



THE OTTER AND THE

# *Officer*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**LAURA GREENWOOD**

# THE OTTER AND THE OFFICER

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THE SHIFTER SEASON #5

LAURA GREENWOOD

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## BLURB

Georgiana believed she'd marry Henry since the day she understood what it meant. But when he goes away to war, she watched that dream slip away.

After two years away, Henry returns to find Georgiana engaged, and that winning her back might not be as easy as he first thought.

Can the two otter shifters find a way back to one another?

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*The Otter and the Officer is a paranormal Regency romance with otter shifters. It is part of the Shifter Season series. It has a second chance m/f romance and is Georgiana and Henry's complete story.*





# PROLOGUE

GEORGIANA

*TWO YEARS AGO*

THE WIND RUSHES in from the sea, pulling my hair from its pins, and making my dress tangle with my legs. I should have dressed better for the weather, as the cold sends a shiver down my spine, making a small part of me wish to run inside.

But I don't dare.

I can't leave. Not when I'm waiting for the person I want to see the most in the world to appear before he's sent overseas for good. I slip my hand into my pocket and fiddle with my favourite pebble, turning it over between my fingers several times in order to soothe myself. While it normally works, it doesn't seem to be the case this time, and the nervousness doesn't depart.

The path crunches under familiar-sounding boots and I turn around. My heart skips a beat at the dark-haired figure striding towards me with purpose and determination written all over his face.

I don't wait for him to grow closer and rush over, throwing myself into his arms. Henry captures my lips with his, kissing me as deeply and passionately as he ever has. I lose myself in the way it feels for my body to be pressed against his, and allow myself just a moment to forget about the coming distance.

We break apart, and he reaches out to push a stray tendril of hair behind my ear.

"Must you leave?" I ask, my voice coming out almost pleading. Which it has to be with me wishing that he wasn't going to.

"You know I have to, Georgiana," he murmurs. "How will we have the money to wed if I don't do this?"

"You could die, then we wouldn't be wed at all," I point out.

A sad smile spreads over his face. "You will have to trust me that I will come back. After all, I have something precious to return to."

"I know that you feel that way, but it doesn't change the fact that I worry about it."

"I love you, Georgiana."

"I love you too, Henry, but that's not the point. This isn't your war, it's one that the humans are fighting, it's no place for an otter shifter."

"This is my country too, and my king. But you know that I am not going to war for either of them, but for you. I have a good rank, which means that I will be paid handsomely."

"I have no need of a fortune, Henry, just you."

“You believe that now, but will you when I have taken you from your parents’ house and am unable to keep you in the manner you’re accustomed to?”

I bite my bottom lip, knowing that there is no argument I can make to convince him. We have been over them several times since he made up his mind that he would go to war in order to make the money he believes he needs to in order to properly marry me.

“I will return,” he says.

“You must. I believe that I can avoid going to London for the Season this year, but I don’t think my parents will allow me to put it off next year. They expect me to be presented.” And to find a husband, though I leave that part hanging between us. I don’t believe he will be particularly fond of that statement, even though it is the truth.

“I’ll do everything I can to be back before the Season begins.”

“Don’t make promises that you can not keep, Henry.”

“I intend to.” He puts his hand in his pocket and holds out his pebble to me.

I frown. “What is that for?”

“For you.”

“But...”

“I want you to keep it, Georgiana. Please. It is my promise that I’ll come back to you, and that when I do, I’ll be ready to make you my wife.”

I bite my bottom lip and then nod, taking it from him and slipping it into my pocket.

“I will come back,” he promises.

“I know that you’re going to try.” But there is a part of me that can’t ignore just how dangerous what he’s doing is. Human weapons could kill him as easily as magic could.

“Will you write to me?” he asks.

“Of course. Every month.” At least that is something that I can do in order to feel like I’m still close to him, though it is a poor consolation next to the thought of not seeing him all the time.

“And I will do the same. This will not be for long,” he assures me.

“I know.”

“How long do you have before your parents will miss you?” he asks.

“My maid is covering for me, I should have until the morning.”

“That is a risk.”

“Perhaps you are worth it.”

He chuckles. “I feel more that I am lucky to have someone that believes as much. If you are hungry, I have had Frederick order food to be delivered to my rooms.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You’re getting a future viscount to serve you?”

“I asked a friend if he could aid me to spend one final night with the lady I love,” he corrects me.

“When you return from war, you’re going to have to repay Frederick tenfold for everything he’s done for you. And for us.”

“I believe that it might be more than that, I’ve asked for him to watch over you while I’m gone.”

“I do not require that.”

“I know. But I trust no one more than I trust him, he is like a brother to me.”

I nod. “Perhaps Frederick is owed some of the fortune I am set to inherit.”

“You will not get that for a long time yet, one would hope.”

“I certainly do,” I respond. “Now, shall we have that meal? I hope there is a fire burning already, the cold has quite gotten to me.”

“Absolutely. There is only the best for my future wife.” He holds out his arm to me and I slip mine through it, resting my hand on his sleeve.

We make our way through the sleepy fishing town, and I find myself glad that we do not live in London where there are many more prying eyes who could speak of things they should not.

Then again, perhaps if I did not wish people to talk about what I chose to do with Henry, then I should rethink doing it in the first place. I may not have a title, nor will I ever, but there is no doubt that dallying with someone below my station would be frowned upon, especially when we aren’t married.

Though I do hope that can change once he returns from war.

I glance at Henry and my heart swells to several times its normal size. That day will not come soon enough.

# ONE



## GEORGIANA

I STEP into the ballroom and slip my hand into my pocket, feeling the two pebbles within and asking them for strength. A part of me knows that I should have left Henry's at home.

I should *always* leave it behind.

But despite knowing that's what's best for me, I can not seem to help myself.

"Miss Rocke," a smooth voice says from beside me.

I turn and bring a smile to my face for my betrothed. "Mr Stoaly," I respond with warmth in my voice that isn't entirely fake.

"After all the years of knowing one another, shouldn't you be referring to me as Frederick," he asks, holding out his arm.

I lace mine through it and rest my hand against his. The position is comfortable, but mostly because it has to be.

"You greeted me as Miss Rocke," I point out.

He chuckles and leads me around the ballroom towards where the drinks are being served. It's a ritual that we've

started doing ever since our parents formed our betrothal.

“Very well, Georgiana. You look lovely this evening.”

“As do you. That jacket is very fine.”

“Thank you, it is new.”

“The colour is excellent on you,” I say.

“Instead of discussing my choice of attire for the evening, perhaps we should talk about the topic that is really on your mind.”

I let out a loud sigh. He knows me far too well. “Have you heard from him?” I don’t say Henry’s name, but I don’t need to. Frederick knows precisely who I’m talking about.

“No.”

“Oh.” I glance away. It’s not like it’s a surprise to me.

“He’ll return,” Frederick says. “And then we can be done with this farce of a betrothal.”

“One of these days, you might say something that makes it sound like you want to marry me.”

He lets out a light laugh. “It is not that I don’t like you, Georgiana. I’m sure we would share a wonderful life together.”

“But it would be as friends.” Because both of us know that I’m still in love with his best friend.

“There are a lot worse fates,” he agrees. “Which is why I have not fought this union very hard. Yet. Make no mistake, I wish to marry you about as much as you wish to marry me.”

“Will you go through with it?” I ask. “If our parents force the matter.”

“We both will,” he points out, bringing us to a stop. “You know how I feel about this, Georgiana. I believe we are friends so that we may speak plainly with one another.”

“We are friends,” I agree.

“Then you know that I care for you as such. And that I will do what I can to honour the relationship you had with Henry. I don’t wish to replace him. If our parents force the issue before we have found a satisfactory way to avoid it that doesn’t ruin you, then I will do everything that a good husband should.”

“Even though I won’t love you?”

“There are different types of love,” he points out. “Having a friend in my wife would be much more than many of the gentlemen here would say.”

“I’m not sure, there have been several love matches lately. Including Lord and Lady Cygnus.”

“Ah, yes, you are friends with the new Lady Cygnus, are you not?”

I nod.

“Weren’t they caught together in a compromising position?”

“Yes. And I feel grateful that I’ve not been in their position.”

“That’s because you and Henry were always away from society when you...”

“Frederick,” I hiss. “Not here. Do you have any idea what kind of trouble we’ll both end up in if people find out what Henry and I did? It will ruin me, and if they realise you knew, then it won’t reflect well on you either.”



“I am not going to tell anyone of it,” he promises. “It is a secret between the three of us and your maid.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “I feel foolish for allowing him such liberties.”

“I believe as your future husband, I can say that it does not matter to me.”

“That’s because you are a good man. If one of the other betrothals my parents had thought about had gone through then the situation might have been very different.”

“One has to assume there are ways in which you could fake it.”

I close my eyes. “We are not having this conversation.”

“Very well. What shall we speak of instead?”

“How delicious Lady Greyling’s lemonade is,” I say, picking up a glass and taking a sip. I wrinkle my nose.

“Or not?” Frederick asks, amusement in his voice.

“It’s ghastly. What kind of shifter is she?”

“A squirrel I believe.”

“I did not realise that they liked things this tart.” I force the rest of the lemonade down to save myself from appearing rude, but resolve to drink wine for the rest of the evening.

“I shall take your word for it and choose an alternative,” Frederick says. “And then I must bid you adieu until our dance later this evening. I see that Lord Angus is wishing to speak with me.”

“Then you should not keep him waiting.”

“Luckily for us both, Lady Cygnus and Miss Falnor appear to have arrived.” He reaches out and takes my gloved hand in

his, raising to his lips and kissing it. “Until next time, Miss Rocke. As always, it has been a pleasure.”

“Mr Stoaly.” I bow my head.

He disappears to speak with his friend and I let out a loud sigh. Sometimes, when I’m speaking to Frederick, I can almost believe that my heart isn’t breaking at every moment. It’s like he keeps part of Henry alive, but when he leaves, there is no one I can talk to about him in quite the same way.

I push thoughts of my departed love away and head over to where my friends are speaking.

“Georgiana,” Letty says brightly. “Is everything all right with you? You’re looking rather pale. We can retire...”

“I think you’ve had enough of retiring rooms,” I quip.

Mary hides her laugh behind her fan.

“I’m married now, it’s different,” Letty responds.

“Yes, *because* you ended up in a retiring room,” I point out.

“Well technically, it was because we got caught, not because we were in the room.”

“You shouldn’t sound so pleased about that,” Mary says. “Even I know that.”

Letty tilts her head. “I’m married to the man I love, why shouldn’t I be pleased? Georgiana understands, right?”

“Understands what?” I ask, surprised she’s using that as her reasoning.

“Taking risks with the man you love. From what you’ve said about your Captain...”

“I haven’t said anything about my Captain,” I snap.

“Ah, so Mr Stoaly hasn’t heard anything from him either,” Mary says.

I pull out my fan and snap it open, mostly for something to do with my hands rather than because it’s too hot. “I know I should give up hope that Henry will come back. It’s been two years without a single word.”

“And you’re betrothed, so even if he does, it’s a moot point,” Mary points out.

I give her a weak smile. “Precisely.”

“I thought you said that Mr Stoaly was looking into a way of breaking your betrothal?” Letty asks.

“He is, but so far there is nothing that won’t ruin me, and he’s too good of a gentleman to do that.”

“It won’t ruin you if it’s not true,” Mary says.

Letty and I both turn to her with disbelieving looks on her face.

“The ton is abuzz with scandals that aren’t true, and the women always end up ruined,” Letty points out.

“And the only reasons we can come up with *are* true,” I murmur.

“I’m certain that no one will think twice about a kiss with a man who is not here to say anything,” Mary says.

Letty raises an eyebrow and gives me a look that I think means she’s worked out that I’m talking about far more than a kiss. And that even the hint of what passed between Henry and I could cause a very great scandal which will mean that no one will ever consider marrying me.

“And Mr Stoaly is aware of what occurred?” she asks, intrigued.

I nod.

“I beg of you to tell me that you didn’t confide it in him,” she says.

“Are you asking because you’re potentially upset that I didn’t tell you first, or because it would be idiocy on my part?” I ask.

“The latter. Though I reserve the right to change my mind once I’ve heard your reasoning.” She checks around us to make sure that no one is listening in. Which is certainly for the best.

“He knows because he grew up in the same town as we did. Henry and Mr Stoaly went to school together.”

Understanding dawns on Letty’s face. “It is not you who confided in him, it’s Henry?”

“Of sorts. Mr Stoaly would aid us when we wished to speak in private.”

Mary let out a small gasp. “Georgiana, you shouldn’t have. Speaking in private with a gentleman is enough to ruin you.”

“Because you’ve never found yourself in that situation at one of your meetings,” Letty says to her.

“Only to discuss books.”

“Perhaps Georgiana and Henry were simply discussing books.” Her tone says that she knows that’s not the case, but I appreciate her defending me, especially after how I was when she was sneaking into retiring rooms with Lord Cygnus.

“It is still a risky game,” Mary warns. “Oh, there is Lady Batloam, I must speak with her.” She drifts off before either of us can say anything.

“She doesn’t know what she’s saying,” Letty says to me.

I sigh. “I know.”

“But really, Georgiana? Just what did you do?”

“Everything you claimed you didn’t.”

“Because I *didn’t*,” she stresses. “Nothing more than a kiss happened between Lord Cygnus and me until several weeks after our wedding.”

Surprise flits through me. “I didn’t realise.”

“I will admit that I was tempted to do more than that, but I wasn’t willing to risk my reputation. Something you reminded me of on several occasions.”

“Perhaps I was warning you based on past experience,” I murmur. “I did not think we were doing anything wrong. I knew that people would not approve, but we planned to marry, I saw no harm in it.”

“And there still is none if Mr Stoaly is aware and still willing to marry you.”

“The only problem being that we do not wish to marry one another for other reasons.” I close my eyes and resist the urge to scream. How have I gotten myself into this situation? “We don’t love one another, Letty. And we never will. No matter what we do, Henry will always be between us.”

“Perhaps that will fade in time.”

“I don’t believe it will.”

“Perhaps Henry will return.”

“I’m starting to believe that is even less likely,” I admit. “I’ve lain awake at night thinking it over in my head and the only reason I can possibly think of for him not having written to me in two years is that he’s dead. And even if he is not, why hasn’t he written to me? I can understand one letter going astray, but every letter for two years when he promised me that he would write.” My voice cracks and it almost becomes a strangled sob.

“Use your fan,” Letty says softly, snapping her own open and using it to shield me from view of the others surrounding us. Thankfully, it is still too early in the evening for my dance card to be full, which means that I’m not required on the dance floor until someone specifically asks.

I know it’s only a matter of time, but at least being betrothed offers me some modicum of reprieve from the situation.

“I know that there is nothing that I may do in this moment, but if there is anything I can do to improve your situation, you will tell me, won’t you, Georgiana?” she asks, with a serious look on her face that I haven’t often associated with Letty in the past.

“Thank you, I appreciate it. You’re a dear friend.”

“I hope to be,” she responds. “And I will do anything to help you. As will Lord Cygnus, though I promise I won’t tell him any more than he needs to know.”

I smile in gratitude.

“But now I believe your reprieve is over and you’re being sought after for a dance.”

“It’s almost enough to make me wish I was married already so we could spend the entire ball speaking with one

another,” I mutter.

She lets out a light laugh. “You’ll only be saying that for as long as you can dance. Sitting on the side while the unattached ladies dance the night away is tediously dull. How I wish I could join you on the floor.” She sighs wistfully. I know my friend is happily married, but it’s clear that she misses some parts of these events that she can no longer take part in.

A gentleman approaches and I make sure to put my serene smile into place. No matter what happens now, I have to at least appear as if I am enjoying his company, even if the entire time I’m thinking about how much I’d rather be in the embrace of a ghost.

## TWO



### HENRY

I STARE at the cottage in front of me, trying to reconcile the idea of it being my new home through my mind.

“Ah, Captain Stone, you’re here.”

