



The
Bluestocking War

THE
BEAST'S
BLISS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVA DEVON

as

MAIRE CLAREMONT

**THE BEAST'S
BLISS**

THE BLUESTOCKING WAR
BOOK 12

by
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As M^{lle} Clairemont

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The Beast's Bliss

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CHAPTER I

Lady Rose, second daughter of the Earl of Millbank, chucked her book across the room. It was a singular thing for her to do, for she was not in the habit of chucking books across the room. No. She revered books. She adored them. She loved them with every fiber of her being. And if Rose had her way, she would have spent the entirety of her days in the pursuit of words upon a page, but she was not allowed to.

Much to her dismay, her days were generally spent in practicing her waltz, her walk, her curtsy, how to hold her train, and how to make banal conversation with gentlemen who had very little to say.

But the book she'd just concluded was beyond impossible.

She let out a horrified groan, turned to her sister Hyacinth, who was bent over her own novel, and all but bellowed, "What did I read?"

Hyacinth barely lifted her gaze from her own page as she turned it slowly. She pushed her gleaming gold spectacles up her nose, for they tended to slip down, and replied, "I have no idea, dear sister, but clearly it has you in a strop."

"I cannot be reading nonsense like this," Rose defended, throwing her hands up.

It was impossible to read such a tale.

Clarissa.

She blew out a breath.

Oh, how she wanted to huff out the name and rail at the author for such a horrific ending. She pushed herself up from the settee and charged to the open window. Deeply, she drank in the warm scent of spring.

Winter had ruled for far too long and, frankly, she had been barely able to support the gray skies of England. Oh, she had

been raised with the gray skies of England, so one would've thought she had a remarkable tolerance for them, but she did not.

The most frustrating part was that they had brought her spirits quite low recently, and she longed to see the beautiful flowers of the English countryside, or at least have them brought into their London townhouse. Thankfully, spring had arrived at last! Summer was nigh.

And the Season was in full swing. She was required to be in London for its entirety, and she was deeply grateful the weather had turned and fresh air had been allowed into the house. A frigid spring was not unheard of, and she was so glad that one had not appeared this year.

She studied the carriages bustling up and down the busy and fashionable street. The noise of people shouting and calling to each other gave her a shudder. She liked the *idea* of people. She liked the *idea* of company, and she certainly loved to read about people, but she did not actually like being *among* them.

There was a distinct difference.

Though she wished it was not true, company made her feel extremely odd. *The nerves* was how her mother put it.

She didn't like feeling as if she had *the nerves*. It seemed like it was some sort of weakness, but the truth was that sometimes she just could not get on well in company.

Her mother castigated her for it almost daily.

She swung back to Hyacinth. "Did you finish reading it?"

Hyacinth blinked, pushed her spectacles up her nose again, this time out of habit, and lifted her gaze from the page. "What? Which one?"

Rose tsked, though she was not surprised her sister had barely heard a word she said. They both became lost in the world of books easily.

They read books every day and often finished them hastily. They both adored three-volume novels, for they guaranteed a long and delicious tale.

And frankly, she and her sister would rather be in this room reading novels and discussing them than at balls. They were odd. They knew it, but there it was. *They* liked it, even if their mother wanted to rend her garments and, at one point, had threatened to burn all the books in the house if they did not behave.

They behaved.

So, that the books were not thrown out or burned.

“*Clarissa*,” she reminded firmly, pointing to the offending book, which was now page down on the blue and green Axminster carpet.

Hyacinth grimaced, and her dark brown curly hair bobbed as she shook her head. “Oh no. I had to put it down. It was far too demoralizing.”

Rose sighed. “I agree. The ending.”

“Don’t tell me the ending,” her sister protested, horrified.

“You won’t wish to finish it,” she pointed out. “It is absolutely appalling what was done to that poor girl, Clarissa. I cannot bear it. And that awful man. How could anyone paint him as a hero?”

“Well,” Hyacinth said, pondering this. “Rakes are often painted as heroes, are they not?”

“Hmm,” considered Rose. “In my view, I do not see how a rake can possibly reform and make a good hero. That idiot in the book certainly did not, did he?”

Hyacinth pursed her lips. “I suppose not. But I haven’t read the ending, so I can’t really tell you.”

Rose clasped her arms under her breasts. “Well, he doesn’t, and the truth is that I don’t believe rakes do reform. Like the play says,” she said. “The Rake Relapse is inevitable.”

“Well, most people seem to think that rakes make excellent husbands.”

Rose rolled her eyes and crossed to the fireplace where she touched one of the dozens of invitation cards her mother loved to display. “Rakes are only good for one thing. The expertise they have and the knowledge they have accumulated, no doubt due to the multiple affairs they have had. But I do not see how they could be good husbands. Look at Papa. Wasn’t he a rake when he was young? He’s a terrible husband.”

“Mama does not seem to think so,” Hyacinth returned evenly, her book still open and ready.

Rose frowned, feeling rather demoralized by the state of ton marriages. “That’s only because Mama likes the gowns that she gets, the tiaras she has, and the coaches in her possession.”

Hyacinth tilted her head to the side and allowed, “That’s true.”

And with that, the door to the blue morning room burst open as if she had summoned her mother into the scene with her thoughts.

“My dears,” her mother trilled with remarkable optimism. “It is time to get ready for the ball this evening.”

Rose swallowed. “Mama, please. I don’t feel particularly well.”

Her mama scowled at her. “You will get yourself ready immediately or there will be no more lending library, and I will not allow you to visit Hatchards for the duration of the Season. Your credit there shall be ended.”

Rose dug her nails into her palms and gave a tight nod. What else could she do?

