summer, but..."

Gavin squeezed her hand.

"Stay calm. Remember you're a viscountess. Don't cower. Don't back down."

Cora looked down at herself; she didn't at all resemble an influential lady. She looked very short, very road-worn, and she had, predictably, forgotten her gloves. But she loved Gavin for trying.

The carriage rolled to a stop. "Fordham House, Lady Dane," her coachman called.

"Shall we?" Cora glanced at her brother.

Gavin sighed, guardedly looking at the grand townhouse, illuminated by flickering torchlight. "I suppose so."

There was nothing better than a brother.

CORA AND GAVIN were politely escorted to the earl's drawing room.

"Lord Fordham is still out for the day, Lady Dane. And the countess is in residence in the country."

"We'll wait," Cora said resolutely. "We'll wait for the earl, please. It's urgent."

"Very well." The butler nodded. "You can wait with Lady Tabitha."

Tabby is here?

Sure enough, when a footman bowed them into the stately drawing room, there was Tabitha, sitting at an escritoire, looking resplendent in an emerald silk gown.

“Tabby!” Cora practically hurled herself at her friend. *Tabby*. Cora expanded with relief. Why hadn’t she thought of this herself? Tabby would solve this.

“Cora!” Tabby was immediately on her feet. “Darling! What are you *doing* here?”

“What are *you* doing here?” Cora tried to lower her voice, but her hysteria had completely taken the reins. Next to Tabby’s unruffled, willowy frame, Cora felt more disheveled than ever.

“I’m to dine with Raymond. He’s just returned from Hampshire, but he’s out at the moment. Actually, from what I gather, he’s been out since this morning. So I’ve decided to finish my letter to the Captain.”

Tabby winked deviously, and Gavin coughed, turning red. Tabitha was wont to claim that her crowning achievement was the famously debauched letters she sent to her frequently absent husband, a renowned naval captain.

“Gavin Sinclair,” Tabby drawled. “Cravat in a twist as usual, I see.”

“Lady Tabitha,” Gavin croaked, rocking nervously on his heels.

“Say, Cora, *you’ve* been a wanton lately,” Tabby mused, holding up her letter. “Tell me, what do you think is more titillating for the male persuasion...*this* word as an adjective or as an adverb?”

“This isn’t appropriate,” Gavin interjected, and Tabby laughed.

“Oh Sinclair,” she said affectionately. “Never change.”

Tabby turned to Cora, who was neither helping with titillating adjectives nor paying attention to Gavin’s mortification. Instead, she was pacing, nearly jumping out of her skin with impatience.

Leo’s toys. Tabby’s letter. Cora hadn’t realized until tonight how often she put her own concerns last. Only one person had ever tried to change that about her.

At the thought of Nate—her good man, his good heart—Cora’s eyes filled with tears.

Please be all right.

“Cora, what’s wrong?” Tabby grabbed her arm in alarm. “Why *are* you here?”

“I need to speak to the earl,” Cora said, her voice breaking. “Straight away. It’s about Nate.”

“What about Nate?” Tabby dropped all pretense of teasing. “Is he well?”

“I don’t know.” Cora choked. Her throat hurt; everything hurt. “I don’t know *where* he is.”

“Nate’s missing?” Tabby straightened, a flash of true concern in her eyes. “For how long?”

“He came to London earlier in the week. Tabby, he was with Gavin, working on some business regarding the Carletons, but nobody has seen him since.”

“It’s been five days,” Gavin clarified.

“Five?” Tabitha’s face cleared in relief. “Five. Oh, well then, that’s not so bad. Five is not unusual for him, Cora.”

“I would have had word from him.” Cora shook her head. “I know I would have.”

Tabby and Gavin looked at each other.

Cora shifted, her gaze darting between them.

“What?”

Tabitha sighed, taking Cora’s hand.

“Cora, darling. My brother seems to have been atypically domesticated as of late. But you don’t know this side of him. Nate *does* this sort of thing. He gets involved in his own affairs, he doesn’t communicate. He doesn’t...face matters head-on. I don’t think you should be so worried as this—”

Cora snatched her hand away, her face burning. “I *know* something has gone wrong for him.”

“Darling, don’t be rash. Think of your own unanswered letters to him, the ones you sent all spring. I’m sure he’s at Madame’s Roost, on a bender. He’ll turn up.”

“He’s not *gambling*,” Cora snapped. “Tabby, I need your help. I need to meet with Lord Fordham, *tonight*.”

“I don’t know that you should bring Raymond into this,” Tabitha said cautiously. “Cora, we love Nate. But he’s not exactly a sympathetic character when it comes to Raymond.”

“He’s changed,” Cora gritted out. “*You* don’t know *this* side of him, Tabby.”

“Cora,” Gavin said softly. “Maybe we should wait before making a scene. Yesterday you were inconsolable, convinced he’d left you—”

“Stop!” Cora’s words were strangled. “Both of you! *Please*. I know you’re trying to protect me, but you don’t need to worry. I know what I’m doing. I know Nate—”

“Is there a problem?”

The voice was so similar to Nate’s, Cora’s blood ran hot and cold at the same time. She whirled around, coming face-to-face with a very confused Lord Fordham.

“Raymond,” Tabby said, stepping forward, glancing nervously at Cora.

“Lord Fordham,” Cora interjected, dropping into a hasty curtsy.

“Lady Dane?” The earl cocked his head. “And...?”

“Mr. Gavin Sinclair, my lord,” Cora said quickly. “My brother.”

The earl looked puzzled at the appearance of unannounced houseguests, but he didn’t seem to be angry.

“Will you dine with us, Lady Dane? Tabitha, have Mrs. Matthews set two more places.”

“No. No, thank you.” Cora smiled thinly. “We don’t mean to stay. But I *do* need to speak to you, my lord. It’s quite pressing.”

Gavin and Tabby's doubts clamored in her ears. Did she have this wrong? Was she about to make a fool of herself?

No. And likely.

"Lady Dane, I should first tell you—"

"It's about Nathaniel," she interrupted. Cora was aware she was acting abysmally rude, but her words tumbled out in a wretched, unstoppable stream. "He's missing. We...had an argument. And there was too much I said and too much I didn't say, and we left it uneasily between us, and he *disappeared*. And I think something terrible must have happened because he would have returned to me. I *know* he would have returned, Lord Fordham, and I implore you to believe me, I implore you to help me."

She took a deep breath; her chest was heaving.

"But if you refuse me, then I'll find him myself. I've become quite proficient, you see, at keeping my family together."

Cora glared at the earl, her fists shaking. She felt wild and wounded and dreadfully alone.

"You might want to listen, Raymond."

Cora froze; his voice went straight to the center of her heart.

"There's nothing she loves more than getting her way."

Nate.

Nate?

She spun around, and the whole earth's axis tilted with her, because there he was—unshaven, rumped, and smiling like he'd just stumbled upon the sun.

"*Nate?*"

"Cora."