I turn around to find Lord Ferrington striding towards me. His tall and powerful form makes me think of the stag I know he can shift into, which often makes me wonder about whether I have any features that make me appear particularly otter-like to other members of shifter society.

“My Lord,” I say, bowing my head.

“Ah, they’ll be none of that now,” he says. “I know it’s necessary when others are around, but when it’s just us, I believe it is unnecessary. War makes equals of us all, particularly when you saved my life in France.”

I force a smile to my face and try my best not to recall the incident. When I left England, I had foolish notions of what it was going to be like to serve in the army, and of what I would return to.



All of them fell away one by one as friends lay dying and I saw nature destroyed. And that's without the heartbreak of knowing that Georgiana has forgotten me. Or I assume that she must have given the lack of letters.

At first, I thought that the letters may have gotten lost. Or perhaps that she was being stopped from sending them. But after a year went by, I started to believe that she had not sent one in the first place. Even my pleas for an explanation in the letters of my own were not enough to elicit a response from her.

I push the thoughts from my mind. I've returned now, discharged and no longer needed to fight for King and country. I could start my life over. I had to, considering that there is nothing left of my old one. I went to prove my worth and came back knowing that it was all for nought.

"So, what do you think?" Lord Ferrington asks, gesturing to the cottage. "I know that it is not much, but it is what has become vacant on our lands. If you wish for something else, then I can arrange that."

"It is perfect," I respond. "Are you certain that I may use it?"

"Of course. You are planning on accepting my offer to become my business manager, are you not?"

"I am." Mostly because it is the best offer I could imagine getting after my time in the army. It's certainly a higher position than I could have hoped for, with a stable income and somewhere to live. And having served under Lord Ferrington already, I'm aware of what a fair and just man he is.

"Excellent, then I should show you around. I believe my wife is preparing a basket of bread and cheese to get you

started, but if you wish to take your meals at the main house, let the cook know and she can prepare an extra setting for the servant's dinner."

"Thank you, that is most kind." I'm not certain whether I plan on taking him up on the offer or not, but it is good to know that it is there should I want to.

"I am also under instruction from my wife to invite you to attend her ball on Thursday."

"I don't believe I am of much social importance."

"You're a Captain," he points out. "That grants you the social status. And even should it not, it is my wife's ball and she can invite anyone it pleases her to."

"That is a rather forward way of approaching things."

"I don't believe in stifling my wife's enjoyment in life. If I remember correctly, you spoke of a girl that you wished to marry once you returned. Have you sent for her?"

"I have not."

"Then you should. It would be a joyous thing to have another wedding here."

"I don't believe it's a good idea," I respond, thinking of all that is hanging between Georgiana and me. She hasn't cared enough to write, and I care too much for that not to hurt.

"Ah, I suppose a lot of time has passed. Then you must come to the ball, there will be many young ladies of impeccable charm and wit there. Perhaps you might lose your heart to one of them."

"I have my doubts."

“Now, come here, Captain Stone, I’m sure that is not true. There are many lovely ladies around this time of year. But perhaps marriage has made a romantic of me.” He smiles to himself.

It certainly seems as if life back in England has agreed with Lord Ferrington, and he seems much more jovial than he ever did on the front. Which I suppose is to be expected, but from what I’ve seen of many other returning soldiers, not everyone comes back with the same zeal for life as he seemingly has.

I know I certainly feel more jaded than before.

“Anyhow, I’ll allow you to settle in,” he says, clapping me on the back. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you, Lord Ferrington.”

He disappears back in the direction he came from, leaving me to make my way to the cottage. I push open the front door and step inside, only half surprised to find that there’s a fire roaring in the grate and food waiting on the table.

Lord Ferrington is certainly making good on the promise he made me in France, and I’m glad for it. Even if I’ve lost the reason I went in the first place, at least I’ve come back to something I didn’t have before.

Though this is a hollow replacement for what I thought I’d have with Georgiana. I scan the room, trying my best not to imagine her in it. This was a far cry from the world she was used to living in, but I knew her well enough to be sure that she would adapt well.

Or maybe that’s part of it. Perhaps I don’t know her at all and that’s why she hasn’t written to me. My thoughts stray to

all the times we'd spent together. When we'd played as otters, or snuck away to the hidden cave we thought of as our own.

And when we'd danced. Oh, how it felt to have her in my arms.

I shake my head, chasing the memories away. What use did they have for me now? I needed to move on with my life, and that involved moving on from the love I once thought I shared with her. There was no future with her, which meant that I had to forge one for myself, no matter how much my heart still wanted her.

# THREE



## GEORGIANA

THE BALL IS in full swing when I arrive, but I can't find it in myself to fully enjoy the music or the dancing. It's been like this since last Season when my parents forced me to come despite the fact I didn't want to. At least I made the best of friends out of it. Without their insistence on presenting me and having me join the parade of young ladies who are part of the marriage market, I wouldn't have met Letty and Mary, and that's something that I can not regret, no matter how hard I try.

Frederick smiles at me from across the room and approaches just like I know he would. He always suggests that we partake in the third dance together and it's sort of become a sort of tradition for us.

"Miss Rocke," he says, bowing deeply to me. "Would you do me the honour of escorting me to the dance floor?"

"Of course." Partly because he's the only person I can't refuse. To everyone else, I can use the excuse that we're betrothed to get out of dancing, though I naturally don't do that.

He leads me into position.

“I saw you danced with Miss Mothal earlier,” I say. “Have you found another lady to occupy your attention?”

“If I didn’t know you better, I’d say that you were jealous.”

I let out a light laugh. “You mean if you weren’t already aware that I’m in love with someone else?”

“Yes. That knowledge does go a long way to me understanding precisely how you feel about me.”

“You’re a good friend, Frederick.”

“As are you to me.”

“And perhaps to your future mistress should we end up having to go through with our wedding.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You wish to befriend my non-existent mistress?”

“It seems like the easiest way to ensure that there are no hurt feelings. Communication seems to be the key to these things.”

“You are merely saying that because you are hurt over the fact Henry hasn’t written,” he responds.

“I should not have told you that.”

“You did not need to. You are clear in your feelings, even if you do not mean to be.”

“Then I should work on that. I do not wish the entire ton to know my secrets, there are already too many people who are aware of them for my liking.”

“Perhaps you should make some new ones, they might be easier to keep quiet.”

“And just what are you suggesting?” I ask.

He shrugs. "In all honesty, I had not thought that part through. If you have any ideas, I'd be honoured to help you with them."

The dancers before us come to a stop, signalling that it's our turn to move through the steps of the dance, effectively ending our conversation, which is probably for the best.

I skip through the steps, admittedly glad that Frederick is a good dancer. My parents could have chosen a worse husband for me, which is something I'm aware of.

But I still can't bring myself to be happy for it.

We come to a stop at the end of the line and begin the wait for our next turn.

"Father has said that your parents are starting to pressure him about a wedding date," Frederick says.

"What?" The question slips out more bluntly than I mean it to. "I'm sorry, I mean..."

"I know what you mean."

"I thought they were all content with a long engagement. That is what we asked for."

"I know it is. The only way we're going to find a way out of this is if we have time."

"Why did you even say yes?" I ask.

He let out a frustrated laugh. "Do you think that I had any more of a choice than you did? The viscounty needs money, and you come with more than enough."

"Oh."

"When Father laid it all out on the table, there just wasn't any way I could refuse without revealing what I knew about

you, so I kept quiet. After that, there was no getting around it.”

“I’m sorry for getting you in that position in the first place.”

“You have nothing to apologise for.”

“Henry does though,” I mutter.

Frederick snorts in amusement. “Perhaps he does, yes.”

We lapse into silence, barely saying anything as we move through the rest of the dance, though I have to admit I barely notice. It’s hard to when my thoughts are occupied by someone who isn’t even with us.

Everything always seems to bring me back to Henry no matter what I try to do.

The band ceases the music and I dip into a curtsy to Frederick. “Thank you for the dance.”

“You’re welcome, Georgiana. I’ll see what I can do about avoiding the suggestions for a wedding date.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

“Believe me when I say that it is not just for you.”

“Ah, so Miss Mothal did catch your eye.”

“She did not, but that doesn’t mean that I do not wish to find someone who is suited well to me.”

“I can understand wishing for that,” I assure him.

“I will see you anon.” He dips his head and disappears in the direction of the gaming rooms.

I search for my friends amongst the assembled faces, surprised to find Mary still here. I hurry over to her and smile.



“Do you not wish to be at some meeting or other?” I ask her.

“Lady Batloam has fallen ill,” she says by way of reply.

“Right.” It’s an explanation of sorts.

“You and Mr Stoaly looked like you were getting along well on the dance floor,” she says.

“We are friends, of sorts.”

“What precisely does that mean?” Mary asks.

“I suppose it is more that we are allies. We both want the same thing, but are plagued with the nuisance that is parents.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she mutters.

“Oh, Mary, I’m sorry, I should have thought before I said anything.”

“It is fine, I’m used to it.” She smiles reassuringly at me. “It gets easier the more time passes.”

“Still, I should have thought before I said anything.”

“You can not ignore your problems simply because my parents are no longer with us,” she points out.

I sigh. “I wish they’d listen to me.”

“Did you ever tell them that you wished to marry Henry?” Mary asks.

I shake my head. “I was planning to before he said he was enlisting in the army.”

“What if they had forbidden it?”

“Then I would have made my way to Gretna Green.”

Mary gasps. “You wouldn’t have?”

“I would. I loved him. Well, I love him. He may not even be alive any more, but I love him still.” I look out across the dance floor, my heart stopping when I notice a dark-haired figure standing in the entrance to the ballroom.

I blink a few times, at first wondering whether I’ve conjured his image with thoughts of him, and then wondering if I’m somehow seeing his ghost. I know it is in theory possible, but not everyone can see them.

But he remains standing there.

“Georgiana, are you all right?” Mary asks, but I can barely think straight, never mind formulate a response to her.

“That’s him, isn’t it?” Letty asks, sounding a little out of breath as if she’d come rushing across the room just to be with me when she realised what was happening.

I’m certain that tomorrow I will be grateful for my friends and their insistence on caring for me, but right now there’s only one thought on my mind.

I stare straight at Henry, and when his gaze shifts in my direction, I know he’s seen me. I can feel it deep within me.

And something snaps inside. I take a shaky breath and turn on my heels, fleeing from the ballroom towards the gardens outside. I need fresh air and I have to be away.

A small part of me still wonders if he is some apparition conjured by my imagination and the longing for him to return.

But I know that’s true. He was as real as he could be.

More than that, he’s here.

And I don’t know how I feel about that. Or what I had to do in order to survive the storm that is sure to come.

# FOUR



## HENRY

THE MOMENT I lock eyes with Georgiana, her face goes pale, as if she's seen a ghost.

More like she's seen someone she doesn't want to. Perhaps because she just spent her last dance in the arms of a man who I thought was my friend.

She turns, ignoring the ladies next to her and hurries towards the doors that lead to the gardens.

Without thinking about it, I follow. I don't know whether she wants me to or not, but I have the burning need to speak with her that can't be ignored. I need to know why she hasn't written to me in all these years.

The heat of the ballroom gives way to the cool breeze outside. Thankfully, very few people seem to have thought to come out here, so we have the place to ourselves.

I catch up with Georgiana just as she turns around. Up close, I can see just how little she's changed in the two years I've been away. She's as beautiful as the woman in my mind, potentially even more so.

“You’re back,” she says, her tone difficult to decipher.

“I returned a few days ago,” I respond. “Lord Ferrington was kind enough to extend an invitation to the ball tonight.” So I could see her, though from the expression on her face, she doesn’t want to hear that.

“I wasn’t aware you knew one another.”

“He was my superior officer.”

“And so you’ve gone up in the world,” she says with a hint of bitterness in her voice. “That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“Among other things,” I admit.

“Was it worth it, then?” she asks. “Going to war.”

“I know what you’re asking,” I respond. “I suppose that depends on what I’ve come back to.”

Georgiana lets out a bitter laugh that I’ve never heard from her before. “Less than you left with.”

“Frederick...” I trail off, not knowing what to say about it.

“What about him?”

“You were dancing together.”

“I dance with a lot of gentlemen. It’s a ball, that’s what people do.”

“But Frederick...”

“Jealousy doesn’t suit you,” she says. “We’re betrothed.”

Pain lances through me. “Betrothed?” I echo.

“To be married.”

“I know what it means, I am simply struggling to see how something like this could have occurred.”

“Are you?” she spit out, anger growing in her voice. “You left two years ago.”

“So what? You forgot that I existed?” I demand, my voice louder than it should be given where we are. Thankfully, no one seems to be paying us any attention.

“Forgot?” She scoffs, disbelief written all over her face. “I wrote to you every month without fail.”

“You did?” Shock fills me.

“I said that I would, do you really know me so little that you didn’t realise that I’d keep my word?”

“I didn’t get them,” I murmur, trying to reconcile the idea that she’s been writing to me this entire time with the experience that I’ve had.

“And I don’t understand how you can be angry about that when you didn’t write to me either,” she says, the set of her mouth hardening.

“I did,” I promise. “I wrote to you, Georgiana.”

“Miss Rocke,” she says through gritted teeth.

My heart constricts at the correction.

“I spent the best part of two years hoping that I was wrong and that your letters were just lost, but they never showed up. Not a single one.”

“I wrote,” I promise.

She lets out a loud sigh. “Maybe so. But it’s too late, Henry.”

Hearing my name on her lips makes it so much worse. “Because you’re engaged to my best friend.”

“What other choice did I have? My parents were insisting on a betrothal and when Frederick’s father approached mine, there was no way of getting out to fit without revealing things that would ruin me. Besides, I hadn’t heard from you. For all I knew, you were dead.” Her voice cracks and it looks as if she’s about to cry.

Without thinking about it, I reach out to try and console her.

She bats my arm away. “Don’t touch me.”

“Geo-Miss Rocke, please listen to reason.”

She sighs and turns to face me. “There is no reason, Captain Stone. We must both deal with the hand that we have been given. There is no turning back time to change things.”

“So you’re just going to marry my best friend?”

“You claim that’s what he is, but he’s also not heard from you in two years,” she points out. “You did this to us, Captain Stone. You could have come back. Are you truly telling me that you haven’t had a single moment of leave in the past two years during which you could come back? If you had done that, then maybe we would have been able to avoid this situation. *You* are the one who decided to go off to war. I didn’t ask you to do that, I was perfectly content with the way things were and would have married you the moment you asked. This situation is entirely of your own making.”

I stare at her, unable to fully reconcile the words coming from her with the way I feel. Regret, anger, and pain all war inside me while I try to make sense of what to feel.

And no matter what I think, she is betrothed to a man I once considered my closest confidant.

Footsteps sound from behind us, and there's a brief moment of panic as I consider that we might be caught.

"Miss Rocke," an unfamiliar voice says. "I believe they're about to start the next dance and Lord Angus is waiting for you."

"Thank you, Lady Cygnus," she responds. Georgiana looks at me with a sad smile on her face. "This is the way it has to be." She turns and walks away with the other women.

"Georgiana..." I trail off, not knowing what I want to say.

The way she looks at me with pain in my eyes tells me all I need to know.

Nothing I say is going to convince her that there is anything more between us than history. I came back from war too late. Even if I never intended for her to feel as if I forgot about her, my letters didn't arrive, and she believed that there was nothing left.

But none of that justified what she's done. She shouldn't be engaged to my best friend. Surely there were better options for her than that.

Anger stirs up within me, and I hate how much it consumes me. I went away to war for her, to make my name and bring back the money I needed in order to make our marriage possible. The fact that very same thing has completely ruined any chance we had of a life together doesn't escape my notice.

And now I have to learn how to live with that.

# FIVE



## GEORGIANA

I SMILE at the maid who shows me to Letty's parlour, glad that I'll have a safe space in which I can talk to my friends.