Her mother’s wide smile returned as if the irritating moment had not just occurred.

“Now, up to your rooms, my dears. It is time to make you shine and... Rose, you are potentially the diamond of this

Season. You will not let me down with your silliness, and your vapors, and your nerves.”

Rose’s mouth dried. There was no reply she could make.

It was quite difficult because she knew that she possessed the exterior of someone who could be the diamond. Her mother had been the diamond of her Season. She had rattled on about it every year quite firmly to Rose, and her elder sister before her.

Yes, her mama had insisted she would be just like her older sister, Iris, and take London by storm.

The truth was that she didn’t even know if she could take the small street they lived upon by storm, let alone the ton, as her mother wished.

Her mother wanted her to be a grand lady, but she did not want to be a grand lady. She hated company. She hated balls, and she didn’t particularly like dancing. Well, no, that was not true.

She adored dancing with her sister and her tutor, Signore Burdini, in the green salon. But she didn’t like holding multiple people’s hands. It made her feel completely terrified for absolutely no reason. She knew it was unreasonable. She knew that she should simply pull herself together and get on with it, but she couldn’t.

Without another word, expecting Rose and her sister to follow like ducks in a row, her mother turned on her heel and headed back out into the hall, curls bouncing behind her.

A cloud of lilac remained.

Rose and Hyacinth exchanged glances.

“Well, it’s going to be a long evening, isn’t it?” mused Hyacinth. “Do you think I can pack a pocket book?”

Rose groaned softly. “I think Mama would know, and then we’d be in terrible trouble. Can you imagine not going to Hatchards the whole season?” she lamented.

Hyacinth's eyes widened with sheer horror. "I can't imagine. It sounds like positive hell."

"Hyacinth!" Rose exclaimed. "You must not say such things."

Much to her younger sister's credit, Hyacinth shrugged before she gave a devilish grin. "Mama's not here, and I must practice my vocabulary."

Rose laughed. Hyacinth always made her laugh.

In general, Mama did not bother Hyacinth because Hyacinth needed spectacles, and she was certain that Hyacinth would only catch a vicar for a husband. Which really didn't seem fair because Hyacinth was quite pleasant and extremely intelligent. That, of course, was not always a bonus to lords—the intelligence bit.

Frankly, Rose adored her sister, and she was grateful to have her and wanted her to be happy and not miserable like Iris.

Still, she also needed her sister at these events. "You will not leave my side, will you, Hyacinth?"

Hyacinth closed her book and clutched it to her chest. "I won't, even though I would rather find a nook and hide myself away."

"And so would I," Rose rushed. "I think we would both prefer a nook, but Mama will never allow it. Best we get married straight away then." She tapped her forefinger to her chin, then added with a grin that matched her sister's, "We must find husbands who like books and who'll simply let us do whatever we want."

Hyacinth arched a brow. "I don't know if husbands will ever let us do what we want. Certainly not the kind Mama has in mind."

Rose sucked in a breath. "If Papa arranges a marriage for me to one of those great lords, I shall have to give parties

every day. I shall have to attend them every day. And the very idea of it..."

She began to shake. Her hands went cold, her palms sweating. She could not draw a breath. Hyacinth put her book down and jumped to her feet.

"Come to the window, sister," she said and gently guided Rose to the window again. "Draw in a slow breath through your nose."

She did, though it was a struggle, and she could barely get air in.

Her whole body was trembling at the very idea of having to be in company and crushes every day for the rest of her life.

Hyacinth stroked her back gently. "I am here. You are here safe with me. It will be all right, Rose. I promise you."

But it wouldn't be all right.

Rose was sure of that. Her mama was going to parade her, just as every young lady had to be paraded. She didn't know why she had to be so different. She didn't know why it had to be so difficult. Why she preferred the world inside her head to the world outside. Why it was so hard for her to make friends. Why it was so hard for her to have conversations or bear the company of others.

People were not so very terrible, but whenever she got into company, her cheeks went red, and she could not speak. Her throat tightened, and it was difficult to breathe, and she felt as if her whole body was vibrating.

She swung her gaze to her sister. "Whatever am I going to do? Mama wants me to be the jewel of this Season. But what if I can't even speak to anyone?"

"You can," Hyacinth said, turning her and clutching her hands. "I will never leave your side if you don't want me to. I promise you. And we shall make funny quips. I shall tell you quotes by Shakespeare and Chaucer and remind you of the jolly silliness of life."

She let out a laugh and was so desperately glad to have such a sister. “Thank you, Hyacinth.”

And with that, she embraced her sister, who held her tightly. But even in Hyacinth’s arms, she knew she had to find a solution. There had to be a way. She had to find someone who would help her find a husband who would not bother her, who would not insist that she be in company all the time.

Yes, she would find someone to help her, who would not ruin her life. And she wondered who exactly that was. Whoever it was, she had to find them.

With haste.

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CHAPTER 2

Damian Hardbrook, Viscount Clarence, did not understand why people liked balls so well.

Oh, he didn't think they were awful, but he couldn't see the true appeal of them. He supposed it was because everyone of his class actually *had* to get married, and so they all had to assemble somewhere to find reasonable partners.

At least that's why Almack's existed. And he supposed balls were also an opportunity for people to find lovers and friends. But the truth was that he came because he was expected to, and he understood that his friends wanted him there.

And truthfully, he liked his friends and didn't want to disappoint them. Frankly, sometimes his friends needed a bit of encouraging. And what was the world for if not to encourage one's friends?

Still, he would far rather be on the Continent or at Horse Guards, but Horse Guards was not going to let him go back to the Continent anytime soon, and he wasn't pleased about that at all.