She closed her eyes at the way he said her name. She would take that sound to the grave; she would press it to the dirt surrounding her. She would never be without it.

He was here.

Nate, as easy as ever. As easy as always.

Like he had only been waiting for her to find him.

July 1819

Fordham House, London

Nate—

Word at White's is that the railway out of Darlington isn't killed yet. It seems there is going to be a new survey, exploring a different route, and I've been mulling it over.

Once you settle matters with Lady Dane, I'd like to sit down with you and discuss this as a possible investment for you. I'm open to considering a new business venture, provided the survey is sound.

Review the enclosed documents and let me know your thoughts.

I trust your judgment.

Raymond



HE COULDN'T STOP LOOKING at her.

Nate's chest had expanded beyond the capacity of his body. This entire room, this entire townhouse, this entire bloody city was his heart, and every beat of it was for Cora.

He had arrived at Fordham House with his brother but had been detained in the hall by the housekeeper, fussing over his stint in near-jail. By the time Nate had moved to join Raymond in the drawing room, he could *hear* her.

It was impossible, but unmistakable—Cora on the rampage.

She was here.

For a stunned moment, Nate stood in the doorway, trying to make sense of what he saw. Tabitha's tension, Sinclair's worry, Raymond's confusion.

But nothing mattered except Cora's tearstained face, turning to him in devastating relief.

"Nate," she whispered, her hands over her mouth. "You're here."

"A moment, Raymond." Nate heard himself say. His voice was so low it cracked. "All of you. Please, give us a moment."

He was certain there were exchanged glances between Sinclair and his siblings as they made their silent way to the door, but Nate didn't give a damn.

Cora had come for him. Granted, he hadn't actually needed her to, but that wasn't remotely the point. Nate knew exactly what this must have cost her. She had made herself vulnerable, uprooting her life, and undoubtedly the children, for *him*.

"I feel like every time I spy you from across the room, I look a disheveled mess." Nate smiled crookedly, but his eyes were burning. "I'm hardly better than I was that afternoon at Dane House."

"I don't know..." Cora murmured, beaming as she wiped her wet cheeks. "You presented quite well at the ball." She was struggling to catch her breath, swaying on her feet as though physically pulled to him.

Come here, darling.

But Cora had come far enough.

Nate stepped forward, making his way to her, but she recoiled, putting up her hands.

"Wait." Her eyes widened, and Nate halted with five paces between them. "I need to say this, Nate."

Too much I said; too much I didn't say.

But none of it mattered. Nate already knew. He had wanted to deserve Cora's love, but that was entirely the wrong sum of things.

It wasn't about earning; it wasn't about proving. Love wasn't a singular achievement. It was a multitude of choices, day in, day out.

Every day, he could choose to be enough for her. Every day, she could choose to let him.

She already had.

"You don't need to say anything, love."

"I *do*," she insisted, eyes blazing. "Nate, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have trusted you, implicitly. But this is *hard* for me. It's always going to be hard for me. I never learned how to love someone the right way."

She gasped, unleashing a great, choking sob, and Nate instinctively rocked toward her.

"Cora..."

"I'll get better, Nate. If you let me try, I *want* to try...but I understand, if you prefer someone whole, someone easy, someone—"

"Stop."

"Nate, I'm not—"

"*I love you.*" He strode forward, his gaze searing as he bridged the distance between them. "You maddening woman. Do you hear yourself? You are the love of my goddamned life, Cora. You are the *reason* for my goddamned life. I am insanely, irrevocably in love with you, I'm in love with your children, I'm in love with the family we created this summer. I'm going to be in love with *all* of you until the day I take my last breath, and then the dust of me will keep on loving you thereafter. You'll never be free of me, Cora."

Every word brought him closer, until the last one fell against her lips. He lifted her in his arms; Cora clutched his shoulders harder than she'd ever held anything in her life.

“Nate, I love you too.” She was crying again. “But I don’t have a speech.”

“No...no tears.” His words sketched her cheekbone, the corner of her eyes. “The entire point of me is to ensure you don’t cry.”

And then he found her mouth, and Nate started laughing, because Cora had been wrong, and she would hate it. The *proper kiss* she had once longed for had nothing to do with nerves.

He dragged his lips against hers, holding her fast against him, exactly where she belonged. Cora’s fingers immediately stroked his filthy hair, and he could feel his overgrown beard scraping against her cheek. But all of her accepted all of him, her smooth skin flushing from his abrasive burn, her plush mouth softening his greed, her sigh meeting his own groan.

“Cora,” he murmured.

Her hands slid inside his waistcoat, her breath coming fast and hot. “Our families are right outside,” she whispered. “You can’t debauch me.”

He slowly inched her toward the chaise.

“You just tried to rescue me, love.” His voice was grave, but his smile was wicked. “I’m going to have to debauch you a bit.”

SITTING in Raymond’s study with Cora, Sinclair, and his brother was not the way Nate wanted to spend his reunion with Cora, but the day hadn’t yet reached its capacity of urgent matters.

“It’s a good thing you’re here, after all, Mr. Sinclair,” Raymond said, sitting behind his desk. “I needed to speak with you.”

“What happened?” Cora asked for the tenth time. “You were *arrested*? You could have been sentenced? You could have been—”

Nate kissed her wrist reassuringly.

“Arrested-adjacent.” He shrugged. “I was never formally charged. There was a great deal of confusion, you see, about who the crime was actually committed against.”

Raymond steepled his fingers. “We spent the day working out this tangle. Nate has been released from the magistrate to my care, for now...but the victim of the fraud, it would seem, wasn’t officially Ronald Carleton so much as it was the *trustee* of Leo’s account.”

“Carleton is still Leo’s testamentary guardian,” Cora gasped, her face ashen. “I don’t have any say over his finances. Gavin’s bill of complaint was only filed two days ago. It could take *weeks* before the court reviews the case. And in the meantime, the Carletons would have Nate rot in prison without a second thought!”

Nate grinned. “Well. About that...”

Raymond withdrew a sheaf of papers. “I don’t always throw my weight around,” he said, sliding the paperwork to Sinclair. “But when I do, it’s to clear my brother’s name and keep small children with their families.”

Cora and Sinclair exchanged identical wide-eyed glances.

“You mean...”

“I didn’t exert undue influence on the court.” Raymond shook his head. “The evidence did all the work. But I did *encourage* them to expedite their review.”

Sinclair skimmed the papers, his face clearing. “These are...”

“These are *what?*” Cora slithered away from Nate in an attempt to read over Gavin’s shoulder.

“Our guardianship papers.”

“*What?*”

Nate laughed, squeezing Cora around the waist.

“As of today, you and your brother are Tess and Leo’s testamentary guardians. Full legal rights, Cora. They’re yours.”

“Oh my...” Cora was levitating. “*Oh my...is this true? Is this true?*”

For some reason, she launched herself into Nate’s arms, as though he had single-handedly brought this about. He didn’t feel the least inclined to correct her.

“It’s true.” Raymond was smiling. “Your late husband’s relations officially, legally, and permanently have no authority over your children, Lady Dane. They are yours, in every sense of the word.”