"Lady Cygnus," I say to Letty as I enter, dipping my head while there's a servant around. I know that Lord Cygnus' mother is slowly warming to my friend, and I do not wish to set her back by having reports made that her friends aren't giving her the respect she deserves as a future countess.

"Miss Rocke, you're just in time for tea," she says. "Thank you, Eliza, that will be all. I'll call should I need anything."

"Of course, My Lady." The maid dips into a curtsy and leaves the room.

"Does that ever get old?" Mary asks.

"It got old on the first day. There are far more servants here than at home and sometimes it's just impossible to avoid them. Philip assures me that I'll get used to it, but that hasn't happened yet."

"At least we know that there are some faults in newly wedded bliss," I quip.



“It is still worth it,” Letty responds. “I highly recommend marrying for love.”

“If I recall correctly, you were annoyed that you were required to get married.”

“Yes, but that’s because I didn’t believe I was in love.”

“We did try to tell you,” I say.

“Speaking of love, what happened at the ball the other night?” Mary asks. “You didn’t say a word after you returned from the gardens.”

I let out a loud sigh and accept a teacup from Letty. I knew this was coming, especially when Letty came to aid me in my escape.

“Philip said that was your Captain,” she says softly.

“How would he know that?” I ask.

“He didn’t in so many words, but he gave me enough information that I was able to put the rest together. Had he not, I’m reasonably certain your reaction would have told us as much.”

“You are lucky that Frederick wasn’t in the room or there might have been a duel for your honour,” Mary says.

“I don’t think there’s much honour left,” I murmur.

“Nonsense,” Letty chides me. “Besides, didn’t you say that they were friends?”

I nod. “But Frederick has not heard from him in the same amount of time as I have.”

“Did Captain Stone provide an explanation for that?” Letty asks.

“He says that he wrote to me, but he also said that he didn’t get my letters. I wrote him a letter for every month that he was gone. How have all twenty-three of them gone astray?”

Letty frowns.

“You say that he sent you letters too?” Mary asks.

I nod. “That’s what he claimed.”

“Then it is not twenty-three letters that have gone astray, but forty-six.”

“That doesn’t seem right.” Letty takes a sip of her tea.

“It doesn’t,” Mary responds. “Could something have happened to them on purpose?”

“Are you suggesting that the British army stole our letters?”

“I’m doing no such thing,” Mary says. “But that doesn’t mean that someone hasn’t been.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “If that’s the case, then what am I supposed to do? It doesn’t change the hurt in thinking that he forgot me.”

“You could speak to him about it,” Mary says. “If the two of you can do that, then perhaps you will be able to move past whatever it is you feel.”

“Maybe. But none of that changes the fact that I am betrothed to someone else, and that our parents are in the midst of picking out a wedding date.”

“I can see how that might be a problem,” Letty says. “Is there a way you can postpone it?”

“Mr Stoaly is trying, but I fear that we’re only going to get so far. There’s just nothing that can be done about it. I’ve

thought all this time that Henry returning would solve all of my problems, but now he's back, it only seems to have created new ones." Not least of which is the fact that he seems to have convinced himself that I didn't write to him even though I know I did.

I didn't tell him everything I needed to in the letters, but I certainly sent them.

I set my teacup down. "Can we speak of something else?" If we continue down this path, then I suspect there may very well be tears in my future, and while I know that my friends won't make me feel bad for it, I don't wish to be an imposition.

"Is there any news on when you might have a child with Lord Cygnus?" Mary asks Letty.

She almost chokes on her tea. "It's not in our immediate plans."

"Sometimes these things just happen," Mary says.

"There are things you can do to lessen the chances, though," I say without thinking, drawing a knowing smile from Letty and a confused expression from Mary. "So I've heard," I murmur.

Letty lets out a bemused laugh. "I think most of the ladies in London have heard of ways to prevent children before they're ready."

"I haven't," Mary responds. "Perhaps I should ask about that at the next meeting."

My eyes widen. "I wouldn't."

"Whyever not?"

"It isn't a proper topic of conversation," I point out.

“We’re speaking of it now.”

“Yes, because we’re in the privacy of Letty’s drawing room without any servants in the room. It’s not something to be talked about in front of others,” I say.

“Then how am I supposed to learn about things?”

I exchange a glance with Letty, unsure precisely what I should be saying.

“Do you have reason to avoid becoming with child right now?” Letty asks.

“Well, no, I suppose not. Though I’m not entirely clear on precisely how such an event occurs in the first place.”

How are we having this conversation? I thought that Mary was the most well-informed of all of us because of her reading and her penchant for sneaking off to her meetings to discuss radical subjects with gentlemen and ladies alike, but it seems that isn’t the case.

“It’s a very natural occurrence,” Letty says.

“Then how am I supposed to know how to avoid it?”

“Mary, believe me, you’ll know when you’re doing it,” I say firmly. “It’s not something you’re going to end up doing by accident.”

She frowns.

Letty smothers a laugh and I shoot her a disapproving laugh. It’s none of our fault that we don’t have the words to explain this, even to one another. Especially when I’m not even supposed to know what we’re talking about, much like poor innocent Mary.

“I’m sure that you’ve heard whispers on the subject,” Letty says. “About members of the ton who are caught in a compromising position.”

“I did hear a rumour about Lady Lamprey being caught with her husband’s valet’s hand up her skirts,” Mary responds.

“See, that’s not something that’s going to happen to you by accident,” I point out.

“Hmm, that is true. But I am still going to see what I can read on the subject. You never know when the information may prove to be useful.”

“That’s fair,” I agree.

Relief washes over Letty’s face, and I don’t blame her. This isn’t the kind of topic we’re used to discussing.

“So, when you say that things with you and Henry were serious before he left, do you mean that you were caught doing something you weren’t supposed to?” Mary asks me.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I thought I’d gotten away with it.

“We were never caught,” I say firmly. “Or not that I’m aware of.”

“Considering you’ve never been forced down the aisle, I would suspect that’s true,” Letty says.

“Probably. There are a lot of ways to get away with sneaking around when you’re small in shifted form,” I admit. “If I needed to sneak out of my room, I could just turn into my otter form and run out of the window.”

Mary frowns. “Wouldn’t you be naked wherever you turned back into a human?”

“Yes.”

“Was that not a problem?”

“Not for what they were doing,” Letty quips.

I shake my head. “Henry would have a dress waiting for me.”

“That’s so improper.” From the way she says it, I almost suspect that she’s intrigued rather than horrified.

“I am not denying that, we were being reckless,” I admit.

“But you love him,” she says.

I nod. “And it really didn’t matter to me. I was ready to marry Henry. If someone had caught us, then nothing would have changed in how I felt. I would have run to the nearest church with him the moment it happened.”

“You have to admit that’s rather romantic,” Letty says.

“It does sound it,” Mary agrees.

“If only it had a happier ending,” I say wistfully. “Marrying another man doesn’t exactly seem like the thing that romances are made of.”

“Would you marry Henry now, if you could?” Letty asks.

“I don’t know if that’s still what he wants.”

“That isn’t a no,” she points out.

“It’s not.” Because I don’t think there could ever be a world in which I wouldn’t want to marry him. No matter what has happened since, he is the love of my life, and I don’t think anything is going to change that, even if there’s a part of me that wishes there could be.

# SIX



## GEORGIANA

A LOUD SHOUT comes from the playing field and despite the fact that I'm still lost in everything that's going around my head since Henry's reappearance, I can't help the smile that comes to my face. I'm not sure what game is being played, but the people partaking in it seem to be having a good time.

I pick up my teacup and take a sip, freezing in place when I notice a familiar figure heading towards me.

I glance over my shoulder to make sure Mother isn't paying me the attention she's supposed to as my chaperone. I have no idea how she may react should she see Henry. I'm not even sure that she knows him at all, but if she does, then I can not imagine she would take it well that I was speaking with him, especially when there are so many people around.

"Do you want me to go?" Letty whispers.

I shake my head. "I need a chaperone."

"From what you've told me, it's a little late for that as far as the two of you are concerned."

“In the past. This is different.” Especially as I have Frederick to take into consideration. It isn’t his feelings I’m worried for, he’s well aware of how I feel towards Henry, but that doesn’t change the fact that his reputation is on the line as well as mine should I slip up.

“Miss Rocke,” Henry says, bowing low to me.

“Captain Stone,” I respond, my voice wavering as I say his name. “This is my friend, Lady Cygnus.”

“A pleasure, Captain,” she responds.

“Lady Cygnus.” He dips his head in her direction before returning his attention towards me. “I was wondering if you would do me the honour of taking a turn around the park with me?”

“Do you think that’s wise?” I ask, shocking myself with the bluntness of my tone.

“I wish to clear the air between us.”

I chew on my bottom lip. I would like that. Even if there is no way of getting back what we lost, I don’t want there to be any bad feelings between us.

“I have been considering a walk around the park myself,” Letty says. “Perhaps I should get Lord Cygnus to accompany me and act as a chaperone for you?” The way she looks at me makes it clear that she believes I should do this.

“Very well.” I rise to my feet, checking that Mother is still preoccupied and grateful to find that she is. I doubt she would find Letty to be a suitable chaperone, but that isn’t exactly something she can argue with if she doesn’t know about it.

Letty waves Lord Cygnus over.



“Is everything all right, my dear?” he asks, concern for his wife clear in his voice.

“Our escorting services are required,” she says.

“Ah, indeed. Miss Rocke, a pleasure as always.”

“Likewise, Lord Cygnus.” I nod to him.

“Captain Stone,” he says.

“Lord Cygnus,” Henry responds in a serious tone. “Are you ready, Miss Rocke?” He holds out his arm to me.

For a single moment, I question whether this is wise, but the idea of spending time with Henry is appealing regardless of how much it hurts.

I slip my arm through his and rest it on the sleeve of his jacket, instantly noting the warmth radiating from him. It feels so different compared to when I’m in this position with Frederick.

Letty and Lord Cygnus fall into step behind us, but I won’t be surprised if they keep falling further and further behind as we walk, not even because Letty will wish to give me space, but because the two of them will wish for it.

“I wish to apologise,” Henry says once we are a few feet away from anyone else.

“I don’t believe that you have anything to apologise for.”

“I do. I was angry at you at Lord Ferrington’s ball.”

“As you had every right to be. Things are not as we left them, Henry.” I slip back into using his first name without even meaning to.

A small smile tugs at the corners of his lips, my usage doesn’t seem to have gone unnoticed by him.

“I appreciate the apology, even if I think it is unnecessary,” I say.

He nods. “I am sorry that I did not return sooner.”

“I assume that it is because you could not?”

“As opposed to?”

“I’ve considered many options over the years,” I admit. “I thought that you might have abandoned me in favour of a beautiful French duchess.”

“I could never.”

“But you can see why I might think that? I didn’t get a single letter from you the entire time.”

“I wrote to you every month.” The earnestness in his voice would make me believe him even if the knowledge of his character hadn’t already.

“Whether or not you wrote to me, the letters didn’t arrive,” I point out.

“Nor did yours.”

“Which begs the question of what happened to them.”

“Perhaps we’ll never know.”

“Maybe not. But we have to accept that whether we like it or not, that has affected our trust in one another. We both believe that the other no longer wished to be part of our courtship,” I say. “It hurt, Henry. I have never known pain like that.”

“I am...”

“Don’t. Just don’t. I understand that you didn’t do it on purpose, it just all seems so unnecessary. I would have married you two years ago.”

“And would you marry me now?”

“I *can't* marry you now. I'm betrothed to Frederick.”

“Ah.” He looks away. “I don't understand how that happened.”

“Can't you? I warned you when I went that my parents wouldn't allow me to sit out more than one Season, and this is the third since you left. Did you really think that they wouldn't try to secure me a match?”

“But Frederick?”

“It wasn't either of our doing,” I assure him. “We actually had nothing to do with it. His father and my parents arranged it between them. By the time we realised it was happening, there was nothing we could do except for try to prolong the engagement for as long as we possibly could and try to find a way out of it.”

“But you haven't yet.”

“The engagement has only been for six months,” I say. “And we've already managed to get longer delays on the wedding three times, but my parents are insisting this time. There's only one way the two of us can think of getting out of it, and that will end up with me ruined and potentially disinherited. And Frederick isn't likely to get out of that one unscathed either considering he knew what we were doing the entire time.”

With him this close to me, it's virtually impossible to stop the memories of our moments alone from assailing me. Every tender touch and whispered word feels like it rushes into me at once, creating a connection with the man beside me that I can't ever have with anyone else.

That I don't want to have with anyone else.

“I know that it is a hard situation, but you must know that all that lies between me and Frederick is friendship and our memories of you. Have you not talked to him since you returned?”

“No.”

“Henry!”

“Yes, Georgiana?” he asks, looking straight at me. I think he’s testing me and whether I’m going to allow him to use my forename.

I know that I shouldn’t allow it, but I like the way it sounds far too much. “You have to talk to him, the two of you have shared too much to end things this way. He’s missed you too.”

“Shared so much that we might end up sharing more than I ever wished to.”

I let out a loud sigh. “There is nothing I can tell you that will take away the sting of betrayal. I know that you don’t like this, but it’s not as if we had another choice, and Frederick has been doing everything he can to fix it. He has never stopped being your friend.” *Just as I have never stopped loving you.* I can’t say the words out loud, there’s too much at stake if I do. It admits too much and will only complicate things further.

“You are right. I know I shouldn’t let jealousy rule me, but it’s hard. I believed for so long that I was going to return here and be able to make you my wife.”

“I believed that too,” I say softly. “And I hoped for it for so long, even after your letters didn’t arrive. I thought that you would turn up and there would be an explanation. But then three months turned into six months, into a year, and into two. I waited, Henry, and I would have waited longer had the

circumstances allowed. But the whole reason you went to war in the first place is that you didn't believe my parents would accept you as my husband. Which means that there must be a part of you that realises they have more of a say in this than I do."

He lets out a loud sigh. "I know that."

"But?"

"It's hard to know it in my heart."

I let out a sad laugh. "I know that feeling." I glance over my shoulder and see Letty talking with her husband and looking sickeningly in love. "Why did you come back now?" I ask.

"I was discharged," he responds.

"Ah."

"And Lord Ferrington offered me a job."

"I didn't realise you knew him."

"He was my superior officer, and he claims that I saved his life."

"What happened?"

"I'd rather not speak of it," he responds. "If I am to accept that you can't be my wife, then I want to savour every moment I can with you until then, which means no speak of war."

"All right, if that's what you wish."

"Do you know what I would love right now?" he asks.

"What?"

"One of the swims we used to do as a romp."

I let out a small laugh, recalling the days that all of the otter shifters from around our town would take to the water at once. Some would create a raft and laze around in the water, while others would play. “Do you think they ever noticed when we swam off to that cave?”

He chuckles, a warm and inviting sound that I wish to hear more of. “I suspect not or we would have gotten ourselves into a lot of trouble.”

“Especially if they figured out what we were doing in the cave.”

“It was worth it, though,” he says.

“Yes, it was.” I lapse into silence, unsure precisely what I should say to him now. It’s a difficult position to be in. This is the person in this world who knows me the most intimately, and I find myself at a loss for how to act and what to do.

Because I don’t believe that I can spend the rest of my life looking at him from across a crowded room, knowing that I can’t share a single moment with him without causing myself immeasurable pain.

# SEVEN



## GEORGIANA

I SLIP my hand into my pocket and run my fingers over the pebbles inside. I should really give Henry's back to him considering he asked me to safeguard it, but finding the right moment is important, and I can't do it in a room full of other people.

I head over to the drinks table and pick up a glass of lemonade, hoping that it's better than the one served by Lady Greyling. I suspect it will be, the Renartons are known for their taste.

I take a drink, pleased to discover that I'm right in my assessment and that it's delightfully drinkable.

"Miss Rocke."

My heart skips a beat at the sound of Henry's voice and I turn around to face him. "Captain Stone," I say with a slight quiver in my voice. I set down my empty glass.

"Would you care for this dance?" he asks, holding out his hand.