They seemed to think he would be able to handle organizational and administrative tasks with superior skill to the lot of them, and, quite frankly, it was true, which was even more abhorrent.

The truth of it meant the deal was all but done.

He swung his gaze to his good friend, Abernathy, who struggled forward on his leg, part of which had been amputated but a few months before.

Abernathy, with his black hair, obsidian eyes, and granite expression looked as if he was going to set fire to the whole room. His hands were clutched behind his back, his red

uniform was perfect, but he looked like he wanted to do murder.

Pain did that to a man, as did learning to stay upright on a peg leg that needed constant adjustment.

His presence at the ball tonight, though he would never say it, was to support his friend. His friend did not like coming out anymore, but he *needed* to.

The black hole of melancholia was real, and winter did strange things to people in the isles. Yes, though the sceptered isle was glorious, it could truly render one emotionally incapacitated with its long winter nights and gloom.

And though spring had arrived weeks ago, one did not suddenly become cheerful after winter and an amputation.

The truth was that many people had not quite climbed out of the mire, and Abernathy had more reason to stay in than out.

His leg had been bloodied terribly on the continent, a cannonball landing adjacent to him as he shoved a young drummer boy out of the way. His leg had been blown to ribbons, and the man now had to learn to negotiate the world with a wooden stick attached to what remained of his knee.

He also had a cane, something Abernathy loathed and refused to use, because Abernathy had been one of the fastest men in the army until the accident.

The man's face looked like a positive mask of fury as he stared at the dancers.

Clarence folded his arms across his chest, a gesture which would no doubt cause his valet, Hobbs, to have a fit. But Clarence couldn't be bothered about the starch of his shirt.

"Absolute idiots poncing about, showing off for each other."

"It's part of society," Abernathy ground out.

“Ah, your reflections suit my mind,” Clarence said. “But don’t you think we could find partners in some better way than parading up and down in frocks that are meant to be no better than peacock’s feathers?”

Abernathy snorted. “It is the way of things and always has been, Clarence. You can’t change everything.”

Clarence let out a dry laugh. “Do I always act as if I wish to change everything?”

Abernathy gave him a side-eye. “Indeed you do, old boy. I think if you could, you would change the whole world order.”

“I would not,” he protested swiftly at such a grand and inaccurate summation. “I’m a loyal man of the Crown, and I would not undo that, though half the world wishes to undo monarchies.”

Abernathy let out a grunt of acknowledgement. “Yes, you are a loyal man. I will give you that.”

“Why, thank you,” Clarence said with the bow. Though the truth was that he would prefer to undo a great deal about society and how it was run.

Clarence arched a brow. “Do you think we should just hie off and go find an opera dancer?”

Abernathy laughed. “I suppose we could, but I don’t know if your friend Brookhaven would approve. This is his ball, is it not?”

He was grateful that Abernathy had laughed at the idea.

The truth was that he and Abernathy had made their way through a host of opera dancers when they were young. Before the army. But now they were not really interested in parading around dark rooms after midnight and drinking until dawn. No, they had more important things to accomplish, and the truth was that Clarence was going to recruit Abernathy to be by his side in the Horse Guards. The army needed a great deal of fine tuning, and Abernathy had a good mind for it, though he did not see that yet.

“Brookhaven would no doubt murder me,” Clarence said, waggling his brows as he thought of the man and his new wife. “And besides, he’s such a good friend and his wife, my goodness, she is a veritable force! One Brookhaven needed.”

Abernathy nodded. “Yes, so I’ve heard. She’s doing quite a lot of good work. Is she not?”

“Indeed, she is,” Clarence agreed, admiring her prodigiously. “And that friend of hers, a very interesting young woman. They both seem determined to change London society.”

“There it is again—you and all that changing.”

Clarence stared at his friend. “Don’t you wish it to change at all?”

Abernathy’s eyes narrowed. “Why would I wish it to change? It’s been like this for centuries.”

“That’s not always a good thing. As a matter of fact,” Clarence said, “I think change is coming rapidly with mechanization, travel.”

Abernathy shuddered. “All I can see is that mechanization has led to worse war. If we could go back, I would prefer it.”

He wouldn’t argue with Abernathy on that score.

Clarence fought a sigh. He wasn’t entirely sure what to do.

Usually, his pithy ripostes pulled Abernathy out of his melancholia, but right now the man seemed determined. “Should we go out to the garden and survey the evening air instead of watching these dancers make a mess of the minuet?”

“That doesn’t sound like a terrible idea,” Abernathy said, his face lined with pain. “As a matter of fact, I could use a glass of punch and a breath of fresh air. The perfume is terrible in this room.”

Clarence laughed. “Covering up all their sins,” he said.

And with that, he walked slowly with his friend. He could tell that Abernathy absolutely hated having to go at a slow pace. The man was going as quickly as he could, but it was not enough for his friend.

Damian didn't mind. He'd been around many wounded men. Some could not even walk at all. He wished Abernathy could see this, but given the fact that Damian had no wounds on the outside anymore, he wasn't about to say anything.

Damian had spent some time in hospital, and he had been wounded, but he also had the remarkable luck of recovering entirely. On the outside. Though his insides were still sometimes a bit of a mess, if he was honest.

He didn't usually tell people that. Why would he? It did little good to share one's burdens, and he knew that if he absolutely had to, he could tell Brookhaven, his dearest friend, that things were not well, but they were well enough.

He was still in control.

He had a tight rein on himself, and that was all that mattered. So, as they headed out through the wide doors into the spring air, the scent of flowers filling the air, he drew in a long breath.