Sinclair whooped, turning to pump Raymond’s hand.

“Thank you.” Cora clutched Nate’s hand so tightly it would have hurt if he were capable of feeling pain right now. “Lord Fordham, thank you for helping my family.”

“Thank *you*, Lady Dane.” Raymond was watching her with something like wonder. “For helping *my* family.”

She blushed, abashed, still gripping the guardianship papers as though they were a life raft.

“But what all this means, Lady Dane, is it’s your decision how to handle the fraudulent activity with Leo’s account.”

“Yes, Lady Dane.” Nate grinned devilishly. “*Whatever* shall my punishment be?”

Raymond cleared his throat, and Sinclair turned to his sister, pointedly ignoring Nate.

“Cora, I can issue a notice you won’t be pursuing criminal charges against Travers.” His voice was businesslike, but his ears were entertainingly pink. “But what about the Carletons? Do you want to take *them* to task?”

All three men turned to Cora.

“It’s your call, love,” Nate said.

Sinclair nodded. “After all, you were the injured party, Cora. I’ll proceed however you like.”

Cora bit her lip. “I...I *only* ever wanted the Dane family out of my life.” She nodded decisively. “And I don’t want to drag out our dealings with them. I want Leo’s money repaid...”

and I want the Carletons to leave us alone. And..." She suddenly smiled impishly. "I want to be the one to tell them."

"No criminal charges?"

Cora shrugged. "If the court wants to pursue further action, I'll let them handle it."

Sinclair laughed, incredulous. "*You?* Letting someone *else* handle it?"

Cora's eyes found Nate. The blue hit him first and then the amber. Cora, in two parts. All of her, *his*.

"I'm learning."

THE EARLY MORNING sky was still foggy when Nate descended the polished staircase of Fordham House. Last night, Nate had slept in his brother's home for the first time since he moved to his own lodgings post-Cambridge. It had been well past midnight by the time their little quartet finished working out the confusing, exhilarating details of Nate's absence, Cora's arrival, and the next steps regarding her earnest plans for a reckoning.

Even in light of her triumph, Nate watched Cora's eyes gradually grow unfocused; she was exhausted. Despite his urgency to take her to bed, he knew if he did so, neither of them would sleep.

Instead, he lingered with her in the hall, holding her hands between their bodies, plying her with bruising, woozy kisses. It was enough. She was achingly precious to him; and now, of course, there was no need to rush.

"I love you," she had whispered, tracing his searching lips with her fingertip. "Come to me tomorrow."

Now tomorrow had arrived, and Nate intended to be at Dane House before breakfast. While his reunion with Cora soothed many of his ills, there were two very small, very distinct absences. Nate itched for the soft flax of Tess's hair, for the swell of Leo's round cheeks. He was desperate to hold them again.

But as he crossed the front hall, he paused. Down the side corridor, he could see a cracked door.

Raymond's study.

Impulsively, Nate turned, making for the very space he'd been sequestered in most of last night. Before he could change his mind, he lifted his hand and knocked. His brother was bent over his desk, his silvered hair on end and his shirtsleeves rolled. It looked as though he'd spent the night here.

"Good God. Did you even sleep?"

Raymond startled, blearily looking up at Nate. "I was reviewing your notes. From the spring, about the Darlington railway. I was writing to you about it, actually. I think you might have been right about this investment."

"Ah." Nate hesitated. "Is that so?"

"We should sit down with this, Nate. This week, if you can stay in London. I'd like to review your ideas. It's unconventional, but it may very well be worthy."

An unfamiliar warmth unfurled inside Nate's chest, like the painful, welcome sting of a loosening cramp.

He nearly felt...proud.

"If you have a moment..." Nate faltered, strangely nervous. He hadn't planned to ask this question until he started speaking. "That is, if you aren't too busy this morning, come with me. To Dane House. I'd like to make an introduction."

Ray blinked, surprised. "An introduction?"

Nate grinned and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Well...two of them, actually."

THE CHILDREN WERE in the breakfast room with Annie. A maid intimated Cora was still sleeping, and Nate was relieved to hear she was resting. He'd see to it she slept well every night of her life. But Tess and Leo, of course, had no idea how altering yesterday's circumstances had been. Knowing the two

of them, they'd been up with the sun, demanding scones and stories before poor Annie knew which way was up.

Nate stalled in the threshold, watching the children's bright, sticky faces. Raymond was waiting a half step behind him.

It was official; Tess and Leo were safe at home with their mother. It's where they belonged and where they would stay.

God willing, it's where all of them would stay.

Nate stepped into the breakfast room.

"I sincerely hope you two rascallions saved some for me," he teased in pretend consternation. He felt a thrill of unadulterated joy as their sleep-mussed heads swiveled toward him. "Otherwise, I'll have no choice but to impose yet another biscuit tax. And Tess is severely in debt, as it were."

Next to him, Raymond chuckled knowingly. "Like father, like daughter?"

Nate met his brother's gaze for a split second before both squealing children were upon him. He closed his eyes, clutching their small, familiar bodies, an excitable child tucked securely in each of his arms. Nate laughed and buried his face against the tangled fluff of their hair.

"Raymond...this is Leo. And this is Tess."

Nate took a steadying breath.

"They're my..."

At the astonished expression on Raymond's face, Nate's voice dropped off. A tight burn descended from his eyes down into his chest. His brother's hand landed reassuringly on his shoulder.

"I know *exactly* who they are, Nate."

His children.

"CORRA, are you certain you want to do this?"

It was early afternoon. Nate, Sinclair, and Cora were idling in a carriage outside a nondescript home in Cheapside. Nate knew Cora deserved this confrontation, and the prospect of handing it to the Carletons wasn't without its merits, but Nate didn't relish this reunion, regardless of the circumstances.

"Yes," she said with her typical dogged determination.

"But—" Nate and Sinclair avoided looking at each other.

"None of that, you two," Cora warned. "I'll be fine. The Carletons tried to take everything from me. They underestimated me. And I want to show them how wrong they were."

Nate frowned. He didn't like this one bit, but it wasn't up to him.

"Let's get this over with," Sinclair muttered, peering around the carriage curtain.

The trio disembarked from the carriage, Cora marching to the house. Nate wasn't about to let her lead the charge until he saw what was what. Placing his hand gently on her back, he stepped forward and knocked.

There was a pause, and then a plump housekeeper eased open the door.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, ma'am." Nate tipped his hat. "We are here to call on ___"

"*Travers?*"

He'd know that squawk anywhere.

Behind him, Cora stiffened.

From around the corner peered the scowling face of Edith Carleton.

"What are *you* doing here?" She came to the door, all but shoving the poor housekeeper aside.

Nate made a show of looking up and down the house. "That's odd," he mused to Sinclair and Cora. "I see no

evidence of locusts...frogs...pestilence. Are we at the right house?"

"I suppose you think you're smart—" Edict started, her eyes narrowing to slits.