"Do you think that's wise?"

“You once told me that it was rude for a lady to refuse a dance.”

“Except if she’s betrothed. I can refuse then.” Not that I want to.

“I understand.” He starts to step back but I reach out and stop him.

“But I won’t.”

“Are you certain?”

“Shouldn’t you have thought about that when you asked me to dance in the first place?” I tilt my head to the side and wait for him to respond.

“I believe you have bested me in that.” He holds out his hand again and I slip mine into it.

Even through the fabric of our gloves, I can feel the heat of his touch and I long for more of it.

He leads me onto the dance floor while my heart pounds and I start to reconsider whether or not this was a good idea. All I can think about is what it would feel like if he touched me properly, the way that he used to when we were alone.

I take a shaky breath.

“Are you all right?” Henry asks.

“It’s warm in here.” But not because of the actual heat.

The music begins to play and he bows deeply to him.

I curtsy in return, our eyes meeting and the intensity between us only rising. We move into the first position, and I move past him, our bodies not even touching, but close enough that it makes my throat constrict.



This is a terrible idea, and a perfect one at the same time. I should have stayed far away from Henry Stone until I was certain that my feelings, and desires, were under control.

We come within an inch of one another and I can almost swear that I can feel his heart pounding as strongly as mine.

If I had any sense, I would pretend to fall so that I could vacate the dance floor without making it seem as if I was slighting my partner. The last thing I want to do is make Henry look undesirable to the eligible young ladies in the room.

Or perhaps that's precisely what I want.

I push the thought aside. I can not act in such a selfish manner. I will not ruin his prospects for a good marriage over jealousy aimed at a young woman who doesn't even exist.

The dance passes both excruciatingly slowly and faster than I wish it to. The music ends and Henry takes my hand in his, bowing low and kissing it while making eye contact with me.

My breathing hitches and I can't tear my gaze away. In that single moment, I don't care whether anyone notices the way we are looking at one another, nothing matters except this stolen moment.

I clear my throat. "We should get some drinks," I murmur.

He nods and offers me his arm.

I hesitate for a second, wondering whether it is wise for me to touch him again. But the urge becomes too strong, and I slip my arm through his and let him draw me back towards the table.

"I suppose asking you for a second dance would be out of the question," he says.

“It would be considered very improper, especially as I haven’t even danced with Frederick yet tonight.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Do you not dance your first with him?”

I shake my head. “Always the third.”

“Any particular reason?”

“It has become habit. I assume that is when most of his friends are busy. I’ve never given it much thought. We normally make sure to do at least a small walk around the room so people don’t start talking about how we’re never seen together, but I spend most of my time with Lady Cygnus and Miss Falnor, so long as they’re not away tending to their own interests.”

“And what would they be?”

Ah, of course. I met Letty and Mary after he left for war, he doesn’t know the first thing about them.

“Well, up until fairly recently, Lady Cygnus’ interest during these events was Lord Cygnus. They would sneak off to retiring rooms when they thought no one was looking.”

“Now that does sound like an appealing option,” he murmurs.

“And it’s what got them caught and married.”

“They seem reasonably content with their lot,” Henry says.

“Now, they had some early issues where neither of them particularly wished to be wed.”

“Fascinating. And Miss Falnor?”

“She likes to engage in more scholarly pursuits. She mostly uses events such as these to ensure she’s introduced to

the right people to gain access to their salons and libraries,” I say.

“You have chosen interesting friends.”

“The Season will do that.” We reach the drinks table and I pick up a glass of wine, handing it to him before taking one for myself.

“I must admit that this is nothing like I expected it to be,” Henry says.

“Oh?”

“I thought there would be a lot stricter rules for a start.”

“There are many rules, and all of them are strict, but there are plenty of ways to circumvent them if you’re clever enough and have friends to help you not get caught,” I say.

“I believe we have taken advantage of that latter one ourselves.”

“In a town much smaller than this one, and with a lot fewer people around who cared. The butcher didn’t care the time he caught us behind the barn because he was meeting the dairymaid without his wife knowing. That’s not the case here, people will take pleasure in outing your secrets.”

“I will keep that in mind as you instruct me in the ways of the ton,” he responds.

“I will do no such thing. Can you imagine how that will start people talking?”

“Perhaps that is what I intend to do.”

“Then you have less care for my reputation, or for Frederick’s, than I thought you did.”

“I’m sorry, Georgiana, it was merely a jest.”

I nod. "Now we must part ways."

"Another rule of the ton?"

I nod. "Unfortunately so."

"Then I shall obey. Until next time, Georgiana."

"Until next time, Henry," I whisper, already regretting that we have to part.

I'm starting to see the appeal of sneaking around like Letty did.

I tear myself away from the drinks table and find the amused smile of my friend waiting for me.

"I would rather you didn't say what you were thinking," I murmur to Letty.

She lets out a bemused laugh. "You don't know what I was thinking."

"I can take a guess."

"Because you're thinking it too?" There's a twinkle of mischief in her eyes. "By the way, you are no longer allowed to tease me about the retiring rooms. Never mind what I was thinking, your thoughts were written very plainly on your face."

Horror fills me. "You don't think anyone noticed, do you?"

"That depends how closely they were watching you dance."

"Thankfully, no one but you will have been doing that."

"If what you say about Mr Stoaly is in fact true, yes," she says.

“I have no reason to think it is not. He has no interest in marrying me beyond obligation.”

“Let’s hope that is the truth, because it is very clear that your...heart lies in other places.”

“That pause was wholly unnecessary.”

“I believe that it was,” she responds. “But I am glad that you and Captain Stone appear to be back on speaking terms. I doubted it after the end of the argument in the gardens.”

“There is a lot of hurt.”

“Can you forgive him for it?” she asks.

“I don’t know. And whether he can forgive me is just as important.” I glance across the room to where Henry is talking with a man I don’t recognise.

“And what happens if you both can?” Letty asks.

“I do not know.” And that is even more of a problem than my current engagement.

# EIGHT



HENRY

THE SALTY SEA air is a welcome home that I never knew that I needed. Having gone straight from France to London, I hadn't thought to return to the town where I grew up, but when Georgiana's letter about the otter romp's upcoming swim, I knew that it would be worth making the journey, especially if it could mean a chance to see her. I am uncertain whether she is even coming, but even should she not, the chance to swim in the ocean for the first time in years is too good for me to pass up on. I left so many parts of me behind when I joined the army, and I am only now starting to realise precisely how much of a toll that took on me.

I make my way down the winding path that leads to the beach, knowing from past years that it is where the romp will be gathering before we all head into the sea. The otter inside me is itching to break free, but I hold back. It'll be better once everyone arrives.

By the time I reach the beach, there are already fifty people gathered. Some of them I recognise from living around town, but others are from the neighbouring villages and

countryside. It doesn't seem to matter whether they're from common backgrounds or aristocratic ones, every other who wants a chance to play in the sea has turned out.

There's nothing stopping us swimming at any other point in time either, and many of us do, but there's something truly magical about us all coming together like this.

A hand reaches out and taps my arm. I turn around, my eyes going wide as I find Georgiana standing in front of me with hair down in a loose plait and a simple dress.

She reaches out and takes my hand, drawing me behind one of the rocks so no one can see us.

"Are your parents around?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Mother has a headache, which I believe is her way of saying that she doesn't want to go in the sea when it's this cold, and Father got distracted speaking with the Mayor. We're lucky that he is the one who came with me, I'd never have been able to escape Mother." From the expression on her face, I know she's right. "You got my letter this time."

"I did."

"I had Letty send it for me."

I frown. "Letty?"

"Oh, sorry, it's the surroundings, it makes me forget. Lady Cygnus. I wasn't sure exactly what caused our last letters to go astray, but I thought that it was better to be prepared. I gave her the letter when I went to tea last week."

"Your mother lets you go unchaperoned?"

"Only because our carriage takes me right to the door and she's too worried about upsetting the Earl of Swancove. There

are some advantages to having a close friend who will become the Countess of Swancove in the future.”

“I can see that being true.”

She smiles up at me, and it’s only then that I realise how close we’re standing.

“Is it wise for us to be alone like this?” I ask, my voice low and unintentionally inviting.

“Of course not, but I needed a moment alone with you so that I could give you this.” She reaches into the pocket of her dress and holds out a single pebble. Her eyes are wide and the wind plays with a loose tendril of dark hair, reminding me of the day I gave it to her.

“I didn’t realise you still had it.”

“Of course I do. You asked me to care for it, and I did.” She bites her bottom lip in a gesture that makes me want to sweep her up into my arms and kiss her, despite knowing that’s not what I should be doing when we’re surrounded by as many people as we are.

But the rock, and the fact that no one will be looking for us together gives me a false sense of security.

“I carried it with me every day,” she admits softly. “I kept telling myself that each day would be the last one that I carried it, but no matter what happened, I’d keep putting it back in my pocket.”

“Oh, Georgiana...”

“I keep it with mine.” She pulls out a pebble that I recognise as her own. “Do you remember the day we chose them?”

“How can I not?”



“It was when we found the cave.”

I chuckle. “We were barely eight years old.”

She lets out a light laugh. “It was the first time we decided to explore on our own during the swim. No one even noticed that we were gone. It was the day you promised that we’d always be friends.”

“And I stand by that, we’ll always be friends, Georgiana.”

“I can’t just be your friend, Henry,” she whispers. “These past two years have proven that. And the last few weeks...”

I reach out and cup her cheek in my hand, even though I know I shouldn’t. I should back away and not take this any further. We should respect that there is nothing more that can ever happen between us.

“Henry,” she whispers, her voice cracking as she says my name.

“Is that a warning or a plea?”

“I do not know.”

A whistle sounds from above and the otter shifters assembled on the beach start moving towards the relevant changing stations.

Indecision wars on Georgiana’s face, as if a part of her wants to stay here, but the rest wants to go with the others.

“I’ll see you in the water,” I say, making the decision for us before our last shreds of self-control start to slip away. I step away, ready to make my way over to where the men were changing.

“Henry?” she calls.

I turn around to find her holding out my pebble to me. I reach out and take it, lingering longer on the gesture than I have any right to.

She swallows hard and our gazes meet. "I'll see you in the water?"

I nod, not having any words. I don't need to ask her how she's going to find me, I know the answer to that. We've seen one another's otter forms often enough that we're as familiar with them as with our human ones.

Besides, I would know her from a mile away.

I roll my pebble between my fingers, almost in disbelief that she's kept it for so long. And that she's carried it with her the entire time.

Any vestiges of anger over what I perceived as her indifference wash away. How can they linger when she did something like that? She thought of me all the time in keeping the pebble on her, something that I'm never going to be able to disregard.

I hurry over to the men's changing station, noticing that many of the others are already in the water. I find an empty spot and strip off my clothing. I fold it neatly and place it on one of the shelves. I pick my pebble back up and place it on the ground for once I'm shifted.

I call forth my otter form, shrinking in size rapidly. I shake myself, getting all of the stiffness out of my limbs. It has truly been too long since I properly shifted.

I pick up my pebble in one of my clawed hands and place it in the naturally forming pocket under my arm. Knowing that it's been travelling around in the pocket of Georgiana's dress

for the past two years makes it even more special to me, and I don't ever want to lose it.

With everything in place, I bound down to the shore along with a few of the other otters who have still been hanging back on the beach for one reason or another.

The cold sea hits me, but I barely feel it through my perfectly suited fur. I dive in, swimming through the water with practised ease, searching for the one otter I want to spend this time with more than any other.

# NINE



## GEORGIANA

BUBBLES SWIRL around me from where dozens of other otters are doing their thing. Some of the older shifters have already joined hands and formed a raft floating on the surface of the water, while several of the pups seem to be playing an elaborate game of underwater tag.

If I were in my human form, I might smile at the sight. There's something so freeing about being here, probably because very few people would be able to recognise me in this form.

In fact, there's perhaps only one who could, I'm not sure my parents have even seen me shifted enough times for them to be completely sure who I was. Something I've used to my advantage many times before, and I intend to do the same today too. Though I doubt Father is paying enough attention to even realise I'm here.

An otter rushes past me and I recognise the white star mark on his chest. I use my back legs to propel me forward until I'm alongside him and nudge into his side with my nose.

Henry stops and turns in the water.

I gesture with my head to get him to follow me, though I suspect he'll be able to guess where we're heading.

We pass several of the other otters, but none of them pay any attention to us, they have no need to. With so much going on, it's virtually impossible for anyone to keep track of what other otters are up to.

I go up to the surface and take a gulp of air before darting back down, with Henry doing the same alongside me. I glance in his direction to see him moving gracefully through the water. He's slightly bigger than I remember, but that could just be my memory playing tricks on me and nothing more than that.

I swerve to the left and duck under the rocks that will bring me up into the cave where we spent a lot of the swims like this. Every time they came around, the two of us would come here and spend a few hours away from prying eyes.

The cave opens up and I swim to the surface of the water but don't get out. Bright sunshine pokes in through the hole up above, giving us the light we need to see without exposing us to anyone.

Henry emerges alongside me and cocks his head to the side, studying me.

I reach into the pocket under my arm and take out my pebble, placing it on the edge of the pool so I don't lose it, then call forth a shift.

My whole body changes in an instant and the slight bite of cold from the sea washes over me, but it's worth it to be able to talk to him properly.

I don't even have to ask Henry to join me. He places his pebble alongside mine and returns to his human form. His dark

hair sticks to his forehead and I reach up to push it away so that it isn't in his eyes.

“We should not be here,” he says.

“You knew where we were coming,” I point out. “You could have swum away.”

A small smile pulls at the edge of his lips. “I did not say that I didn't want to be here, only that we shouldn't have come. Certainly not alone, without a chaperone in sight.”

“And whose fault is that?” I ask, moving closer to him in the water. I search for the ledge that I know is there and place my feet on it so I can save my energy for things that don't involve keeping myself afloat. “We didn't make up the rules of the romp's swim.”

“We merely take advantage of them.” He joins me on the ledge. “Why did you bring me here, Georgiana?”

“You know why,” I whisper.

“I need you to make it clearer,” he responds. “I need to know for certain.”

I reach out and place a hand on his bare chest, it's barely exposed over the water. He's broader than when he left, likely due to the amount of hard work he's done in the past two years.

I lean into him, bringing us so close that I can feel his breath against my lips. A part of me knows that this is a bad idea, but if I spend one more second trying to resist time with Henry, then I dread to think about what will happen. It's much better if we deal with such feelings here in the privacy of our cave rather than in the middle of the dance floor.

“Georgiana,” he whispers, though whether it’s an expression of longing, or a warning, I’m not entirely certain. I do not even know which of them I wish it to be.

“Kiss me,” I respond.

There is no telling him twice. He reaches out and places a hand on the bare skin of my back, drawing me to it as he crushes his lips to mine. Everything that we haven’t said comes through the passion of his kiss. I can tell how much he’s missed me, and how much he wants me to know that. There’s something deep in the kiss. Something that’s been missing in my life ever since he left.

I push myself against him, knowing that there’s no way to stop what will happen next.

And that I do not wish for it to stop.

“We should not do this,” he murmurs against my lips.

“I know.”

“We should stop.”

“We should not.”

“Georgiana...”

“Henry,” I say in response. “Please?” I pull back slightly and look into his eyes.

He lets out a small noise that I’m reasonably certain is some kind of resignation.

“We do not have to if you do not want to.” Though there will be more than a little disappointment if we do not. I did not realise the extent to which I missed him until this moment.

Except that is not entirely true. I realised it, but I was not ready to act on it. Those are two remarkably different things.

He searches my face, probably wishing to work if I am being serious.

“We can not undo this.”

“I know. But if we are going to be forced to be apart, then give me one more day to say goodbye.”

I see the resolve shift within him and he nods. He leans in and brushes his lips over mine almost tenderly, his hands beginning to drift over the planes of my skin, leaving a trail of warmth behind them despite the cold of the water.