The stone balcony overlooking the beautiful garden was really a sight to behold. Torches had been set up so that people could go into the garden. He was rather surprised. He didn't think that Brookhaven's wife would've approved of trysts, but she was a merry soul. One who understood that duty was not the most important thing. She seemed to believe that love was.

He rather liked the idea that she didn't mind if a couple slipped off into the dark.

Duty was well and good, but he rather thought that getting things done was actually much more important than a rigid allegiance to duty. And that was the difference between what he did and what men on a battlefield did. He was more interested in getting behind enemy lines and finding out

information so that his own men were not entirely slaughtered than following the rules.

People didn't really approve of his methods, but he didn't care.

After all, spies... Well, spies might be frowned on, but he was fairly certain that spies were the future of war. Without them, whole armies would be slaughtered.

They sauntered out slowly across the stones.

His friend cursed as his wooden peg caught on a groove. Damian was tempted to reach out and grab Abernathy, but he knew that such a thing would not be welcome.

He waited, and Abernathy let out another curse before he righted himself and tugged at the gold edges of his coat.

"I'm going to sit down for a moment. I need to collect myself. You go out into the garden," he said with the authority of a man giving orders to a battalion. "Don't bother me for ten minutes. I need a moment alone."

Damian nodded, not caring that he had more rank than his friend. He was pleased Abernathy knew what he needed.

"I understand," Damian said, and he did. Sometimes people needed a moment to collect themselves. And after nearly going down, he wasn't surprised that Abernathy needed to have a bit of a conversation with himself.

So he gave his friend a nod as the man sat down on the balustrade.

Damian headed down the wide stone stairs into the beautifully kept garden. His boots easily slipped over the grass. He headed out towards several of the trees with sweeping branches that had been planted along the artificial pond at the back of the garden.

It was an immense green space for a London townhouse.

So many of the new houses did not have this at all, and people who did not have an ancient family line lived in row

houses. Beautiful houses, of course, but none of them were stand-alone like this.

There was little privacy and certainly no sense of romantic wilderness.

His own family also had an ancient seat, but it was outside London, and when he wanted to come into the city, he always stayed at his bachelor's lodgings.

Damian drew in a breath, brushed aside the willow's long branches with its beautiful long leaves, and stepped inside the copse of trees.

He too wanted a moment away from it all to try to pull himself together, to understand what he should do next.

Should he protest at his London assignment? Should he try harder to go back to the Continent where he could do his work? He knew it was unlikely that he could.

Too many people recognized his face now. Unfortunately, he'd been put all over the newspapers, and people had made a great deal of his efforts in the war.

It was difficult to be a spy when your face was printed everywhere. But the idea of having to go and put figures into columns for the rest of his life, making certain that goods arrived from point A to point B or soldiers went from point C to point D, really was a bit demoralizing.

It shouldn't be.

The truth was that such things were vastly important work, but that didn't excite him. He was going to have to deduce how to make it exciting. Or at least how to make his *life* a little bit more exciting without being reduced to the life of a *bon vivant*, which no longer appealed to him.

London was the greatest capital in the world, but he wasn't particularly interested in spending all his time in it. There was so much transpiring in the world, and the world was where he wanted to be, but it was not where he *could* be.

Damian, who often could not stop himself from scanning environments for threats, blinked.

He spotted the barest trace of lace skimming the immaculately cut grass, disappearing behind the wide tree trunk.

The sort of lace that hemmed a lady's skirt. A pale pink skirt. Which almost certainly meant the skirt of an unmarried young lady.

Slowly, he lifted his gaze and caught sight of a pale gloved hand clutching the tree trunk.

"Are you unwell?" he asked gently. "Are you alone?"

A gasp shot from behind the tree. "I am alone, and we should not be together," she replied. "I won't be accused of trying to catch a gentleman in matrimony."

He let out a soft laugh. "I would never accuse you of such a thing. After all, I'm the one who's invading your privacy. Are you all right? Shall I go fetch someone?"

"Please don't," she blurted quickly, distress tightening her voice. "I should get into the most terrible trouble if you do."

"Then I mustn't, of course," he said carefully. "Have you just been..."

He didn't want to say "meeting a lover."

But then she swung around from the tree trunk and met his gaze. Her sapphire eyes were shining with fear. Her body was tense. She was clearly alarmed.

He took a slow step back, hands lifted in supplication. "I don't mean to frighten you," he said.

"You haven't frightened me," she protested, lifting her chin in defiance. "I just can't..."

And then he noticed that her whole body was tense.

He recognized the way she held herself.

He saw it on men's faces, usually those who had faced war. It reminded him of that.

"Look at me," he said. "Look at my eyes and draw a breath in through your nose slowly. Now let it out."

She did exactly as he said, clearly longing for relief.

"Now, feel the grass underneath your shoes," he instructed calmly.

She looked at him, her eyes wide. "Are you mad?"

"No. Well, maybe a little," he replied, his lips tilting in an unbidden smile. "But do what I say. Trace them back and forth."

He showed her with his own boots, and she did it.

"Now, breathe again."

Her breath began to slow, and her shoulders seemed a little less tense.

"Now," he began, wondering if this last suggestion would cause him to lose her. "Rub the tree with your hands."

"You are mad," she protested, her brow arching.

He grinned. "Perhaps. Just do what I say, mad or no, and I promise you'll feel better."

She did exactly as he said, tracing her gloved hands over the tree branch.

"No, no," he said, wincing as he realized the limitation of the gestures. "Without your gloves on."

Quickly, hands shaking, she pulled them off and traced her bared palms over the tree.

She lifted her gaze to his, astonished. "That does feel better. I'm most surprised, but it does."