"Ah, Mrs. Carleton, it *is* you." Nate smirked. "I could have sworn it was the wrong address, what with the lack of biblical plagues."

"We are here to speak with you, Mrs. Carleton," Cora said tightly. "The vicar, as well."

"Hmph." Mrs. Carleton backed away, letting them inside. "You're lucky you caught me when you did. I have to change Prudence's dressings soon."

Nate stifled a gag as he followed her to the parlor.

"You remember my brother, Mrs. Carleton." Cora's voice was clipped. "Mr. Gavin Sinclair."

"I remember," the vicar said from his chair in the corner. He lowered his paper, looking suspiciously at Sinclair. "He's a barrister."

"Yes." Cora smiled sweetly. "Yes, he is."

"Where are the children then?" Mrs. Carleton glared at Nate, as though he had them in his coat pocket. "And their belongings?"

Cora and Sinclair gingerly sat on the small sofa; Nate stood behind them.

"My children are at Dane House," Cora said, with an offhand shrug. "Likely running amok."

"I thought I made clear—"

"Oh you did." Cora leaned forward, her eyes gleaming. "You were perfectly clear. But the location of my children is a determination for their *guardian* to make, you see."

She paused, looking enormously pleased.

"And that would be *me*, Mr. and Mrs. Carleton."

There was a stunned silence.

Cora smiled proudly over her shoulder at Nate.

“I’m sure your own solicitor will receive communications, Carleton,” Sinclair said, handing the vicar a copy of the guardianship terms. “But we wanted to be certain you understand. You have no future dealings with my sister.”

“This is preposterous!” Unfortunately, Edith Carleton had found her voice. “On what grounds?”

Nate started to count off on his fingers. “Let’s see...you’re wretched, you’re cruel, you were stealing from Leo’s accounts, the vicar tried to get handsy with the scullery maids, you don’t eat dessert, you’re vile...did I mention the stealing?”

The vicar gaped; Mrs. Carleton turned puce. “We’ll file a rejoinder—we’ll contest—”

Cora tilted her head. “I don’t think you will,” she said slowly. “I don’t think you’ll do that, at all. Because, you see, right now, my brother has agreed not to press criminal charges against you on behalf of my son. But it’s on the sole condition you never come near my family again.”

That shut them right up. Nate grinned victoriously. Cora had been right to pursue this; it was making for an altogether enjoyable afternoon.

Cora stood briskly, and Sinclair followed suit.

“Is there anything else, Cora?” Sinclair asked solicitously.

“Yes,” Cora said suddenly, turning from where she had started to make her way to the door. “Yes, there is, actually.”

She looked at the Carletons for a long moment. They were furious but silent.

“Why?”

“Why what?” the vicar grumbled.

“*Why* did you do this?” Cora spread her hands, her lovely brow creased. “You could have kept withdrawing the money. I wouldn’t have known. Why did you have to insert yourself? Why the constant intrusions, the interference, the threats—”

“Because of *you*.” Mrs. Carleton’s shaking finger was pointed at Cora. “It’s because I cannot *tolerate* you, Cora Dane. You’re abysmally unconventional for a lady of your station. Aldworth Park is my family home, and you run it with less than no propriety. You don’t know how to take care of those children. You aren’t giving them a *proper* life. You spoil them, you let them run wild.”

Cora blinked, taking a step back. Nate gripped her arm, staring daggers. Something was exploding inside his skull.

“You needed someone stronger to take control. I have a responsibility to my brother, to care for his estate, for his progeny, to see they are raised to his standards—”

But at the mention of Dane, Cora lifted her chin. “Your brother didn’t even know his children’s birthdates.” Her voice was as cold and sharp as flint. “I would rather Leo *never* learn his lowercase letters than be *anything* like your brother.”

Cora inhaled, her cheeks pale.

“Mrs. Carleton, you once told me, children should know their fathers. Do you realize what Tess and Leo know of Dane?” She stepped forward. “They know nothing. Because he didn’t want them. He wouldn’t even dine with the children. I can count on one hand the number of times he held them. He asked my midwife if Tess was a boy, and at the news he had a daughter, he cursed over her dowry and left the house. He left us *all* the time. And we preferred it that way. He was a callous, indifferent *oaf*—”

“You ungrateful wretch. He’s their father—”

“He’s not.” Cora seethed, her eyes bright. “He’s *not* their father. Not in any way that matters. Not in any way at all.”

She looked at Nate. “What are our children’s birthdates?”

A painful, livid lump lodged in his throat.

“Tess is April ninth,” he said quietly, his eyes never leaving her face. “Leo is May twenty-third.”

Cora nodded once, her face transforming into an expectant, rosy smile.

“If you aren’t careful, Lady Dane, they’ll end up like you. Like *both* of you.” Mrs. Carleton sniffed, eyeing Nate venomously.

Nate took a furious step forward, but Cora placed a placating hand on his arm.

“And so what if they do?” Cora said defiantly. “I don’t think that would be so very bad at all.”

He loved her so damn much. Cora was, as ever, a marvel; she could accomplish anything she wanted to.

But so could Nate.

“You’ll be leaving my family alone, Mrs. Carleton,” Nate said now, with a note of finality. “My wife, my children. You’ll have nothing to do with us.”

“Don’t get me started on *you*—cards, drinking, your reputation—”

“You were right, Nate,” Cora said slowly, tapping her finger on her chin. “All this time, you were right about the Carletons.”

“How’s that now?” the vicar grunted from his chair.

Cora turned to leave the room. “They really are *bloody prigs*.”

“Lady Dane!”

Sinclair sputtered; the vicar choked.

But Cora had already swept out of the room, and Nate was more than content to follow her.

August 1819

Finch Residence, London

Cora,

I hope you and the children have been enjoying your newfound independence at Aldworth Park this last week. I can attest Nathaniel, while breaking quills in half from missing you, has been keeping himself busy with whatever he and Raymond have been sequestered with. Investments? How dull! What have you done to my brother?

He is, of course, champing at the bit to see you. So much so, I have come to thoroughly regret my offer to chaperone his forthcoming visit.

Please, show me mercy this week.

I'm sure you haven't missed directives instructing you how to live your life. But for old times' sake, I thought I would send you one last order.

And it's nonnegotiable, Cora—

Live happily ever after.

Tabby



ON THE MORNING of August 5, 1819, Cora Dane awoke with a man in her bed.

In her earliest return to consciousness, she had forgotten, unfurling from her tight ball of sleep and stretching as far as she could reach across her crisp bed linens. It was only when

her waking limbs were met not by expansive space but a warm wall of muscle that she remembered.

Cora slowly turned to face him.

Nate rolled to his stomach, one arm under his head, the other splayed across her pillow. He was soundly sleeping, his breathing deep and even.

Cora relished the space he took up in her bed, her body humming with the muted echoes of last night. In Nate's beloved, brilliant hands, she had fallen apart once, twice, an improbable, exhilarating thrice. He had only been away for a week, but their corporeal resistance to the separation had been ferocious indeed.