I know we should not do this, but my desire for him consumes every part of my body. Nothing has ever felt as right as when I am with Henry, and that is what I want to experience one more time.

Even if this has to be the last.



# TEN



## GEORGIANA

LETTY GLIDES DOWN to the path in the gardens with practised ease, smiling and making small talk with many of the members of the ton she knows as we pass while I lose myself in memories of the week before. I should have known better than to lead Henry to the cave, and I certainly should have known better than to lay with him.

But it had been worth it. Especially if it was a chance to properly say goodbye to one another in a way that we wouldn't have been able to at a society event.

“Georgiana?” Letty asks, touching me gently on my arm.

“My apologies, what were you saying?”

“I was asking whether you were ready to return to our table for sandwiches and cake, but it appears as if you are lost in thought.”

“I was.”

“Perhaps thoughts of a certain otter-shifting gentleman?”

“Whyever would you suggest that?” I ask.

“Perhaps because he is heading towards us.”

My eyes widen and I look in the direction she’s pointing to find that she’s correct, Henry is making his way over in a fine coat of dazzling red.

“Is my dress presentable?” I ask Letty.

She frowns and considers me for a moment. “Of course, but why does that matter?”

“No reason,” I murmur, not caring to elaborate on exactly what it is on my mind.

“I hope you realise that I do not believe that. But I shall be an excellent chaperone and speak with Lady Scalforth over there.” She gestures to where a small group of ladies are speaking with one another.

“You do not have to.”

“Perhaps I have something of great importance to share with her that can not wait.”

I give her a disbelieving look, but she is already on her way to speak to the others, leaving me to wait for the approaching Henry alone.

“Should I be concerned that I have offended Lady Cygnus in some way?” he asks with a sparkle in his eye.

“I believe she is trying to be a good friend by giving us a moment to speak without prying ears.”

“Ah, then I should be grateful to her. I would relish a moment of your time, Georgiana.”

“I believe I have given you more than a moment.”

“And yet you have been avoiding me since last week,” he says.

I fiddle with the end of my parasol. "I assure you that I have not."

"Do you regret it?"

"No."

"That is a rather quick answer."

"Should it not have been?" I ask. "You know that I have never regretted any of our time together." We should not be speaking of this here.

"Nor I."

"Though there is a modicum of guilt over poor Frederick," I admit.

He stiffens ever so slightly. "You said there was nothing between you."

"There is not. But he is still my betrothed. I should speak with him."

"You would tell him of what we did?"

"Not in so many words," I respond. "But do you not think he deserves to know? What if one of the other otters saw something and reported it to the wrong person? We would be the subject of gossip, and Frederick would be caught up in that, as you well know."

He nods curtly. "If that is what you see as the right course of action."

"I do." Even if it is not a conversation that I particularly wish to have.

"Can I see you again?" Henry asks. "Alone?"

"We can not." As much as I wish to say yes to him. "We must suffice with the occasional accidental meeting."

“You do not know how much that pains me, Georgiana.”

“I do,” I assure him. “For it pains me just the same. I love you, Henry. I have never stopped loving you. But that does not change the way things stand. We both know that.”

“I have never stopped loving you either, Georgiana,” he says, the earnestness in his eyes betraying the depth of the truth in his words. “Even when I thought you had forsaken me, I loved you still.”

A tear springs to the corner of my eyes. “I know.”

“And until the moment there is a wedding ring on your finger, I will fight for you,” he vows. “Even once there is.”

“I can not break my wedding vows.” No matter how much I may want to.

“I do not expect you to,” he responds. “I will find a way.”

I can not think of a way to respond, but before I have to, Letty reappears with a somewhat panicked expression on her face.

“Your mother is heading this way,” she says hastily. “I thought I should rejoin you lest she think you were having an improper conversation.”

“We would do nothing of the sort, Lady Cygnus,” Henry says with an amused smile on his face.

“A likely story, Captain Stone. I am beginning to believe that the two of you are incapable of having a *proper* conversation.”

He lifts an eyebrow, clearly surprised by the implication she’s making, even if it is entirely correct. “In which case, I must beg leave of you lest I assault your ears, Lady Cygnus.”

He dips his head, then turns to me, taking my gloved hand in his and lifting it to his lips. "Miss Rocke."

"Captain Stone," I respond, meeting his gaze.

"I look forward to our next accidental meeting." He smiles and lets go of my hand.

"As do I."

He leaves the two of us and strides off in the direction of whatever it is he is planning on doing with his time in the park.

"You are going to get caught," Letty warns.

"There is nothing to be caught at, we were merely talking."

"He was looking at you as if he wanted to remove your dress right here."

I glance in his direction, but he's already out of sight.

"You can not let anything happen between you," she reminds me. "You are betrothed to Mr Stoaly, it would end very badly."

"I know."

She raises an eyebrow, clearly not believing me.

I let out a sigh. "I am well aware of the consequences," I assure her. "And I have no intention of getting caught in a compromising position."

Letty narrows her eyes at me. "That is not the same as promising that you will not find yourself in one."

"I can not promise that."

"Georgiana!"

"Do you wish me to lie to you, Letty?"

“No.”

“Then I shall not. I can not promise anything like that. Do you not remember how it felt with Lord Cygnus? You knew that you should stay away from him, and you especially knew not to do anything as reckless as sneaking into retiring rooms with him, or to go to dark corners of the park, but you did it anyway.”

“Well at the very least think of something that is not your Captain, your mother will be here in a moment.” She nods to where Mother is coming down the path with a woman who appears to be about the same age, but whose name I do not know.

“What should I think of?” I whisper.

“Your betrothed, perhaps. You seem to hold no attraction for him,” she quips.

“That is cruel. Mr Stoaly is a charming man.”

“I’m certain that he is, but that does not change the way you feel about him.”

“It does not,” I admit. “And that is the problem.”

“Only if you are to marry him.”

“Which I am supposed to be doing,” I point out. “There is no way to avoid it.”

“If you wish to spend more time with your Captain, then you should find one. Preferably sooner rather than later.”

I let out a resigned sigh. “You are right.” But that does not change the fact that I have no idea how to avoid the wedding.

Mother and her friend approach and I dip my head in greeting.

“Daughter, Lady Cygnus,” Mother says.

“Mrs Rocke,” Letty responds. “I do not believe I have been introduced to your companion.”

“This is Mrs Ribberson,” Mother responds. “My daughter, Miss Rocke, and Lady Cygnus,” she introduces us to her friend.

“A pleasure,” Mrs Ribberson says.

“Likewise.” I dip my head to her even though I am unsure of her rank and whether I am required to actually do so.

Mother gives me a tight smile, but does not show much more affection than that.

“Enjoy the rest of your walk,” Letty says. “I believe our tea and cakes are ready, Miss Rocke.”

I give her a brief grateful smile and say my goodbyes to my mother. From the way she’s looking at me, I have to assume that she is going to have something to say to me later. Probably about the way my gown looks, or the company I am keeping. She has never been particularly fond of Letty, though she has warmed to her since she married Lord Cygnus, which is obviously a case of her respecting Letty’s new status as opposed to coming to like her as a person, but at least it is something.

I shall prepare myself for Mother’s displeasure, no matter what it is about.

# ELEVEN



## GEORGIANA

I DO NOT BELIEVE it has ever taken Mother this long to order me to appear in front of her and Father after I've displeased her, but somehow, it has.

I smooth out the skirt of my dress and fuss around the lace at the top. I don't believe that it is inappropriate, and she is the one who approved the modiste who worked on it, but I can never be too careful when it comes to being presentable.

Satisfied that I've done everything I can, I fold my hands into my lap and wait as demurely as possible for the two of them to enter the room.

It takes another few minutes for them to arrive, and it's only then that Mother calls for refreshments, not seeming to have thought in advance that we might need them.

I stay silent the entire time I wait for them, knowing that it is pointless to try and start the conversation. Perhaps if it was only Father in the room with me, I might have a chance. He is the one who is the most likely to side with me, even if most of the time it is out of indifference rather than any semblance of feelings.



Mother fusses with the pot of tea that arrives, pouring a cup for the three of us without saying anything.

“I suppose you are wondering why we wished to speak to you,” Father says.

“I am curious, yes,” I respond.

Mother takes a deep breath, a triumphant expression crossing her face as if this is something she’s been working on that needs announcing.

Dread settles within me, and I realise precisely what Father is going to say even before he does.

“I have heard from Viscount Stoaly, and he has finally agreed to a date for your wedding to his son,” Father says. “You are to be married at the end of the Season.”

“But that is two months away,” I say, horror filling me as I realise it means that Frederick and I are out of time. “I thought you had agreed on a lengthy betrothal with Lord Stoaly?”

“It has been long enough since the announcement and now,” Mother says. “It is time that you were properly wed.”

“What if I do not wish to marry Mr Stoaly?”

Mother’s face falls. “That hardly matters. This is a union that will bring great advantages to both sides. We will gain a title for our family, while they will gain the fortune you stand to inherit from your father.”

I bite my tongue to stop myself from pointing out that they won’t gain a title, and that only I will when Lord Stoaly dies.

“Why now?” I ask. “What has changed that you are no longer allowing us to have a lengthy engagement?” I know I should keep my questions to myself, but I can not help myself.

I want to understand precisely what is happening and why, even if there is nothing that I can do in order to change it.

“Leave us,” Mother barks at the servants.

I frown, uncertain why they need to leave. Is she about to say something that is so inappropriate that the servants need to be dismissed? I dread to think what might be in store.

The door closes behind them, though I have no doubt that they are lingering on the other side still.

“You will be married by the end of the Season,” Mother says. “And you are well aware of the reason.”

My whole body goes numb. “I am unsure what you are referring to.”

Mother gives me a tight smile. “Do you know a Captain Stone?” she asks.

My heart races. “I know of him, we grew up together,” I say. “You know him too. What of him?” I try to keep my voice as level as possible, but I fear that I am giving away far more than I wish to in it.

“How well would you say you are acquainted with one another?” she asks.

This feels like she is trying to get me to admit to something that I should not. “We have spoken.” It is not a lie as such, it is simply not a full admission of the truth.

Mother lets out a strangled laugh. “Do you hear this?” she asks Father.

He simply nods.

“If you have merely *spoken* with one another, then why were you writing to him every month for two years?” Mother

demands.

I blink a few times.

“And why would he be writing to you for just as long.”

Understanding dawns on me. “You intercepted my letters,” I whisper.

“And apparently there was a need to. Considering the things that the two of you committed to paper, I have a great deal to be concerned about.”

“I do not know what you mean,” I murmur, though I am reasonably certain that I am. I have no idea what Henry wrote in his letters, but I know what I wrote in mine, and it would not have taken much for someone to work out what I am referring to in several of them. “Do you still have them?”

“Of course I do not. I burned them.”

“They were mine.” I ball my hands into fists in an attempt to control my anger.

“And they were highly inappropriate. Do you know what Viscount Stoaly will do if he discovers that you have had improper relations with someone before your wedding?”

“I imagine he will call it off.” Which does not sound like the worst thing to me, though I don’t believe that is the right thing to say out loud.

“Have you no regard for your future?” Mother demands. “How could you do this?”

“I am unclear about what *this* you are referring to,” I say firmly. “I exchanged letters with a friend.”

“Love letters, Georgiana. I am no fool and I know precisely what they were.”

“If you have had my letters for years, then why does it matter if I do not have a long engagement?” I demand. “Unless one of those letters spoke of Henry’s return?” I realise too late that I shouldn’t have used his forename, and from the set of Mother’s mouth, she has not missed it.

“So you are aware that he has returned?”

Considering he has taken every opportunity to seek me out, it would have been hard to miss it. “I am. I have encountered him at some of this Season’s events.” And invited him to the romp’s swim right under their noses.

“Do you not see what a precarious position this puts you in?” Mother asks. “If he says something to Viscount Stoaly about whatever has passed between you, then you will be ruined.”

“Perhaps that would be better than being forced into a marriage I do not want.”

“Enough,” Father says firmly. “Georgiana, you will be married at the end of the Season to Mr Stoaly. The deal has been made and there is no changing it now. Not a word of this dalliance is to pass your lips, do you understand?”

“Yes, Father,” I say through gritted teeth. “May I be excused?”

Mother appears as if she wants to say more, but Father nods.

I get to my feet and rush out of the room, uncertain about precisely what I wish to do. I need to speak to someone. Preferably Henry, but I do not know exactly how to go about doing that without arousing suspicion. Especially as he needs to know that Mother is the one who stopped our letters from reaching one another. As much as I hate knowing that is the

case, I realise that it makes complete sense. She has always been fixated on my marriage and how much it could improve our standing as a family, that is why Henry felt the need to go away to war in the first place. But knowing that she's actively working against my happiness is another thing entirely.

And I most certainly need to speak to Frederick. If I am finding out about the wedding date now, then I must imagine that he is too, even though I know that he likely wishes that he was not either.

Which means that we are going to have to find a way out of this mess before anything else could possibly go wrong.

# TWELVE



## HENRY

I FEEL like a fraud walking into the club, but Lord Ferrington has made the introduction, which means that I have every right to be here, even if I feel as if I am out of place.

The place is surprisingly calm, especially compared to what it was like whenever I found myself at an event being hosted by other officers while I was in the army. Perhaps the difference was between shifters and humans, though I suspect that isn't the case and it's more to do with the location than anything else.

“Mr Stone,” a familiar voice says.

I turn around to find myself face-to-face with the person I least want to see. “Mr Stoaly.”

“Wait, it's Captain Stone now, is it not?”

“It is.”

“We should have a drink for old time's sake,” he says, slurring his words a little more than he should be doing.

“Are you sure that is a good idea?” I ask him. “You seem to have had a few too many already.”

“That is because I wish to forget the predicament I’ve found myself in.” He gestures to one of the tables.

For a moment, I consider telling him that I don’t believe it is a good idea for the two of us to socialise together, but then I relent. Frederick did nothing more than I asked him to in looking after Georgiana, it just didn’t turn out quite the way any of us planned.

I take a seat and gesture for one of the servants to bring us two glasses of brandy.

Frederick drops into the seat next to me.

“What is it that has you so in your cups?” I ask.

“Marriage,” he mutters darkly.

Jealousy twists in my gut. “To Georgiana,” I say.

He grimaces. “I like her well enough, but it was not my idea.”

“Is she the one who suggested it?”

Frederick shakes his head. “We have my dear father to thank for this one.”

The two brandys arrive, though I have my doubts about allowing him to drink his. He snatches it up before I can stop him and takes a swig.

“If the Viscount is to be believed, the Rockes approached him for a betrothal contract. The viscounty needs money, and Mr Rocke wishes for a title.”

“He wouldn’t get one by marrying Georgiana to you,” I point out.

“Ah, yes, but his grandson would be a viscount. That is all that matters to him. More than his daughter’s feelings, that’s

for certain.”

“She said much the same.”

Surprise flits across Frederick’s face. “You have seen her? I did not realise.”

“We have spent some time together,” I say evenly, not wishing to deceive him.

He lets out a loud laugh. “No doubt the same kind of time you spent with one another when you were courting.”

I clear my throat but don’t say anything.

“I believe I should challenge you to a duel for her honour, or some such nonsense,” Frederick mutters. “But what would be the point?”

“I am sorry,” I say.

“Pfft. No need to be sorry. I know where Miss Rocke’s heart lies. I always have.”

“Then why did you agree to marry her?”

“I didn’t have a say in the matter,” he reminds me. “But I also made a vow to you that I would protect her. The only way I could fathom to get out of the marriage was to reveal what I know of your past, but in doing that, I would ruin her. That is hardly the protection I promised.”

“I understand.”

“And now it’s too late,” he murmurs, taking another swig of his brandy.

“What do you mean too late?” Dread settles in my stomach as I think about what the meaning of the statement might be.

“They have set a date. Our parents have conspired without us and decided that the wedding is at the end of the Season.”



Cold rushes through me. “The wedding is set?”

He nods. “I don’t know what to do. Perhaps I should marry her and let you be the one to bed her.”