He nodded. "I've learned a lot of tricks for such episodes," he said. "There are many people I know who suffer as you do. And I get them occasionally."

“As I do?” she queried, her voice hollow as if the idea that anyone could feel the same surely wasn’t possible.

“Yes. I can see it on your face. You are quite... How do I put it? You are distressed and suffering a case of nerves.”

A look of worry crossed her features. “Oh, dear,” she said. “Was it so very obvious? I didn’t know anyone else ever felt like this.”

“Oh yes. You’re not alone,” he replied. He smiled gently at her and added, “It is obvious. To one who knows.”

He wanted to hold her suddenly, to pull her into his arms and assure her that whatever had happened, he would protect her. He would take care of her.

It was a shocking thought because he had no intention of protecting a young lady in such a way. He had no intention of bonding himself to anyone.

There were far too many things to do, and a wife required a great deal of attention. He wasn’t the sort to marry and then neglect his obligations.

And, of course, he liked his single life. So his strange thoughts struck him as absolutely absurd.

But he could help her. He could ease her pain. He could ease her suffering. Surely, that would be something.

At long last, her hands still running along the tree branch, she said, “Thank you. That was incredibly kind of you.”

He nodded, not wishing to make a great deal of the moment. “Why are you out here alone?” he ventured, though he had an idea. Still, it wasn’t safe for her here. Not an unmarried young lady in the dark.

She looked back towards the house. “I needed to get away from all of it.”

“Someone was unkind to you?” he queried, ready to go back inside and punch whoever it was in the face, lady or no.

“No one was unkind,” she said with a quick smile. “But I hate crushes. I can’t stand crowds. They cause me to feel...”

“Like this,” he said softly.

“Yes, like this,” she agreed. She gestured to herself. “And I can’t control it. Whatever this is. It’s most upsetting.”

Her eyes turned to twin round saucers as a thought struck her. “My mother will be furious that I am out here alone.”

He ground his teeth for a moment, hating that she clearly did not see her own mother as a person to turn to.

“More importantly, it is actually dangerous,” he pointed out. “I am loath to say it, but I would encourage you not to do it again. We shall have to find a better place for you to retreat. For a young lady like yourself? Alone.” He winced. “Not everybody is like me.”

“You mean kind and gentle?”

“Gentle,” he barked before he laughed. “I had no idea I could be accused of such a thing.”

She took a deep, easy breath. “Well, you can. You *are* rather large, and perhaps others might find you frightening. I certainly did the moment I spotted you, but then you started speaking to me.” Her face softened with adoration. “You were gentle, and you were kind... And you are remarkable,” she said.

And those simple, powerful words struck him to his core.

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CHAPTER 3

The massive man standing before her should have been absolutely terrifying.

He was, well, how could she say... Herculean in his shape. He was muscled, beautiful, strong. His perfectly tailored evening clothes seemed to barely contain his form, and his blond hair was silvery in the moonlight. His cheeks were two slashes, his eyes a shining silver, and his jaw was so hard that she suspected if one were to try to punch him, they would break their hand.

It was strange because someone so strong, so intense, surely should have made her want to turn and run in the opposite direction, screaming into the night. Though she did not generally do such things, even if she did have nerves.

But oddly, with him, she did not feel like doing that at all. As a matter of fact, he made her want to stay.

Her hand was still lingering on the tree bark. She could feel its little grooves and pointy bits poking into her skin. She held her gloves in her opposite hand, and she was breathing slowly now.

Her heart seemed to have calmed down, when just a few minutes ago, she was certain it was going to beat right out of her chest. She'd felt as if she might die. She knew such a thing was ridiculous and highly unlikely, but at the moment, it had not felt ridiculous.

No doubt, if Mama discovered she had absconded from the ballroom, her mother would take her home and punish her in the most severe ways.

It would be far worse if her mama discovered that she'd run out of the ball and out into the gardens to be alone.

Hyacinth was no doubt searching for her.

After all, Rose had bolted. She'd been surrounded by far too many people all at once, and she'd smelled them all, and she could feel them all pressing in, and her whole body had rioted to the point where she could not think.

She had panicked, and she had raced from the room out into the cool corridor, and then down the stone steps of the terrace and into the night.

She found herself here within the trees, longing for peace, longing for her books, for the escape of those words, which could take her anywhere, but now she did not need to escape.

Now she was here with this tall man who had told her to do odd things like rub her slippers along the grass.

“Why are you here?” he said, clearly curious. “If no one was unkind to you.”

Did she dare explain? Would it even be a surprise, since he seemed to recognize her condition. She shrugged. “The truth is I needed to find a way out.”

“Out?” he queried.

She licked her lips, a gesture that caused his beautiful silvery eyes to trail to her lips for an instant. But then, he wrenched his gaze back to hers.

“Go on,” he instructed.

She nodded, her breath catching for a very different reason than before. “You see, my mother, she wants me to be the diamond this Season, and I do not see how I can be more than perhaps an agate.”

He stared at her for a long moment as he took in her words and then barked out a laugh.

“*An agate,*” he repeated before his brow furrowed in consideration. “You’re not an agate. You are almost definitely a jewel.” He paused, and then his gaze—his shockingly beautiful gaze—slowly danced over her features before he breathed, “I can see it.”

Those words in his deep voice laced through her blood and did something completely unfamiliar to her heart. For the first time in her life... She felt seen. As if he had truly looked at her and seen more than just her face or her nerves.

She shook off the wild thought and rushed, "I don't know if I should say thank you or not. I did nothing to obtain my face. I was simply born with it, but the truth is that my insides don't match it."