As had their corporeal reunion.

But now, Cora didn't feel tethered to reality at all. She existed in a dream state—her family, exactly as it should be.

No more intrusions, no more fear. Right now, two floors above, her children were waking in the nursery, where Annie would give them milk and berries with cream. They would play outside all day until their little sunburned noses hit their pillows. Cora would visit with Tabitha in the garden until her friend graciously invented some pretext to retire early. And then Cora would end her day as she started it: with Nate.

Nothing could be more simple; nothing could be more profound.

She reached for him, gently trailing her fingers over the exposed slope of his shoulders. She lowered her mouth to his back, dropping one lingering kiss to an inviting patch of warm skin.

“Good morning, darling,” Nate murmured, his sleepy voice hoarse as he rolled her on top of him. He lifted her hair, then let it fall over him in a curtain. Cora's toes curled as she slipped her hands around the muscles of his back, pressing her ribcage to his. A dense ache bloomed low in her belly as she shifted.

Oh.

There was a satisfied rumble in her ear as Nate lifted his own hips in response. “That’s yours if you want it, love.”

The words were so preposterously smug Cora wanted to laugh...except she also very much wanted it. Thunderclouds raced along her veins, gathering heavy between her thighs.

“Though...” Nate’s fingers massaged the back of her head, somehow always knowing where every hairpin had pinched. She closed her eyes, only a minute away from outright purring. “You might be too sore.” He kissed her eyelids.

“Well...” Cora bit her lip; Nate’s thumb released it. “Not *terribly* sore...”

His eyes were dark as he pulled her closer. “I’m holding you to that,” he murmured, his slow morning kiss growing heated as his fingers followed her spine.

He dropped both palms to the back of her thighs, lifting the hem of her light cotton nightdress. She moaned, and his own soft grunt quickened her steeping desire.

Higher...higher...he gripped her legs, spreading them wider around his hips, his hands stroking over her buttocks, closer—

Cora cried out, her head falling forward, pressing into the pillow. Nate turned his head, gently biting her earlobe as his thumbs slid down, tracing her quim, finding the evidence of her arousal.

“Shh,” he murmured into her ear. “We have to be—”

“Careful?” she whispered, her voice tight.

Nate’s laugh rolled through her. “I was going to say quiet.”

He paused, his fingers stilling. “*Do* we need to be careful?”

Cora ground her hips against his hardness, raising her hand to his face. “I would say so. My finger is still bare, you see.”

He lifted her left hand, bringing it close, as if to examine it. His own left hand teased the curve of her thigh.

“So it is,” he said, running his fingertip lightly over her ring finger before placing it in his mouth. He sucked once, hard and slow, at the same moment he sank two fingers into her aching center. “I should do something about that.”

Cora gasped, pushing back against his lazy hand.

“You can ask me, you know,” she whispered into his ear. “I’ll say *yes*.”

Nate grinned wickedly, his fingers moving faster. “I’m not asking you in these conditions. I might elicit a false acceptance.”

His thumb circled just above where she was most sensitive, and Cora’s breath grew tight. She reached for his cock, greeting his length with a nimble stroke of her fingers. He wasn’t the only one capable of teasing.

“*Damn it, Cora—*”

She laughed as Nate rolled them over. Her glee melted to a gasp when he held her thighs open, lightly caressing her until she cried out. Her hands brushed along his stomach, tugging the hair on his chest, making him quake with need of his own.

He settled against her and lifted her leg, pausing until her hazy eyes met his.

It was always like this.

Every time.

“I love you.”

He said it; she said it. It never mattered. The words were glazed on her shoulder, on his collarbone, on their tangled lips.

The words were a promise.

The words were a seal.

AFTER, Nate rolled to face her, propping himself on one elbow as he pushed her hair away from her face. Cora was drowsing again, but she could feel the heat of his gaze calling to her.

“Why are you staring at me?”

Nate exhaled slowly. “You in the morning...” he murmured. “Christ. It *does* something to me, Cora.”

Her smile lifted her head from the pillow. “*Gold, gold, gold,*” she quoted, peeking at him over her arm.

Nate appeared charmingly boyish. “Ah. The whole week apart, I wondered if you would bring up the letters.” He walked his fingers up and down her arm. “I told you I don’t know how to write them.”

“You can’t be serious?” Cora sat up. “Nate, those letters... well, to be perfectly frank, they changed my life.” Her eyes clouded with emotion. “I’ll never be able to thank you for them.”

“You needn’t *thank* me.” He gently pinched her side. “You commanded me to do them.”

She laughed guiltily, wrinkling her nose.

“I’m dreadfully demanding, aren’t I? I don’t know how you put up with me.”

Nate’s smile slid away, his face growing somber.

“Nate?”

He regarded her silently.

“You *should* be demanding,” he finally said. “I want you to be.”

Cora hesitated, watching him study her. “Is everything... all right?”

Nate frowned. “Cora...all summer, I allowed you to dwell under the ridiculous premise that it was fine to not ask anything of me. That it was permissible to have no expectations.” He touched her face. “But no more. I’m telling you, love, *ask me*. Ask me for everything. Demand more of me. Let me become.”

He swallowed, his voice husky. “I quite like it.”

She pressed a soft kiss to his wrist. “Very well. As long as you agree to expect more from me, in turn. I don’t think either one of us is finished.”

Nate smiled, but his gray eyes remained serious.

“I meant it,” he said hoarsely. “Every word I wrote to you.”

Cora lifted her finger, tracing his face.

“You said I was your dawn.”

“Yes.”

She fell quiet, searching for the right words. She didn't want to say too much, too quickly, like she always did. She wanted to take care with him.

“It's...it's not like that for me, Nate.” She hesitated, moving her hand to his hair. “You *aren't* my beginning. And I hope that won't make a chasm between us.”

Her brow furrowed, but he pressed his mouth there, unyielding to her worry.

“But...I rather think you're my *ending*.” She found her smile and gave it to him. “I thought I was done. But there you were.”

“Your last chance?” He tried to tease, but Cora held his face, keeping his eyes on her.

“My best chance.”

“Well then. Looks like we're incompatible, love.” He smiled softly. “Quite literally night and day.”

Cora beamed, shaking her head.

“No. Don't you see? We're incandescent. I believe you and I will ignite the entire sky between us.”

“Ah. So we're just humble, then.”

Cora was ten feet off the ground and yet wholly inside herself. “Either that or completely mad.”

Nate pulled her back against him. “Speaking of mad...do you suppose the children would like a puppy?”

IF TESS and Leo understood things were different now, they didn't let on. They were happy to be back in the country; they were happier still the Carletons were gone.

They were happiest of all Nate had returned.

"Tess," Leo said seriously as they sat finishing their picnic. "We're going to do sleeping giants first. And *then* we can play labyrinth."

The sunflower field behind the pond was in full bloom, and Leo was rife with plans.

"Nate, you'll have to be the minotaur," Leo said gravely. "Mama is terrible."