“You know as well as I do that isn’t possible.”

“No one would question the children being otter shifters,” he says. “It’s the perfect plan.”

“It is not. I would not do that to you, and we both know that Georgiana would not either.” She told me as much when she said that she would not break her wedding vows and I have every reason to believe her.

“But while we are betrothed is fine?” Frederick asks with a sarcastic laugh. “I can not marry someone who is in love with someone else.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you’re a secret romantic?”

“I do not believe it is that much of a secret. Did I not aid the two of you for several years?”

“I thought you did that because you liked us.”

“I suppose that is true. But I was also jealous.”

“That I was with Georgiana?”

“No. I like her, but she is not for me. I was jealous because you had someone who would do anything for you. She would have run away to Gretna Green with you, do you realise that?”

“Yes.” And I am starting to believe that would have been the best solution after all. “But I did not want to dishonour her like that.”

“Then this entire situation is your fault,” Frederick murmurs. “I shall blame you.”

“You are not the only one who feels that way.” I pick up my brandy and take a sip, almost surprised at how good it is. “We will find a solution,” I promise my friend.

“There is no time for a solution,” Frederick mutters.

“If the wedding is not for two months, then there is at least some,” I promise. “I will do everything I can to help stop the wedding.”

“So you can marry Georgiana yourself, no doubt,” he responds.

“Yes. And I will not make the mistake of waiting this time.”

“Good, then at least it will not all be for nought if we mess up our reputations in the process,” he responds.

“You’re the son of a viscount, I doubt you’ll be doing any harm to yours.”

“And Georgiana is her father’s only child. Perhaps that might save her too.”

“Maybe, but I do not wish to marry her for her future fortune. If she came to me penniless, I would be more than content still.”

“You may need to prove that with your actions as well as your words,” my friend responds.

“And I will.”

“I believe you. But do not abandon her for years at a time again, I do not know if she will forgive you a second time.”

“I have no intention of letting her go ever again,” I assure him, meaning every word. I intend to do everything I can to

spend the rest of my life with Georgiana, even if I am unaware of how to make that a reality.

The only thing I am certain of is that I need for it to be true.

# THIRTEEN



## GEORGIANA

THE CARRIAGE PULLS up outside Swancove House and I almost run inside, only just managing to smile at the servants I recognise on my way to Letty's drawing room.

I burst inside without knocking, only to turn my gaze away when Letty and Lord Cygnus jump apart.

"I must apologise," I murmur.

"It is no problem, Miss Rocke, I was just leaving," Lord Cygnus says. "I shall see you later, my darling," he adds to Letty.

"I look forward to it," she responds, touching his arm affectionately.

"Would you like me to ask the servants to bring you tea?" he asks.

Letty looks at me, then nods even though I haven't said anything. "Perhaps tell them to bring it to us in about ten minutes' time."

Lord Cygnus doesn't even question it and simply nods, leaving the room.

“I am assuming from your complete disregard for knocking that something has happened?” Letty asks, gesturing to the seat opposite her.

I grimace. “I’m sorry, I did not mean to disturb you.”

“What has happened?” she says firmly.

I take a seat, fidgeting with my gown and trying to find the words.

“Did someone find you in a compromising position with Captain Stone?” she asks.

“No. But I have found myself in one nonetheless.” I slip my hand into my pocket and run my fingers over the pebble there, already missing the presence of Henry’s. I know that giving it back to him was the right thing to do, but it seems that I gained more comfort from it being there than I originally realised.

She raises an eyebrow. “I thought Mr Stoaly was aware of what happened between you.”

“He is.” I take a deep breath. “I’ve missed my courses.”

Letty’s eyes widened. “Are you certain?”

“Very.”

“Georgiana.” It is hard to decipher whether her expression is more judgemental or worried. “I thought you knew to be careful.”

“That is not the argument I expected to hear from you,” I murmur.

“It is the one you are getting. What happened?”

“I got swept up in the moment,” I admit. “All I could think about was Henry, and I just didn’t think things through the

way that I should have.”

She nods understandingly. Perhaps she has had similar moments with Lord Cygnus, though they have the distinct advantage of being married. No one would think twice if she was suddenly with child. If anything, they would rejoice. “What are you going to do?”

“I do not know.”

“Have you told anyone?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t know who to turn to. I thought you were the person who was most likely to understand, and coming here wouldn’t arouse Mother’s suspicion.”

“I am certain your mother wouldn’t even consider you being with child as a problem that might occur. I don’t imagine you have told her what transpired between you and Captain Stone.”

“I think she knows,” I whisper.

Letty’s eyes widen. “How?”

“Remember that I told you about how Henry hadn’t written for years?”

She nods.

“Mother was intercepting our letters. Mine never got to him, and his never got to me. She read them all.”

“Oh.”

I glance at my hands.

“How bad is it?”

“In all honesty, I do not know. It depends how she chose to interpret the words I put, but I have no idea what Henry wrote.

There are two years' worth of letters, I am certain she will have put some of the pieces together."

"You should never have put any of that in writing."

"I thought they were harmless nothings."

"What precisely did you write?" she asks.

"I do not remember the precise words. But I may have said things about wanting to be in his arms once more, or that I longed for one of his kisses." I squeeze my eyes shut. "I know how that sounds."

"It sounds like your mother interpreted things correctly. And that's even without his side of the letters. You could ask him what he wrote," she suggests.

"That isn't my highest priority right now," I point out. "What am I going to do? I'm supposed to be marrying another man in two months."

"You could ask to bring the wedding forward?" she suggests.

"What? I can't do that."

"Mr Stoaly would understand."

"I can't marry Mr Stoaly," I say firmly. "Especially not when I'm carrying another man's child."

"It isn't the best situation," she agrees. "But Captain Stone is an otter, no one else would ever know."

"It isn't an option, Letty," I say firmly.

"There are things you could do to try and rid yourself of the problem," she says.

Horror fills me at the mere idea.

“All right, I can tell from your face that it isn’t an option.”

I glance down at my hands. “How can I do that when this happened because of how much I love Henry?” I ask. “Do you know how many times I have thought about this child?”

“No, because you have rarely talked about your past.”

I sigh, realising that this is of my own doing. “I have thought about the family I would have with Henry for years,” I admit. “Ever since I realised that he was the man I wanted to marry. I would imagine a cottage by the sea, with a place by the hearth for the collection of rocks our children would undoubtedly bring back.”

“Otters are strange creatures,” Letty says offhandedly.

“Can you say that swans are any different?”

“Of course not. We all have our idiosyncrasies, I suppose. How many children did you think of?”

“I’m not sure. Six, I think.”

“Six children?” Surprise comes through her tone.

“I am my parents’ only child, I suppose I didn’t want my own to have the same upbringing and all the pressures that brings.”

“Does Captain Stone know your plans?”

I shake my head. “I do not even know if he wants children.”

“He is a man, of course he does. He will want heirs to leave whatever fortune he has to.”

“He may want scores of children, but none of that changes the predicament we are in with this one.” I touch my stomach even though nothing has changed there yet.



“You could wait a little longer, there is a chance that things are just delayed and that your courses will come next month,” Letty says.

“And if they do not? Then I am further towards motherhood, and anyone who can count will know the truth.”

“You could tell your parents, they would likely wish to race you down the aisle.”

“And they would do that with Mr Stoaly. They are determined to get the title of viscount for their line and do not care how unhappy it will make me, or anyone else. Knowing Mother, she would circulate a rumour that it is Mr Stoaly’s child, and then what can we do?”

“Hmm, you propose a good point.” She taps her chin.

“And I need to talk to Henry. This is his child too, he needs to know. But with Mother on the lookout, I’m uncertain how I’m going to manage that. I can not risk hoping that I’m going to find him in some place where we happen to be able to have a conversation.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Do you really have to ask that? I am here confiding a secret that could ruin at least me, probably my family, and potentially two more people in the process,” I point out.

“Then give me a few days to see what I can do.”

“Are you certain? If you help...”

“Then we shall be glad that no one would think of slighting a future countess,” she finishes for me. “I am in a position where I can help. Let me?”

I nod. “Thank you, Letty.”

She reaches out and squeezes my hand. “I am always here for you, Georgiana. And I am sorry that you are trapped in a situation with no easy solution. This would be so much quicker to solve if you were not betrothed.”

“You’d just have me caught in a compromising position with Captain Stone.”

She nods. “By more than just your mother too. That way, the two of you would be forced to marry and everyone would get their heart’s desire.”

“But that is not possible without harming Mr Stoaly’s reputation.”

“I will ponder on that too,” she promises. “But do not worry yourself.”

I let out a sharp laugh. “I believe that it is too late for that.”

“Perhaps, but do what you can.”

A knock sounds on the door and a servant comes inside with a tray of tea, putting an end to our potentially scandalous conversation.

But I do have to admit that I feel much calmer having shared my worries with Letty. I know that my problems are far from solved, but at least I no longer have to worry about them on my own. There is more comfort than I expected in that.

# FOURTEEN



## GEORGIANA

I SMILE AS SERENELY as possible to the servant manning the door at Swancove House the moment I enter. I did not expect Letty to have asked me back to her home so soon, but I have to admit that I am relieved that is the case.

“Ah, Miss Rocke, you have arrived,” she says, descending the staircase.

“Lady Cygnus.”

“I wished to show you the room that we talked about the last time you were here,” she says loudly enough for the servants to hear.

I frown, uncertain what she’s referring to, but assuming that this is part of her plan.

“When you spoke of your parents retiring back to the country before the end of the Season,” she continues. “I offered you one of our guest rooms, you should come take a look and see if it is to your liking.” She gestures for me to join her on the stairs.

I hurry up, being careful not to trip on the stairs. “What are you doing?” I ask her softly once I’m close enough.

“You will see, dear Georgiana.” She makes a grand show of taking me up to one of the bedrooms, stepping inside and closing the doors.

“It’s lovely,” I say of the room. “But I do not understand.”

“There is a particularly lovely feature in this room,” she says. “You should open the door.” She nods towards one on the other wall.

I frown. “It adjoins with another room?” Despite my confusion, I make my way towards it and slowly twist the handle. The door swings open and I freeze, my breath catching in my throat. “Henry.”

Letty hurries over. “You wished to speak privately. Here is your chance. The servants believe that Captain Rocke is having a meeting with Lord Cygnus and that I am showing you the guest room.” She pushes me through the door and shuts it tightly behind me.

“Henry,” I whisper.

“Georgiana, what is it?” he asks, hurrying over to me and pulling me into his arms. “Is it the wedding?”

“How do you know about that?”

“I spoke with Frederick. He told me.”

“Ah. It is not the wedding, though I can not say that doesn’t pain me,” I admit. “But I need to speak with you about something far more serious. Can we sit?” I look around the room for where to go, but the only place seems to be the bed.

I don’t suppose that matters particularly now.

He takes my hand and draws me to it, sitting down and lacing his fingers through mine.

I take a deep breath. "I'm with child."

He stares at me for a moment, probably while he processes the words. "Are you certain?"

"As certain as I can be at this stage," I respond. "There is a chance I'm mistaken, and that would naturally be the easiest eventuality to deal with, but considering that I am to be married to someone else in two months' time, there are some bigger problems for us to face."

He smooths a finger over the back of my hand. "So that is why Lady Cygnus was so determined to have me meet with her husband."

"I did not realise she was the one who invited you here."

"I encountered them while they were visiting with Lord Ferrington and she encouraged Lord Cygnus to offer me a meeting, though it would appear that was merely a falsehood to get me to come here."

"She is a good friend."

"I am glad that you have one to aid you."

"I am as well," I respond.

"What are we going to do?" he asks.

"I do not know. I wish that I had some kind of clue about all of this, but all I can think about is how much I want this child. Your child. I do not even know if you want them too."

"Of course I do."

"Letty said that would be your answer. You are a man and you must want heirs."

“That is not why I want this child, Georgiana,” he says softly. “I want them because the child will be part of both of us. I do not care if they are a boy or a girl, if they are the heir to a fortune or a title. They will be ours and something that only we can share.”

A tear rolls down my cheek. “Do you truly mean that?”

“Of course. I know it is not ideal, but we could run away,” he says. “We’ll head to Scotland first. Once we’re over the border, we can head straight to Gretna Green. Once we are married, we can go wherever we want.”

“All right.”

Surprise flits over his face. “You would wish for that?”

“I told you that I would marry you two years ago,” I say. “That has not changed. I could not because of Frederick and what breaking our betrothal would mean for him, but that was before the baby. Can you imagine the scandal it will cause if I have a child five months after our wedding? At best, people will believe that Frederick took liberties with me before the wedding, at worst...”

“They will think the truth.”

I nod. “It won’t reflect as badly on him if we have run away and married.” Though I can still see how some members of the ton might believe so, but there isn’t really a choice at this point. “Are you certain that this is what you want to do?”

He takes both of my hands in his and looks deeply into my eyes. “I have wished for this for years, Georgiana. Since the first time we kissed, I have dreamt of holding you in my arms. And through my entire time in France, I thought about the life that we would lead together and the children we might have. I

love you, and I could not want this any more than I already do.”

I nod. “Then we should do it.”

“There is a ball in three days’ time, do you think you can be ready to leave then?” he asks.

“I believe so, though I will not be able to bring much with me. Though at least that is an excuse for me to wear my best jewels,” I say.

“I don’t care about the jewels you wear.”

“You will when we have no money,” I point out. “Then we will be able to sell them and have enough to put food in our mouths and hire a place to sleep.”

Understanding dawns on his face. “You must believe that I am not doing this for money.”

I reach out and cup his face in my hand. “Eloping is not the way for anyone to get any money. My parents will likely cut me off the moment we’ve learned what we have done. I will not see a penny of my inheritance.” I have no idea who Father will make his heir in my place, but I know that he will punish me severely for what he sees as an infraction against our family name.

“I do not care, Georgiana. There is only one thing that is worth having from the Rocke family, and that is you.”

“I suppose I shall be Mrs Stone soon enough,” I respond softly.

“As will our little one.” He reaches out and places his hand on my stomach.

“It is far too soon to feel anything.”

“I know, but there is a part of me that hopes to all the same.”

I let out a small laugh. “It would appear that they teach gentlemen as little as they teach ladies about the truth of childbearing.”

“I suspect that you may be right. But I will learn everything that I can in order to keep the two of you safe.”

A calmness settles over me that hasn't been there before. Now I know what we are going to do, I no longer need to worry for the future. The time for uncertainty has passed, and I can leave the room knowing that my future is clear.

And that I will get to spend it with the man that I always dreamed I would. I lean forward and press my lips against his. He kisses me back tenderly, full of emotion and promise. On his lips, I can taste that he has uttered no word of a lie. He wants this. He wishes for us to be a family just as much as I do.

A loud knock breaks through our kiss and we pull back.

“I fear that it is a summons to leave,” I say.

“I will see you in three days' time, Georgiana,” he promises. “And nothing will stop us.”

I shake my head. “I love you, Henry.”

“I love you too,” he responds. “Both of you.” He kisses my forehead.

I wipe away a tear of happiness.

“You should take this,” he says, holding out his pebble to me.

“I can not.”



“Just until we are wed. See it as a promise. So long as you have this, I will come back.”

I nod and reach out and take it.

“Now you must go lest anyone get suspicious. We do not wish for your friends’ servants to grow suspicious.”

I nod and rise to my feet. I would much rather stay here with him, but I know that is not possible. There are things that must be done before we are to be together properly, and I will do them correctly. I pause in the doorway and look at him, a soft smile on my face.

Finally, it feels as if everything is where it should be.

# FIFTEEN



## GEORGIANA

THE MOMENT I step back into the bedroom Letty was supposedly showing me, I know that she's realised what we are planning, and that she isn't best pleased with me.

"Letty..."

"You're going to elope?" she asks.

"What else can we do?" I respond. "It is the only way."

She sighs. "I suppose that is true."

Relief fills me. "You are not angry with me?"