"Your insides don't match it," he repeated slowly. "Could you explain that to me?"

The unspoken words, *for I see you, not just your face*, lingered between them. Words far too intimate to be uttered.

Surely, her imagination had finally taken to fancy as her mother had always feared it would.

She swallowed. "I can try. You see, I do look a great deal like my mother and my eldest sister, Iris, and she was a diamond of her Season four years ago. She married very well, but you know." Suddenly, the words were tumbling out of Rose. "She's miserably unhappy, and my mother, who was also a diamond of her Season, married my father. He was a great match, but he's not a particularly nice man. Honestly, while I might look like a diamond, I don't feel like a diamond. The inside of me? Well, it really rather feels like a jelly."

"A jelly," he echoed, stunned. "You don't look at all like a jelly," he said.

Her lips twitched. "Well, I'm quivering inside, if you must know, when I'm with a lot of people. I'm very well educated. I know how to do all the dances. I can speak several languages, and I'm an excellent rider," she said firmly. "But the truth is? The moment I'm in a ball or crowd of people at a party, I just cannot..." She closed her eyes and admitted, "Well, I cannot bear it."

He studied her carefully. "Truly, you're not alone," he said.

She snapped her gaze opened, stunned. "I'm not? I feel very alone."

“There are many people like that.” He took a slow step towards her, the moonlight spilling through the tree’s branches and over his icy-hued locks. “Nobody says it, but it’s true.”

“I can’t believe it,” she said, though the idea filled her with hope. Oh, not that others suffered, but that there wasn’t something horrifically broken about her. “My mother makes it sound as if I am the most horrible person in the world and the weakest too.”

“You are not weak,” he growled, his eyes flashing.

“Am I not?” she queried. “You caught me out here hiding behind the tree.”

“I caught you out here using the tools that you have to feel better, and now you have more,” he pointed out. “That’s a strength. If you had been truly weak,” he said. “You wouldn’t have been in the ball at all, or perhaps you would’ve run screaming into the night, and even then I wouldn’t have said you are weak. What you have inside of you, it is a real thing. I’ve known many men like that.”

“Men,” she said flatly. “But not ladies.”

“Well, ladies are different,” he allowed. “They don’t generally share their confessions with me, but I’m sure that you’re not alone. Ladies have their own stresses, you know.”

“Different than yours?” she said.

He hesitated, then ventured, “Most of the gentlemen I know who suffer as you do have had some horrible circumstance happen to them or they have been in war. Have you had a horrible circumstance happen to you?”

“Not like that,” she said.

“It doesn’t have to be war,” he said. “Other things can bring it on.”

“You’re very odd,” she said, tilting her head to the side as she tried to make sense of why he wished to be in her presence, a man as beautiful and clearly as powerful as he.

“Am I?” he laughed, his brows rising.

“Oh dear, I shouldn’t have said that,” she proclaimed, her cheeks heating. “That was very rude of me.”

“It wasn’t rude. It was honest. I *am* odd,” he said. “But I like it. It’s what makes me capable of doing my job so well.”

“And what is that?” she asked, letting her hands finally fall to her sides.

“I’m not about to tell you,” he said, his eyes glinting with amusement. “But let me introduce myself. I’m Viscount Clarence, and you are?”

She smiled tightly. “I am Lady Rose,” she said, “daughter of the Earl of Millbank.”

Him?” he asked with surprising bluntness.

“Yes,” she said.

“He’s rather difficult.”

A rueful note escaped her lips. “You’re the first person to say so to me.”

“Not everybody is capable of being honest when speaking about an earl, but I’ve got as much money as he does, and my family is as old, so why not?” he drawled before he winked. “Besides, I’m not afraid of him.”

“Most people are,” she said.

“Well, most people haven’t done the things that I’ve done or seen what I’ve seen,” he said simply and without bravado.

The honesty of it jarred her.

She blinked and wondered what exactly he’d witnessed to make him so completely willing to say such things about her father. Her father *was* a terrifying man. He had a great deal of power, he loved to shout at people, and he was not above using a strap to get his way.

His servants all but lived in terror of him.

She had been terrified of him too when she was small, but she rarely saw him now. He was not interested in little girls. No, he only wanted her married off to increase the family power, just as he had wanted Iris to do, who was now in the north and on her third child, full of melancholia, barely able to write letters, barely able to talk about books the way they had, and isolated.

How she wished that her sister had not had such awful life. She wished that her sister had not been worn out by childbirth. She wished that her sister had not vanished into an awful marriage.

She refused to do the same. “If you must know, since we are being so very honest, I came out here not just because of the crush, but because of what I must do.”

“And what must you do?” he queried gently.

She scowled. “I must marry.”

“Oh,” he said with a tsk. “The fate of all ladies.”

She frowned. “Yes, you say it like a quip, but it’s actually quite upsetting.”

“Forgive me,” he said with a quick bow. “I did not mean to make light of your situation, but it does seem to be the point of our class.”

“Yes,” she gritted. “To propagate more little lords and ladies.” She shook her head and fisted her hands. She’d never said those words out loud, and she was astonished that she dared to do it now. But she did. “The truth is that I’m quite afraid. You see, I think I could end up in an awful marriage.”

“Ah,” he said carefully. “You’re a woman of sense then.”

She gaped at him before managing, “Pardon me?”

“Many young ladies don’t give that a great deal of thought,” he said as though the statement pained him. “Because no one tells them about the dangers of marriage, or life after their first Season. Because they are kept so wholly ignorant about the world, they simply wish for a title or a great

deal of wealth, and they don't really think on the man himself. Or they believe whatever facade they see. It's all well and good to catch a duke, but if the duke is dreadful, then you're in for it, aren't you?"