"Obviously." Nate assessed Cora. "More like *miniature*-taur."

Leo cackled, and Tess gamely joined.

"Neither of you is old enough for poor wordplay," Cora grouched. "And on that note, nobody is playing labyrinth. You two stay by the edges of the field. I don't want Tess traipsing off, she's hardly taller than the flowers."

The children, distracted by the lure of sunflowers and moderate independence, raced off.

Cora sighed, turning back to Nate; he was lazing rather deliciously on the picnic blanket. Behind him, the pond glinted green in the heavy August sun. Cora felt a ripple of disappointment he hadn't decided to swim today.

Then again, there was always tomorrow.

"Tell me what I missed," he said, catching her by the wrist.

Cora laughed as she settled on the blanket. Nate lay back, resting his head in her lap. They had been playing this game all day; he was starving for details, as much as Cora could remember from the time Tess and Leo were babies.

"Tess *never* slept," Cora reminisced, weaving her fingers in his hair. He was once again due for a trim—not that she would be the one to tell him. "We had a second nurserymaid for a while. Annie and I were at our wits' end."

“I would have rocked her.”

“I know,” Cora hummed.

“That or dipped the corner of her blanket in whisky—”

“*Nate!*”

“I’m *joking*.”

Cora laughed as she shoved his shoulder. Nate rolled to his side, tugging her down alongside him. He carded his fingers through her loose hair and planted his smile against hers.

He made her heart a garden, forever in bloom.

“September,” he murmured.

“Hmm?”

“Marry me in September,” Nate said, kissing her softly.

“That...wasn’t a question.”

He pulled back, his face as serious as she’d ever seen it. “No. It wasn’t.” He kissed her again. “It’s not really a question at all.”

Cora closed her eyes, picturing the pretend wedding she had planned. Autumn asters, a fawn-colored gown. Nate waiting at the end of a small chapel.

Then she blinked her eyes open, taking in her irrefutable reality. Leo, Tess, Nate. A life loud and hungry and *busy* with love.

“September,” she whispered. “Yes.”

The word puffed away on their children’s laughter, drifting through the late summer breeze like a cloud of dandelion pappus, floating off to sprout their future.

Cora stretched along the row of sentinel sunflowers, shielding them like a hundred tiny suns. And under any one of them—in any varied future, any possible universe—there was a version of her living this moment.

Nate cradled her in his arms, his smile the most blinding sun of all, the reflected light of the man who loved her—her unpinned hair, her unruly children, her complicated heart.

Under the wide expanse of Nate's hands, firm against her spine, she could still feel her wings, and he loved those too.

There was nothing to fear. Cora could unfurl; she could fly.

And then she could come back home.

EPILOGUE

September

Fordham House, London

Cora,

It's a wonder you haven't tired of these belligerent scribbles; I figured my efforts to woo you would have grown trite by now. And if they have, cheers to you, my love, for indulging me anyway.

Yesterday, I came across you playing the piano—Haydn, Sonata in C minor. It sometimes feels like the only song I've ever heard.

Everything was the same, just the same, as the beginning.

But this time, you had both of your beautiful hands on the keys. And damn, Cora, you managed to bungle every chord, a disastrous cacophony only made sweet by your triumphant laughter when you caught me watching.

What a thing, love. Our life is a sonata: two parts. Both parts. Entirely of our own making.

I'm sure you never expected to find your future with a rogue, but every day I'll do my damndest to hold you to it.

As long as you hold me.

Forever yours—



“COME, LOVE.” Nate dropped his whisper into the shell of her ear, and Cora was helpless to do anything but follow him. He held open the heavy door, and she slid behind him into the cavernous, dim Fordham House ballroom.

The house was quiet now, everyone asleep except the two of them. Riddled with anticipation and unable to sleep, Cora had stolen down to the library, thinking some reading would put her mind to rest. But Nate had been prowling too.

Cora was all too glad she'd been caught.

Tomorrow.

He pulled her against him, the two of them as alone now in the empty ballroom as they had felt on the dance floor earlier that evening, even while surrounded by the revelers already arrived for tomorrow's festivities. Crowd or no crowd, it always seemed as though she and Nate occupied a separate space.

His hands expertly guided her into the hold for a midnight waltz, but his gray eyes were burnished with want. Cora sighed, lifting her chin, understanding they wouldn't be dancing at all.

Nate pulled her up, she pulled him down; her palms found the slight stubble of his night beard. He cupped her cheek, holding her against him, his mouth moving dreamily over hers.

Cora immediately deepened the kiss and Nate half groaned, half laughed, the catch in his throat both pleased and eager. His fingers teased the edge of her dressing gown, slipping inside.

Cora was suspended in time and place. What had come before and what would come after were inconsequential.

It would always be like this.

It always had been.

There was a sudden clang, the heave of wood, the ballroom door creaking open.

"Shite!"

Cora reluctantly pulled away, even as Nate's mouth tried to draw her back.

"One more moment," he muttered.

“Are you two *serious* right now?” A tall, strapping young man was silhouetted in the ballroom entrance, his arms crossed severely. He was accompanied by a slender young woman wearing a dark blue dressing gown.

“Leo? Tess?” Cora felt a predictable hum of worry. “What’s wrong, darlings? What are you two doing awake?”

The pair approached them.

“Leo’s nervous for tomorrow. He wanted to practice the waltz one more time.” Tess’s low timbre drifted across the ballroom. She smirked, and Cora, though not an indulgent woman, realized she was looking in a mirror from two decades ago. Tess was Cora at twenty-four, incarnate.

Nate and Cora exchanged a knowing look.

“Leo,” Cora started slowly, appraising her son. It never quite resonated that doing so involved looking *up*. He’d been taller than her for fourteen years. “Darling, you’ve been waltzing since you were sixteen. You *know* how to waltz.”

“Yes,” Tess said, eyeing her brother with fond exasperation. “But not on his little sister’s wedding day.”

“It’s a rather big affair.” Leo was turning red. “I don’t want to embarrass you—”

There was another abrupt commotion from the hall—a crash, a stumble, the sort of furious whispering meant to silence, the reckless laughter that inevitably followed.

Oliver.

Her second son strode crookedly into the ballroom, the extremely handsome picture of chaos. His cravat was untied, his hair was on end, and Cora knew from both the tumbler in his hand and the rouge on his collar, Oliver had been having a predictably ill-advised evening.

The house was chock-full of wedding guests; it was anyone’s guess who he had absconded with that evening.

Please, not Xander’s sister, Cora thought. The last thing they needed was Tess’s future sister-in-law to be ruined on the eve of the wedding.

In spite of this very alarming prospect, Cora smiled. She knew most ladies of the *ton*, be they mama or debutante, had their sights set on the reformation of Oliver Raymond Travers, future Earl of Fordham. He was as offensively attractive as Nate and every bit as dangerous.

But all Cora could see was her newborn son, the moment he'd first been placed in his father's arms.