"No, but I am saddened that my friend will leave. I don't suppose you will be returning once you are wed?"

"I don't believe that we can," I point out. "No matter what we do, there will be a scandal. At least this way, Frederick will become blameless."

"And no one will suspect that the baby was made before your marriage."

I nod. "As soon as everyone hears that we were promised to one another before he left for war, they will simply think

that it is romantic that we have decided to do this,” I point out.

“I hate that you are right. What are you going to tell Mary?”

I grimace. “I do not know. I don’t think she will understand.”

“She knows more than you think.”

“Not about this.” I sigh and sit down on the nearest seat. “She does not know what it is like to love someone so utterly that you will do anything to be near them, even if you know that you shouldn’t.”

“She will know soon enough.”

“You can not be sure about that. Many marriages in the ton are merely business arrangements. I know people like to pretend otherwise, but it is simply not true.”

She sighs. “You may be right. But Mary’s case is not like ours. She does not have parents to meddle with her prospects. I rather suspect she would be happy to become a spinster so long as she has her books.”

“You mean that she will become the new Lady Batloam.”

“Mmm, without the dreaded husband,” Letty quips.

“Do you detest being married so much, Letty?”

“You know that I do not. I love Philip, with all my heart. I do not regret marrying him one bit, and you will not regret marrying Captain Stone either.”

“I know.” I let out a small sigh. “I have known that for a very long time. But there is still a part of me that can not believe that we are doing this. I tried to convince him to elope before and he would always refuse.”

“This time is different.”

“Because of the baby?” I touch my stomach.

“Because he almost lost you,” she points out. “You nearly ended up married to another man. I suspect that was enough to convince him that he would not wait and risk losing you all over again.”

“I believe you are right.”

“I often am, when people care to listen to me.”

I let out a soft laugh.

“When are you leaving?” she asks.

I hesitate, unsure whether it is wise to tell her. It is not that I believe Letty to be untrustworthy, but more that the fewer people know our plans, the less potential there is for something to go wrong, or for the wrong words to slip out.

“If you do not tell me, then how am I to help?” she asks.

“Did you not hear us when you were listening at the door?”

“I did no such thing,” she responds. “You just happen to talk rather loudly about certain things.”

I scoff.

“I did not hear your plan,” she adds.

“At the next ball.”

Her eyes widen. “That is rather soon.”

“Time is not our friend in this situation,” I point out. “Waiting would not be prudent.”

“No, I suppose it would not be.”

“I appreciate your offer to help...”

“And help I shall. I am certain that Lord Cygnus can arrange for one of the carriages to take you across the border.”

I stare at her. “Letty, you can’t, that is too much.”

“It is not. And it will make things much smoother for you if you are travelling in a carriage that has our insignia on it.”

“If anyone finds out that you helped...”

“They will what?” she asks. “No one will say a word, and even if they do, we can spin it in a way that makes it sound hopelessly romantic.”

“And you don’t think that Lord Cygnus would mind?” I slip my hand into my pocket and turn my pebble over between my fingers, seeking comfort from it.

“He is a romantic at heart, I am certain he can be swayed far more easily than most,” she responds. “And should he not, there are ways in which I can make it a reality.”

“Letty!”

She smiles sweetly. “I did not say what kind of things.”

“You do not need to, I know what you have in mind.”

“It is you who is thinking that, not me,” she points out. “I was simply thinking of a swim on the Thames in our swan forms, he has been trying to convince me to do that for some kind.”

“Mmm.”

“You do not believe me? I should be shocked.” She lets out a joyous laugh, showing me that she isn’t truly insulted.

“Thank you, Letty, you do not know what this means to me.”

“I know that you are my friend and I care for you deeply. I wish to help in whatever way that I can. And if I can not use my sway as a future countess in order to aid you, then there is very little point in my position.”

“I think your children may end up disagreeing with you.”

“Perhaps. But they are merely a figment of everyone’s imaginations.”

“Unlike mine.”

“You might not even be with child, Georgiana,” she reminds me.

“I am. I can feel it.”

“Perhaps that is just what you want to believe.”

I frown. “Why would I want to believe something that could ruin me?”

“Because it is how you are going to get what you want. You do not wish to marry Frederick, we all know that. And you want to be with Henry. The idea of a baby means that you have to do something, and the most sensible course of action is to marry the father of your child.”

“You truly believe that is what I am doing?”

“No, you are probably right. You probably are with child, and even if you are not, you can not take the risk of waiting another few months to find out. And with your parents setting your wedding date, there was only a matter of time before you and Henry started discussing the chance of eloping. From what you have said, I am almost surprised that Frederick hasn’t suggested it himself.”

“I have not seen him since our parents announced the wedding date,” I say. “Though Henry has.”

Letty raises an eyebrow. “You have gotten yourself into the most peculiar of situations.”

“It was not done on purpose.”

“I know that it was not. But now we shall purposefully get you out of it, no matter how complicated it is to do so.”

“I appreciate it, Letty,” I say softly. “And everything else. What you are doing...it would be so much harder for me without your aid.”

“Then I am glad I can provide it,” she responds. “Now perhaps we should finish with a tour of the rest of the upstairs so that anyone who questions you will think that is what we have been doing.”

“Do you suspect that anyone will?”

“Not particularly, but it is safer to err on the side of caution rather than inviting questions. It is only three days, but it is still enough time for someone to find out what you are planning and put a stop to it.”

“That is what I fear more than anything.”

“Then we shall do what we must in order to make sure it does not happen,” she responds. “Shall we?” She gestures to the door.

I nod and rise to my feet, feeling a little less alone about my predicament than I did before.

# SIXTEEN



## HENRY

I PLACE my trunk by the front door and start on packing the next one. I know that Georgiana won't be able to bring many of her things with her, but at least we shall have basics on our travels, especially since I asked one of the maids from the Ferrington house to go into town and find some dresses for her. They won't be anywhere near as fine as what she is used to, but at least I can offer her something to wear.

A knock sounds on the door and I freeze, considering my options. I haven't told the Ferringtons about my leave of absence, mostly because I fear what will happen should word get around of what Georgiana and I are planning.

"Henry, it is I," Frederick calls through the door.

I let out a sigh of relief. If anyone deserves to know what is happening, it is him. I unbolt the latch and open it, gesturing for him to come inside.

"I was not expecting you," I say.

"Nor was I expecting to visit," he responds. "But I had business with Lord Ferrington and he mentioned that you had



settled in the cottage here in order to work as his business manager.”

“Ah, yes, he offered me the position and I did not believe it wise to refuse. It is a higher one than I would have received elsewhere.”

“You do not know that.”

“I can be reasonably certain.”

“I thought you had been here for weeks,” Frederick says. “Are you trying to tell me that you have not yet unpacked?” He gestures towards the trunk by the door.

I grimace.

“Ah. You are packing.” Understanding dawns on his face. “You are taking Georgiana with you.”

“I must,” I respond.

He studies me intently. “Must because you love her?”

“Among other factors.”

“I know you can not be talking of our upcoming wedding.”

“There have been some unintended consequences for some of our actions,” I admit, not seeing much point in denying it considering that anyone who sees us in a few months will know with certainty.

He raises an eyebrow. “I see.”

“None of this was my intention.”

He sighs. “Henry, if there is one thing I know for certain about you and Georgiana, it is that the two of you coming together would have only taken a matter of time.”

“She would not have broken her wedding vows to you, she told me as much.”

“And yet the betrothal did not stop her,” he points out wryly.

“In fairness, she did not make that promise to you.”

“True enough, that was our parents’ agreement and had nothing to do with us. But the fact remains that it would only have been a matter of time. She would have had every intention of keeping them, but the two of you are drawn together by forces far greater than I understand. Even with good intentions, you would have begun an affair without even meaning to.”

I stay silent, mostly because I suspect that he is correct and that there is very little that can be done about that. I believe we have proved his point in the past few weeks.

“We are eloping,” I say. “We’re heading to Gretna Green in three days’ time.”

“It is a risk for you to tell me this.”

“I do not see the point in lying to you.”

“Something I appreciate. Is there anything I can do to help?” he asks.

Surprise flits through me. “You wish to?”

“You are my friends, Henry. While this may seem like a betrayal to some people, I know that it is not. Just like I am sure you understand how my betrothal to Georgiana was not meant as a betrayal to you.”

I nod. “I understand that now.”

“Good. Then please inform me what I can do to aid you.”

“I am uncertain, but if you have made the acquaintance of Lady Cygnus, I believe that she is arranging a carriage.”

“I have known Lady Cygnus since she was Miss Swanley.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Georgiana and I have not ignored one another completely,” he points out. “I have made the acquaintances of Lady Cygnus and Miss Falnor through her, she enjoys spending time with them both.”

Guilt passes through me at the reminder of everything I will be taking Georgiana away from. It is not just her family and her engagement, but her life and friends. I know that there is nothing that can be done to save that, but the truth of the matter is that we are leaving all of that behind.

“I shall see what I can do,” Frederick says. “I can not promise you much, you know what is going on with my family’s money.”

“Not particularly.”

He sighs. “My older brother’s gambling debts caught up with him shortly before he died, which means that we are liable for them. We were brought close to financial ruin. Father wishes me to secure a marriage to a rich heiress in order to repair them. Something that Georgiana certainly is.”

“At least for a few more days,” I say.

He chuckles. “Her father is a pragmatic man, he may yet be convinced to keep his daughter’s inheritance intact.”

“It does not matter to me. I would marry her if she was penniless.”

“And she you,” Frederick points out. “I have no doubt that either of you are doing this for anything other than love. That

is why it is easy for me to accept that you wish to be with another man, even if it is over a betrothal and a marriage that I do not wish for myself.”

“I am sorry for that.”

“I am aware.” Frederick smiles and claps me on the shoulder. “I will do what I can and leave you to prepare for the storm that is coming. And rest assured that not a word of this shall cross my lips other than to Lady Cygnus.”

“Thank you.”

“I wish you a happy marriage, my friend.”

“What will you do?”

“I will weather the storm. Whether my family has money or not, I am still a future viscount. Hopefully, Father will find another heiress for me to marry, and that she will be perfectly pleasant.”

“Have you considered marrying for love?”

“Many times, but that is not what life has in store for me. I must do what is best for my family, even if it is not what I wish for myself.”

I nod, silently glad that I do not have the weight of a title or the attached expectations upon me. I have never considered that before, especially as it would have made things much easier for me when it came to securing Georgiana’s hand in marriage.

But I suppose all of that is moot. In a few days’ time, she will be my wife, and no one will be able to undo that, particularly when it becomes clear that there is a baby on the way. I need to hold onto that and remember that I will soon have my heart’s desire.

And she hers.

# SEVENTEEN



## GEORGIANA

I SLIDE my hand into my pocket and fiddle with the pebble inside while I try to work out precisely what is happening and when I need to leave the ballroom. I'm certain that Letty will find a way to let me know, but I wish we could have seen one another between our last conversation and now, it would have made me feel much better about the entire situation.

“Miss Rocke,” Henry says.

My heart skips a beat as I turn around and find him bowing deeply to me. “Captain Stone.”

“May I have this dance?”

“Do we have time?” I whisper.

He nods. “I spoke with Lady Cygnus just a moment ago and she said that we would have time for one final dance before we must depart.”

“Then I would be delighted.”

He takes my hand in his and leads me to the dance floor. My nerves slip away despite the fact I am currently in a dangerous position. If the wrong people see me with him, then

they may jump to precisely the correct conclusion and put a stop to our plans.

“How are you feeling?” he asks. “I have heard that some women get nauseous when they...dance too hard.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I believe that it is too early in the evening for that.”

He seems relieved.

“In truth, I am nervous,” I admit. “I fear that I am going to forget the steps of the dance.” I hope he understands that I actually mean I will forget what we must do in order to protect our ruse.

“Then you must lean on me and trust me to guide you,” he responds.

I look up and meet his gaze. “I will always trust you, Henry.”

The music starts and I step back, curtsying to him. There’s something about this dance that makes it feel so final. Perhaps because I know that this is the last time I am going to be in a ballroom like this. Even should there be a next time, it will be once we are married and I will no longer be able to dance.

And the chances are small that I will be able to at all. We are likely to be shunned from society when people learn what we have done.

Neither of us say anything as we move through the steps of the dance, staring into one another’s eyes as we pass by.

We come to a stop along with the other dancers and bow to one another once more.

“I will see you shortly,” Henry whispers to me, his voice so low that I am certain I am the only person who can hear

him. “This time tomorrow, I will be able to call you my wife.”

My heart swells to several times its normal size. “That is something I have longed for,” I respond. “I look forward to it, and to being able to call you my husband.”

He bows his head and allows me to disappear towards the refreshments stand.

“May I beg for a moment of your time, Miss Rocke?” Frederick asks.

Panic fills me.

Does he know?

“Of course, Mr Stoaly.”

He offers me his arm, and not seeing any other choice, I slip mine through his and rest my hand on his sleeve.

“I know what you are doing, Georgiana.”

“You mean taking a stroll around the room with you?” My voice shakes as I ask the question.

He chuckles. “That was not even a good fake answer,” he says. “I know that you are planning on leaving tonight.”

“I do not know what Lady Cygnus said...”

“Nothing. Well, that is not quite true. She had a lot to say when I visited her a few days ago, but she is not the one who told me. You can rest assured that your friend was extremely determined to protect your secret up until I revealed that I know all of them.”

“Even...”

He nods.

“Henry told you.”



“He did.”

“I am sorry,” I say. “I know that we shouldn’t have done what we did, and that it was unfair to you...”

“Georgiana, I do not fault you. It stings my pride a little, but that is to be expected. When Henry was nothing more than a ghost who had left two years ago and never returned, there was a chance that we would have had a happy marriage. It may not have had the same passion you share with Henry, but I would have cherished you as a wife.”

“And I you.”

“I am aware of that. But the moment he returned, we lost every chance of that. You would have been drawn to him at every turn. In every ballroom, you would have found a reason to have a moment with him. At every walk in the park, and every time you went for a swim that I could not join you for.”

I glance down at the floor. I want to tell him that is not true, but I believe that the last few weeks have taught me just how correct his words actually are.

“You would not plan to have betrayed our marriage vows, I know that, but I also know that the pull between you is just too strong.”

“I am sorry for that.”

“It is not your fault. If we should blame anyone, then perhaps we should blame our parents. They take so little interest in us other than what we can bring to their name and their fortune. Can you truly say that yours have paid you any heed other than about our wedding day?”

“Mother is the one who insisted that they set a date when she heard that Henry had returned,” I explain.

“Hmm, perhaps not as oblivious as I had first thought. But I had guessed as much. He is the only reason she would do that.”

“Perhaps she believed I was getting too old.”

“You are seven-and-twenty, that is young for a shifter still.”

“But not for a human, perhaps it is their standards she is using by which to measure these things.”

“Perhaps, but I do not think so. Ah, look, we have found ourselves by a back entrance to the ballroom,” he says. “I believe that should we turn down here, we will discover my carriage waiting for us.”

“I thought Lady Cygnus was providing the carriage?”

“When I spoke with her, we decided that it would be less suspicious if you and Henry left the ballroom separately. She is dealing with him, and we will meet them with our carriage.”

“We are leaving the ballroom alone together.”

“What will they do to us should anyone notice? We are already getting married and you are already with child.”

My shock must show on my face, as he simply laughs.

“I did tell you that I spoke with Henry.”

“I did not realise that he spoke with you on that matter.”

“Perhaps he should not have, but he felt it was best if I knew everything.”

“I suppose that does make it easier.”

He leads me out to the waiting carriage and helps me up into it. Despite him informing me that he is coming with me, I am still surprised when he follows me inside and taps on the

roof. The carriage lurches into motion, and my nerves return. This is not what we planned, and I can't help but feel as if our plan is about to go very wrong.