"Exactly so," she replied, amazed by his speech. Amazed that he was so sensible and did not reduce himself to condemning young ladies who had no idea what the world was truly like. Or marriage. "You see my point."

"I do," he said, his face surprisingly grim for a moment. But then he blinked. "Do your mother and father not make careful arrangements for you?"

She rolled her eyes, unable to stop the gesture. "They only care about the title and the estates," she said. "Just like you suggested."

"I'm terribly sorry," he said sincerely. "That is frustrating, and that would cause me a great deal of distress as well if I was in your shoes."

No matter how she tried, she could not imagine this man of muscle and sinew and hard male beauty in her shoes, but she appreciated his sentiments.

"I'm glad you understand," she said. She paused, longing to be free with him, wondering if she dared. Much to her surprise, she began, "For most of the characters in the books that I read, it always works out. Because that's the kind of book I prefer, but recently I read *Clarissa*, and that was a terrible ending for anyone. It didn't work out well at all. I fear that will be my life."

"I will not tell you not to fear," he said softly. "But do not let fear rule you if you can avoid it. And I couldn't stand that book either," he said.

"You've read it?" she piped, wondering if she could follow his advice.

His face creased with disgust. "The hero is an absolute arse. Terrible fellow. Nothing good about him. I don't see what *Clarissa* saw in him, at all."

She nodded, but then she suggested, “I think it is because she had so little experience of gentlemen. And he paid attention to her, and he only showed her his best side. Well, his most intimidating, impressive side.”

“Ah,” he mused. “Yes, and many ladies are not taught the difference,” he said. “Between love and the desire to conquer. It is not right that ladies are not taught that men who are obsessive like that cannot feel love. For men like that? Interest means a desire to own. To possess.”

She gasped. “You’re very different than anyone I have ever met, except for perhaps my sisters.”

“I shall take that as a compliment,” he said, his lip curving.

“Please do.” She caught sight of the light of the house behind the tree branches, and she was jolted back to reality. “But I don’t know what I am to do.”

He cocked his head to the side. “You’re in a predicament, aren’t you?”

“Indeed.”

“You must be careful with who you choose, and though I realize it would be very difficult for you, the thing I would suggest is to dance with as many gentlemen as possible, and converse with them, and don’t ask them silly questions.” His brow arched and he leaned forward. “Ask them deep questions.”

“Deep questions?” she challenged before she snorted. “Lords don’t answer deep questions.”

A slow, rolling laugh spilled from him before he nodded his agreement. “If they refuse to answer your deep question, then you know that they’re not the man for you.”

Her own laughter suddenly skipped past her lips at his statement. “My goodness. What a point that is.”

He grinned, a shockingly appealing expression on his handsome face. “They will run off in the other direction.”

She shook her head as she realized an obstacle. “But my mother shall be very angry with me.”

“For asking a deep question?” he asked.

She nodded. “Ladies do not ask questions which might challenge a gentleman’s conversational abilities,” she stated, the saying as carved into her memory as how to open a fan.

“Bloody hell,” he quipped before he groaned as if an idea hit him. “You are in for difficulty. Your mother? She’s the legendary Lady Millbank.”

“Exactly.”

He sighed, a beleaguered sound. “She hosts extremely important parties.”

A wave of acrid foreboding swept over Rose as she considered said parties approaching. “I don’t usually have to attend them, but this year I will.”

“They’re legendary,” he admitted. “I’ve been to several of them.”

“Have you?” she gasped.

He nodded, his eyes narrowing as if realizing that her mother was one of the most challenging and powerful ladies in the ton. “Our families are in the same circle, after all. But here’s the thing. Your mother? Yes, you’re correct, she will not be interested in finding you just a good man. Nor your father, and I think you are very wise to understand that, but I can see that you care greatly about who you marry.”

“It is my life,” she said with surprising emotion. “I’ve seen how terribly it can go wrong.”

“Have you?” he whispered.

She nodded and looked away before he could see the tears that threatened to glisten. “My sister, you see...”

But she did not want to elaborate. She blinked rapidly, and then suddenly she snapped her gaze to him. “You seem like a sensible fellow.”

“Do I?” he queried. “Horse Guards seemed to think so too.”

“Then I have good company in my assessment,” she pointed out. And before she could stop herself with good sense, she rushed, “You could find me a husband.”

His eyes flared. “I could do what?”

“Find me a husband,” she repeated, refusing to retreat now.

His brow furrowed as he spent far too much time trying to make sense of her statement. “You want me to find you a husband?”

“Yes. I’ve said it twice now.” She took a step forward, her skirts skimming the grass. “You seem remarkably capable. You know just about everyone, don’t you? And, well, you could tell me who I shouldn’t marry, don’t you think?”

He studied her for a long moment.

“I could,” he said, but it sounded more like a statement of fact rather than an agreement.

And then she said a word that shocked even herself. “*Please.*”

He stared at her, and for one single moment, she was certain that he was going to refuse. But then he took a step towards her and offered his hand.

CHAPTER 4

Damian had no idea what he was doing, but his hand was outstretched, his snowy, gloved palm facing upwards.

Lady Rose stared at it as if it was a rope sent out to a sailor washed overboard, and the frothing wild waves of the sea were all around. At the sight of his offering, her body seemed to relax, and he felt a wave of hope go through him. A wave of power and affinity and, bloody hell, he realized that he wanted to help her beyond anything.

Damian knew exactly who her parents were.

They were strong, powerful, and dare he say, vicious in the retention of their power.