"Well, what have we here?" Oliver loped up to Tess, swinging her in a circle. He was three years younger, but at Nate's height, he towered over his petite older sister. "I was trying to find you, Leo. I got excited, thought you'd finally gone rogue. I should have guessed the most illicit shenanigans you'd muster on the eve of our sister's wedding would be the ballroom with our parents."

"Ollie, be nice," Tess admonished.

"Had a good time tonight, brother?" Leo looked torn between amusement and annoyance.

"I *always* have a good time." Oliver shrugged, winking.

Cora shook her head. He was *Nate*. It was absolutely frightening.

"Ollie, wait, Aunt Tabby said she heard you in the hall. I know you're up, you promised me you'd let me try your whisk —"

Cecily peeked around the corner, her face pale beneath her riotous curtain of hair.

"Oh, hello?" She laughed nervously, seeing her parents. "I misspoke. I meant to say *whist*. Ollie was going to show me a new card strategy..."

Cora looked at Nate. "Do you *see* our children? What have we done? Who have we raised?"

Nate laughed, holding his arms out for Cecily. At seventeen, she was far too old to be coddled, but loathe the poor soul who told her father.

Cora looked around at her assembled children—growing, grown. Cecily would debut in the spring; Oliver had a term

left at Cambridge, and then he would take over the family's colossally profitable investments. Leo was Lord Dane now in every real sense of the word; Aldworth Park was *his* home. And Tess... Tess was marrying Alexander Reeves, Marquess of Rockwell, tomorrow.

How quickly it had gone.

Nate swung Cecily around, tossing her to Oliver—a rather bold move, Cora thought, given his condition, but he whooped, easily taking his younger sister under his arm.

Tess surveyed her family. “Well then. Which one of us is going to teach the viscount how to waltz by eleven tomorrow morning?”

IT HAD, in the end, been a calamitous mess, mostly from Cecily and Oliver. Cora had finally shunted everyone off to bed, except Ollie, who she was dragging down to the kitchens for a bucket of water and a loaf of bread. Nate watched his son and wife depart, his cheeks aching from laughter.

“Shall we?”

In the quiet ballroom, only Nate and Tess remained, the two of them, as ever, in wordless understanding. Nate took her hand, and they easily moved through a silent gallopade.

His little girl.

She was getting married tomorrow.

“I suppose this will be our last dance.” Nate smiled down at her.

“I doubt that.” Tess grinned. “Xander is a terrible dancer. You suit much better, Papa.”

The boys had switched to Father by the time they were eleven years old. But to his girls, Nate would always be Papa.

“I just want to get it *right*,” Tess grumbled, and her words landed on the most tender part of his heart.

He had four children—two he made and two who had made him—and Nate loved them all fiercely, equally,

differently. Of all of them, Tess was the most like him. She had moved through life without a care in the world.

Until she met Xander.

“The dance?” Nate asked, squeezing her fingers.

Tess shook her head. “The *marriage*. Like you and Mama.”

Nate chuckled lightly. “We didn’t get it *all* right, sweetheart.”

“I know...I know it wasn’t always...”

Nate slowed his steps. He reached down, lightly cupping her cheek. Her blue eyes glowed in the dim candlelight. As he had long ago predicted, his daughter’s gaze had ruined many a rogue— Nathaniel Travers, Lord Fordham, chief among them.

“It wasn’t always easy, Tess. But it was *always*.”

She smiled softly. Nate gazed at her lovely, grown-up face. There, just around her eyes, Tess was still two years old. Around her eyes and around his heart.

“Remember, Lady Swifte, you’re enough. Exactly as you are. Be present, be yourself. And...” He spun her once, catching sight of Raymond’s portrait over her head. “And *keep becoming*.”

He ended their dance, absently stepping forward as he regarded the ageless, frozen face of his brother.

“You don’t need to know it all, Tess. Not yet. Not ever.”

Tess came to stand next to him, linking her arm through his. She, too, looked up at the portrait. Next to it was another enormous painting, Nate and Cora in September 1819. Just after their wedding day.

The past earl. The present earl.

It was strange and sobering and yet, somehow...fitting.

Raymond’s legacy was no longer Nate’s burden. It was his gift. He would pass it down to Leo, to Oliver. His own good men in the making.

He could still remember the spring Leo reached the age of majority, walking his son through Parliament. Nate had been earl for a few years by then, and as he watched Leo shrug into his parliamentary robes, he had been struck with the realization of how few men experienced the gratification of watching their sons come into their own in this particular manner. By the end of that summer, Leo could outdebate him, and nothing made Nate prouder. He and Leo were peers; they were *peers*. Nate had learned it all from Raymond, and Leo learned it alongside Nate. *Me and you, mate.*

Tess sighed, leaning her head against his arm.

“Raymond would have wanted to be there tomorrow,” Nate said softly. “He loved you. In a way—in all the ways that count—you and Leo were his first grandchildren.”

“He loved you too,” Tess murmured. “I remember.”

Nate kissed his daughter’s head. “We got there. In our own way. After all...” He looked down at Tess. “Families come together in many different ways. Don’t they?”

She glanced up at him, a question in her wide blue eyes. “Should...I have thanked you, Papa?” Tess wondered slowly, as if pondering the notion for the very first time. “For...all of it? For *everything*?”

Nate smiled.

“Tess, sweetheart. There’s nothing I’ve been more grateful for than the fact that you never once thought you needed to.”

CORA WAS STILL awake when Nate came to bed.

“She’s nervous,” he said, tugging off his shirt. “But she’ll be fine.”

“Of course she is. Of course she will be.” Cora sighed, making a spot for him, welcoming his weight under the counterpane. “The marquess is a good man.”

“But Tess is better,” they said in unison.

Nate laughed, settling beside her. He reached for her hand, absently twisting her wedding ring—reset now with four birthstones—around, around, around her finger, like a miniature passage of time.

Cora curled into him, running her finger lightly over his cheek.

“I still can’t believe it sometimes,” she teased softly. “You grew up.”

Nate groaned, tracing her shoulder blade. “Direct hit, love.” He dropped a kiss to her temple. “I’m on my knees.”

She elbowed him lightly. “We both know your knees are stiff, old man.”

“Ah, a challenge.” He leaned over her, his mouth now trailing under her ear. “*Excellent.*”

She laughed, wriggling closer to his wandering hands. “Incorrigible. You remain, as ever, the absolute *worst* rogue of my acquaintance.”

His eyes glinted, and two decades evaporated.

“And thank God for it.”

She tilted her face in anticipation. Waiting for it to begin, waiting for it to continue.

Waiting for it to never, ever end.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I had been halfheartedly researching an entirely different plot for *Forever Your Rogue* when I stumbled upon a piece of legal scholarship that completely ignited my story. The case, *De Manneville v. De Manneville* (1804), involved a mother seeking custody of her still-nursing infant daughter, who had been taken from her by her estranged husband. I remember looking down at my own still-nursing infant daughter and feeling sick when I learned that the court supported the father's claim to sole custody of the baby. As a woman, Mrs. De Manneville had no legal rights to her child.