# EIGHTEEN



## GEORGIANA

THE FURTHER WE get from the ball, the more nervous I become. But it is not the upcoming journey to Gretna Green that I am concerned about, but my current predicament. Should anyone find me alone in this carriage with Frederick then he will be the one I am forced to marry, not Henry.

And that would defeat the point of this entirely. Not only that, but it would mean that the child I am carrying would become Frederick's heir despite the fact he is not the father.

The carriage begins to slow and I let out a sigh of relief.

"Ah, we are here," Frederick says, tapping on the roof of the carriage. It rolls to a stop.

Frederick doesn't wait for his footman to get the door, and opens it himself, jumping down and offering me his hand. I take it and allow him to help me down, already feeling the cold of the night air without my cape.

"Will you be needing the carriage again, sir?" the driver asks.

“That will be all for tonight,” Frederick responds. He pulls a bag of coins out of his pocket and hands them to the man. “We appreciate your discretion.”

“Of course, My Lord.” He whips the horses and drives the carriage off into the night.

I frown and look around me. “Why are we at a church?” I ask.

“I can think of several good reasons,” he responds with a slight hint of amusement in his voice.

“I won’t marry you, Frederick,” I say, my voice shaking. “You know that I can’t.”

He chuckles. “Do you really believe that I would make you do that? Remember that this union is not something I wish for either.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

“We’re here for your wedding,” he responds.

“We haven’t gotten a licence.”

A small smile lifts the corners of his lips. “But you do.”

I blink a few times while I try to process what he is saying.

“You are not without friends, Georgiana. Friends who would rather you stayed in London but married the man of your choosing.”

“You arranged this?” Tears spring to my eyes.

“Not alone. I did manage to convince the archbishop to grant you a special licence, and to get Father to break our engagement.”

I stare at him, not quite believing the words that I’m hearing. “My parents did not say.”

“They do not know. I asked him to keep word of it to himself for three days. He will inform them in the morning, by which point it will be far too late.” He gestures to the church. “You will be married by then.”

“How did you manage to convince him to do that?” I ask.

“I promised him something he wanted more,” he responds. “But it does not matter.”

“Thank you, Frederick. I do not know what I did to deserve as kind a friend as you.”

“Nor do I. Perhaps you may simply owe me a favour. But for now, I believe we should go inside.” He offers me his arm, and this time I take it much more willingly. It helps knowing what I shall be stepping inside to find.

The church is beautiful, with stunning windows and carvings that flicker in the candlelight. It is everything that I always imagined my wedding to Henry would be.

I look towards the altar where a priest waits.

Henry turns around and a wide smile spreads over his face as soon as he sees me.

I believe that it is echoed back on mine.

Letty stands on the other side of the altar with a satisfied expression on her face.

“We are hoping that with myself and Lady Cygnus as witnesses, there will be very little that can be done to overturn your marriage,” Frederick says as he walks me down the aisle.

“Thank you. You have no idea what this means to me,” I respond. “You were the best man I could have found myself forcibly betrothed to.”

He chuckles. “Perhaps one day, you will return the favour.”

“Please believe me when I say that I wish that with all my heart.”

“You will make an excellent mother, Georgiana.”

We reach the front and he smiles and goes to stand beside Henry.

I turn to the man I love with all my heart and take his outstretched hands.

“You look beautiful,” he says.

“I look exactly the same as last time you saw me,” I point out.

“That is not true. Then you look worried, now you look as if you’re about to get everything you ever wanted.

“Because I am,” I respond.

The priest clears his throat. “If you are ready, I would like to begin. The situation is rather unorthodox and I do not wish us to be disturbed.”

“Our apologies, Father Reeves,” Henry says. “Please, begin.”

I’m lost in a haze as the priest goes through the words I had started to doubt I would ever get to say to Henry. The ones I feared would trap me in a marriage that I don’t want.

But that is not the case. We may not be in Gretna Green as planned, but there is going to be no doubt that we will be man and wife in every sense of the words by the morning.

We kneel to receive communion and I glance at Henry out of the corner of my eye, noticing the wide smile on his face

and how much less troubled he seems than the last few times I have seen him.

We are getting everything we want without losing the things we cherish the most.

I resist the urge to touch my stomach. The priest has clearly been bribed to perform this ceremony, presumably with Lord Cygnus' money, but I doubt he would be too impressed to discover that there is already a baby on the way.

“Go forth from this place and do as you will,” he says, dismissing us all.

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Is it done?” I ask Letty. Never having been married before, I'm not entirely certain what comes next.

She nods. “There is only one thing left, but I believe you have a head start on that.”

A blush rises to my cheeks. “I suppose we do.”

“My carriage is waiting to take you back to the Ferrington estate,” she says.

I reach out and take her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Thank you.”

“There will still be challenges ahead,” she warns me.

“There were always going to be.”

“Then I am glad to have helped in what small way I can,” Letty responds.

“Nothing about this evening is small,” I say to my friend. “Far from it, and I will remember that for as long as we may both live.”



“Then repay me by making the most of your new husband.”

“I intend to.”

Henry smiles and puts an arm around me. “We should make haste.”

I nod. “Thank you both,” I say to our friends.

“Go. We must return to the ball before anyone thinks that we have run away together,” Letty says to Frederick.

“I should hope not, I do not wish to incur Lord Cygnus’ wrath,” he responds.

Letty chuckles. “It would be fearsome to behold, he does love me so.”

I ignore her and leave the church on Henry’s arm, leaning into him. The carriage is waiting for us outside just as Letty promised, and I have to admit to being more than a little relieved.

“There is just one thing I wish to do before we depart,” Henry says.

“Oh?”

“I wish to kiss my new wife.”

A small thrill goes through me as he says the words. “I suppose that can be arranged, husband.”

I turn around and wrap my arms around his neck. He leans in and captures my lips with his, kissing me deeply.

The entire world disappears around us. I know that this is not going to be as straightforward as simply being married, there will still be plenty of obstacles for us to face, especially

when it comes to my parents. But with Henry by my side, I feel like I will be able to surmount them.

And there are far more important things to me than my inheritance, like that my child will be brought up in a home filled with love. And when they are older, perhaps they will not be pressured the same way I have been.

I know that no matter what life has in store for me, it will be full of all the happiness and love that I could possibly desire, and more.



# EPILOGUE

## GEORGIANA

HENRY ENTERS the room with a look of concern on his face. “Is everything all right? I heard Edward cry.”

“Everything is fine,” I assure him. “He was simply hungry.” I nod towards the small bundle in my arms, feeling a surge of affection travel through me.

Henry hurries over and puts an arm around my shoulders. “He really is perfect.”

“You keep saying that.”

“And I believe it.” He holds out his finger.

Edward gurgles and reaches out to grab hold of it.

I smile.

Henry kisses my forehead. “You truly are remarkable.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

“You gave me a son,” he says. “And hopefully many more to follow.”

“You wish for a lot of sons?”

“Just children. I do not care if they are boys or girls,” he responds. “But even having the two of you share my home brings me more happiness than I can explain. Why would I not wish for more of that?”

“I believe that some people would call you sentimental,” I tease.

“And I would pity them for me. If they had a wife and child they adored at home, perhaps they wouldn’t feel the need to say such things.”

I smile at him, my heart swelling the same way it always has. Even with the sleepless nights and the months without servants helping me as much as they would in my parents’ home, this has been the most wonderful time of my life.

“Did your parents respond to your letter?” Henry asks, holding out his arms for the baby.

I carefully hand him over and try not to cry with happiness at the sight of Henry with our son in his arms. “No,” I say in response to his question.

“Then they are fools.”

“Perhaps. But I did not expect them to respond. Mother is still angry at me for what we did. Or perhaps she is angrier that Frederick helped us.”

“And that we have friends in high enough places that we are protected.”

“We are ultimately nobodies,” I point out. “It is to be expected that most of the ton have paid us no mind. It was only a scandal when the viscounty was involved. But Frederick must have told people about the end of the betrothal as soon as they got back to the ball for word to have spread so quickly.” And with word of our marriage not getting around

for another week, it simply looks like we responded to me being free of my betrothal. At least, that is how we hope that it is going to appear to the outside world. Perhaps that is foolish of me to believe so, but having spent as much time as I have in society, I do not think that is the case.

A loud rap at the door makes us both jump, and Edward lets out a small cry. Instinctively, I reach out for him, but Henry has already started rocking him back to sleep.

Instead, I head towards the door. No one visiting us will be surprised that I am here, which means. I undo the bolt and pull it open, my eyes widening.

“Father?”

He clears his throat. “May I come in?”

I nod and step back, not quite sure what to make of the situation.

He steps inside and looks around our cottage, a strange smile coming over his face. “Your mother and I lived in a place like this when we were your age,” he says, taking me by surprise.

“I had no idea.”

“That is because your mother wishes people to know about the money we have now, and not the money we did not have,” he responds. “I came to meet my grandson, if you are willing to introduce me to him.”

I nod, a little taken aback. I gesture for Henry to bring him open.

“Captain Stone,” Father says, holding out his hand.

Henry shifts Edward in his arms and takes Father’s hand. “Mr Rocke.”

“This is Edward,” I say, touching my baby’s head gently.

Father smiles and leans over him. “He is wonderful, Georgiana.”

“He is,” I agree, still a little uncertain.

“May we sit?” Father asks.

I gesture to the kitchen table. “We do not have any tea, but I can warm some milk, should you wish. Or there is some ale from the Ferrington estate. Lord and Lady Ferrington are most generous with their staff.”

“That is actually the other reason that I came,” Father says, taking a seat without answering my question about the drink.

I sit down myself and Henry hands Edward back to me, touching my back gently but remaining standing. Presumably, he has decided that if Father needs removing from our home, then he wants to be in a position to do just that.

“I heard that you are working for Lord Ferrington as a business manager,” he says to Henry.

“I am.”

“That must mean that you have a good head for figures.”

“I would like to think so,” Henry responds. “But I am still in the process of learning. It has been a rather busy year.”

“Yes, I imagine it has been with a new baby in the house, I remember when Georgiana was that age. We had no servants, and it seemed as if we were working from dawn until dusk.”

I exchange a glance with Henry.

“Your mother is still angry with you,” Father says to me.

“That is to be expected.”

“You had a chance to become a viscountess,” he points out.

“I never wanted to be one.” I straighten my back.

He smiles. “I am more aware of that than you may believe. I am a practical man, I work with what I have got.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“I think that it would be wise to wait a year or two, but then I would like to offer Captain Stone a chance to come and work with me.”

“With you?” I echo.

“The fishing fleet has been my life’s work, Georgiana. I do not wish to see that squandered by some distant cousin that no one has heard of. It may be wise, for the sake of your mother, for me to name Edward as my heir and place his fortune in a trust with an allowance for the two of you and any other children you may have. It would therefore seem to make the most sense should Captain Stone come to work with me and learn the ropes so to speak. I believe it would not be dissimilar to what you are working on with Lord Ferrington.”

Henry stiffens behind me, and I can tell that he isn’t sure what to make of the suggestion.

“I do not believe we can make the decision now,” I say.

Father nods. “The offer is there. I would very much wish to be a part of my heir’s life,” Father says. “Whether that is you or your son. And I am aware that your husband is part of that.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“Your mother will come around. Perhaps we can suggest that she can find an aristocratic marriage for Edward or one of



your future children.”

“No,” Henry says firmly. “There will be no arranged marriages for any of my children, that is not something that I will have considered unless they themselves want it.”

I reach out and touch his hand, letting him know that I support his choice and decision.

“Very well, then we shall find some other way to convince her,” he says. “I shall leave you to your day. But I hope to see you soon, Georgiana.” He smiles and gets to his feet, letting himself out of our home.

I let out a loud sigh. “That was unexpected.”

Henry nods. “We should take him up on his offer.”

“You want to work with him?”

“Not particularly, but I do not wish for you to lose your family, and I do have our children to think of. Their futures will be much more secure with the Rocke fortune behind them. Our daughters can have dowries that allow them to choose their husbands more freely, and our sons will have work that can keep them gainfully employed.”

I nod. “I can see how that is desirable.”

“But we do not have to do it if you do not wish to. We can say that we never wish to see them again.”

“Let us think on it,” I respond. “I know that so long as I have you, the future will be just fine anyway. I love you, Henry.”

“I love you too, Georgiana. And baby Edward.” He leans in and kisses each of us on the forehead in turn. Warmth spreads through me and I lean back in my seat and consider

just how blessed by all of this I am. No matter what the future holds, I know it will be just fine with them by my side.

\* \* \*

THANK you for reading *The Otter and the Officer*, I hope you enjoyed it! If you wish to continue the series, you can with *The Falcon and the Bluestocking* (Mary's story):  
<http://books2read.com/thefalconandthebluestocking>

You can also download a free Shifter Season story here:  
<https://books.authorlauragreenwood.co.uk/e4tcgdej81>

## AUTHOR NOTE

Thank you for reading *The Otter and the Officer*, I hope you enjoyed it!

While this is the fifth book in the series, it was actually the second idea for a story in the Shifter Season series that I had. I'm actually still not entirely sure how it ended up as book five, but I'm so pleased to finally have managed to get Georgiana and Henry's story out into the world.

If you're wondering about Frederick, you'll find him in [\*The Stoat and the Debutante\*](#). Georgiana's friends, Letitia (Letty) and Mary appear in [\*The Swan and the Rake\*](#) and [\*The Falcon and the Bluestocking\*](#) respectively, while Lord and Lady Ferrington appear in [\*The Stag and the Baroness\*](#).

I do want to thank you all for the amazing support I've had for *The Shifter Season* so far. This is a series I started because I've always wanted to write a Regency romance but felt like it didn't fit with my brand. It was only once I thought of adding shifters in that I realised it was possible and I started the series as a huge passion project. To realise that so many other people seem to enjoy it too!

If you want to keep up to date with new releases and other news, you can join my [Facebook Reader Group](#) or [mailing list](#).

Stay safe & happy reading!

- Laura

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[Cauldron Coffee Shop](#) - [Broomstick Bakery](#) - [Obscure Academy](#) - [The Shifter Season](#) - [Grimalkin Academy\\*](#) - [City Of Blood\\*](#) - [Grimalkin Vampires\\*](#) - [Supernatural Retrieval Agency\\*](#) - [Sabre Woods Academy\\*](#) - [Scythe Grove Academy\\*](#)

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# The Forgotten Gods World

A fantasy romance world based on Egyptian mythology. Each series can be read on its own, but there are cameos from past characters and mentions of previous events.

[Forgotten Gods](#)

\* \* \*

# The Egyptian Empire

A modern fantasy world set in an alternative timeline where the Egyptian Empire never fell.

[The Apprentice Of Anubis](#)

\* \* \*



## The Paranormal Council Universe

A paranormal romance & urban fantasy world where paranormals are hidden away from the human world, and are in search of their fated mates. Each series can be read on its own, but there are cameos from past characters and mentions of previous events.

[The Paranormal Council Series\\*](#) - [Paranormal Criminal Investigations\\*](#) - [The Necromancer Council\\*](#)

\* \* \*

## Other Series

[Amethyst's Wand Shop Mysteries](#) (with Arizona Tape) - [Purple Oasis](#) (with Arizona Tape) - [Grimm Academy](#) - [Beyond The Curse\\*](#) - [The Vampire Detective\\*](#) (with Arizona Tape) - [The Dragon Duels\\*](#) - [Speed Dating With The Denizens Of The Underworld](#) (shared world) - [Seven Wardens\\*](#) (with Skye MacKinnon) - [Firehouse Witches\\*](#) (with Lacey Carter Andersen & L.A. Boruff)

# ABOUT LAURA GREENWOOD

Laura is a USA Today Bestselling Author of paranormal, fantasy, urban fantasy, and contemporary romance. When she's not writing, she drinks a lot of tea, tries to resist French macarons, and works towards a diploma in Egyptology. She lives in the UK, where most of her books are set. Laura specialises in quick reads, whether you're looking for a swoonworthy romance for the bath, or an action-packed adventure for your latest journey, you'll find the perfect match amongst her books!

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