The only thing I know about Mrs. De Manneville is that her husband took away her baby, and even though she knew it was likely to be a nonstarter, she still pursued legal action. Ultimately, she failed. As did the vast majority of mothers who sought custody of their children in the early 1800s. What struck me most about these stories wasn't the consistent court ruling that fathers have absolute authority; after all, there were stringent laws and expectations around a woman's legal standing in this period.

What struck me most was that they tried anyway.

Cora's story was my way of giving all of those women their own happy endings. My novel was born from their trying.

A great deal of research went into this story, some of which I stuck faithfully to, some of which I took more creative license with. Numerous well-researched blogs discuss these

topics, but I mostly utilized primary sources and legal sources analyzing child custody and family law in England. Here I'll share some of what I learned, and what I changed.

GUARDIANSHIP

The most salient aspects of the law made their way into my book via Gavin Sinclair; his explanation in Chapter 4 is a fairly succinct summary of the state of guardianship during the early nineteenth century. The father was entitled to name guardians in his will, and, as Nate learned while struggling to read Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, these guardians could be "of diverse sorts."

A mother was not automatically considered a guardian for her child, but she could be named one by her husband. As with Cora, a mother might be considered a "guardian of nurture," which could care for the personal well-being of the child.

Another category of guardian was the "testamentary guardian," or the guardian appointed by a father in his will. Under the 1660 Abolition of Tenures Act, fathers were granted the power to designate, upon their death, a testamentary guardian who could entirely (and legally) remove a child from their mother if they so wished. While as early as the 1700s, courts recognized the importance of a mother's role in a child's upbringing, they consistently ruled that courts could only enforce existing custody arrangements, not change them.

However, the doctrine of *parens patriae*, which justifies state interference between a parent and child, allowed that the Court of Chancery had the jurisdiction to regulate testamentary guardianships. As Gavin tells Cora: guardianship was a trust. If that trust was broken, the court would intervene, removing the guardian in breach of trust and naming another in their stead. This was most imperative if the ward in question was titled or wealthy.

While it was still uncommon for a woman to be named a testamentary guardian, slowly changing attitudes during the eighteenth century saw a gradual trend toward recognizing mothers as guardians. Some sources indicated if a woman remarried, the stepfather would be named her children's

guardian, but there was conflicting information. I, therefore, erred on the side of caution and had Gavin, a non-inheriting male, named as guardian alongside Cora.

LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

For the logistics around Gavin's actual case, I used primary sources from the Court of Chancery that listed the steps involved in filing a petition during the period in question. The first step is to submit a bill of complaint, which lays out the details of the dispute. Thereafter, the defendant would have an opportunity to give answer. The plaintiff responded, submitting additional evidence if needed, and finally, the defendant submitted a rejoinder.

As you can imagine, this process could be very drawn out, and cases were often tied up for months or even years. Obviously, Raymond's involvement in expediting the review to a single day was a major creative license on my part! But given that the Carletons were outright stealing from little Lord Leo, I figured it warranted cutting some corners in order to rapidly remove them from their role as guardians. As he was a peer of the realm, the court's duty was to protect Leo and his property.

On a similar note, the rationale used to prove the Carletons were unfit guardians involved their squandering of Leo's inheritance. As stated, though the estate itself was held in a separate trust, Leo's personal finances would have been accessible to his guardians. I did find a precedent wherein wards, upon reaching the age of majority, sued guardians who mismanaged their funds, and usually a ward won such cases. In reality, Dane should have set up a more ironclad financial arrangement for his children...but we know he was careless with his family. Sometimes, consistent characterization trumps sound logic.

For Nate's halfhearted pretrial with the magistrate, I drew on information from the Old Bailey online, which indicated until 1829, it was common practice for magistrates to examine the accused in either the magistrate's home or office to decide whether the case warranted a trial. Magistrates could dismiss cases at their discretion if they believed there wasn't enough

evidence to pursue further action. Given the murky nature of Nate's situation plus his family connections, I took artistic license to make our magistrate a nervous bureaucrat, much more in favor of handing a reprobate back to his family than risk disgracing a powerful earl. And a good thing, too! Because Nate did, in fact, break the law, even for Robin Hood-esque reasons. Forgery and fraud would not have boded well for him. Luckily, the money was safely returned, and the true criminal identified.

STOCKTON AND DARLINGTON RAILWAY

Nate's railway investment was likewise drawn from the historical record. The Stockton and Darlington railway, while not officially opened until September 1825, had its origins many years earlier. The initial survey was carried out by an engineer named George Overton and pitched by a Quaker, Edward Pease, at a public meeting in 1818—this is where Nate's five percent return on investment was first brought up. In reality, most shares were bought by Quakers, but I decided to have Nate take a gamble here. As in the novel, the measure went before Parliament in spring 1819, where it failed by thirteen votes due to disagreement with the proposed route. A new survey was conducted, and after further delays caused by King George's death in 1820, the bill finally passed in 1821.

Nate was correct in thinking there's money in rails, but he also needed to be patient. Nevertheless, by 1832, the promised five percent return on investment had increased to eight percent. From there the rail only grew. If he played his cards right—and we know he always did—Nate's investments would have made him a wealthy man in his own right.

BANKING

For this plot point, I drew heavily from nineteenth-century banking resources as well as the University of Nottingham's Manuscripts and Special Collections online research guides, which had excellent primary sources, including examples of early cheques (checks for us Americans), or, as they were commonly referred to at the time, drafts. The earliest example of a cheque dates from 1705; partially preprinted cheques exist from the 1750s and fully preprinted cheques from 1811. As

restrictions on bank notes increased, cheque payments became increasingly important.

An example of an early chequebook from 1809 shows a partially printed draft would include space for the account owner to make out the cheque to the named payee or to the bearer, which meant either a designated person or anyone in possession could cash the draft. In my novel, I connected the logical dots that even though Leo was the account owner, as his guardian, Carleton could access drafts to make payments from the account on behalf of his wards. Instead, Carleton's cheques were made out to himself or his tradesman.

Coulter & Co., the bank referenced in my novel, is fictional, but I loosely modeled it after a combination of Child's Bank and descriptions of the Bank of England. I used banking treatises to describe the bank interior and the order of operations for cashing a draft. I filled in the blanks where needed, especially regarding Nate's receipt, though I did find similar wording in Shaw's treatise, which included helpful references to what a transaction receipt would include.

I hope this whetted any curiosity about some of the aspects of my book. I don't profess to be an expert on any of these topics, and I bent reality when needed in favor of developing my characters and plot. All errors are mine alone. I've included some of the sources I used if you would like further information.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Erin Langston is a historical romance author who crafts Regencies with heart, heat, and humor. A librarian by trade, Erin lives in the Midwest with her husband and two children. When not working, writing, or mom-ing, she can be found outside, drinking wine, buried in a book, or attempting to home-improve. A not-insignificant portion of her first novel was plotted in the preschool pickup line.