Little got in their way, and if they wanted their daughter to make a powerful marriage, well, she would. Even if she could not face the company that she must in high society. But he had a strong inclination that behind closed doors, her parents berated her terribly for her inability to tolerate ton society.

And yet, she did not seem as if she was beaten down. She was clever, well-spoken, and matched him quip for quip, but he could see that whatever had happened to her over the last year had caused her to shake, to feel alarm at the presence of others. Oh, not a single person such as himself, but a crush of people. And it sounded as if it was largely limited to the indoors.

And he wasn't about to think little of her for it, even if her parents did.

Could he find her someone? He did know a great deal about the nobility. He could do that for her. He wanted to be of help to her. To soothe her distress. Yes, he wanted to see her smile without fear of what was to come.

Though perhaps that was ambitious for anyone. Life brought suffering far too often. But at least he could ensure she was secured with a partner.

“Come,” he said. “Come with me back into the ball, and we shall show them just how capable you are.”

She swallowed, the action visible, which drew his gaze to the line of her slender throat, which curved to her chest, drawing his gaze down farther to the perfectly cut scoop of her bodice.

He forced himself to tear his gaze away from those perfect swells. Swells that he found all too desirable. She was not for him. He couldn't allow such thoughts to take place.

Her eyes flicked towards the house and then back to him. “I don't know if...”

“I will be with you every step of the way,” he assured. Then he added with a wink, “And if it's too much, we shall escape.”

And then slowly, oh, so slowly, she lifted her hand and slipped it into his. The touch of her hand in his shocked him. It danced up his arm, raced up to his heart, then through the entirety of his body, like a flame coming to life.

Suddenly, he wanted to pull her towards him, to envelop her in his embrace, to assure her that all would be well and that no one would ever hurt her again.

And that's exactly what he was going to do...without the embrace.

It did not matter how much he wanted to feel her arms wrapped about his shoulders. No, he was here to help her. Not seduce her.

And he was a sufficiently strong man to ensure he didn't yield as so many others might.

As he led her from the willow, he carefully checked to make sure no one was searching. The last thing he wanted was

someone accusing him of debauching her out in the garden. Damian led her back up towards the steps.

Abernathy gaped at them as they crossed under the torchlights and stood before him.

“What the bloody hell are you doing, man?” Abernathy all but choked. “You’re not supposed to be having a tryst while I pull myself together.”

“It’s not a tryst,” she blurted.

Damian was rather pleased that she’d been so firm about it.

“Oh,” Abernathy drawled with mock horror. “Forgive me. Two people coming in out of the shadows. How remiss of me to think it a tryst.”

“Yes, I can see how you were mistaken,” she said, arching a brow. “But not everything is as it seems, now is it?”

Abernathy’s lip curled in a smile. “I like you,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied, her own lips tilting into a smile. “Not many people do.”

“Thank God for that,” Abernathy said. “We couldn’t possibly be friends if they did.”

She laughed at that.

Damian beamed down at her. She was just fine in small groups. Truly, it was the crush of the ballroom that bothered her. Yes, he would most definitely be able to help her. He would find a way to make it all work.

“This is Abernathy,” Damian introduced. “My friend. He’s been waiting for me.”

“Oh dear.” Her eyes flared, and her free hand flew to her bosom. “I’ve kept you from...”

“No, no,” Abernathy said, raising a hand to brush off the concern. “I needed the time. You see, I don’t like it in there either, if that’s why you’ve run out.”

“My goodness,” she declared. “How very clear of you. Yes, I did run out, and I don’t like it in there either.” Her smile deepened. “He said I wasn’t alone.”

Abernathy’s eyes narrowed. “I beg your pardon?”

She cleared her throat. “He said that I wasn’t alone in my feeling of not wanting to be in the ballroom.”

Abernathy laughed, a deep rich tone, and for a moment Damian felt relief and gratitude that he’d met Lady Rose in the shadows of the garden.

It seemed that they were all better off for meeting.

“Oh no, you’re most definitely not alone,” Abernathy stated. “Many of us can’t stand it in there.” And he struck out his hand. “Glad to make your acquaintance, miss.”

“Lady Rose, actually,” she said as she crossed to him and slipped her hand into his palm.

Abernathy gave her a quick shake and then drew his hand back before he winced. “My leg is hurting devilish tonight.”

“I’m sorry for it,” she said without undue drama.

“Don’t,” Abernathy said, his shoulders tense with discomfort. “I’m damn lucky compared to some.”

Damian did not smile. He knew it might irritate his friend. But he was bloody glad to see that Abernathy had found some peace whilst sitting and could be kind to Lady Rose.

It was also damn heartening that he’d reminded himself that he was lucky compared to others. Still, it was no easy thing to have lost most of a limb.

Abernathy pushed himself up to his feet and began to hobble forward.

“Well,” she said. “Shall we go in and face them all together?”

Damian inclined his head in a bow. “Indeed, let’s.”

And with that, the three of them, in their odd trio, headed back into the ballroom.

Abernathy did not grow silent but rather kept grumbling about the poor nature of the musicians this night.

“None of them know how to play properly,” he growled. “I don’t know what’s happened. Perhaps they’ve all been at the punch.”

She laughed. “Oh dear, the idea of a drunken orchestra is most interesting,” she said.

“Well, I don’t blame them,” Abernathy allowed as they headed into the heat and cacophony. “To survive the lot of us aristocrats, a good tippie is probably just the thing.”

“I don’t know,” she ventured. “Tipping seems to lead people into much fouler humors than it does good ones.”

Abernathy’s brows rose. “Fair point to you for being such a good observer.”

“Oh, I’ve observed it more than enough,” she said ruefully.

Damian paused.

He wondered what that meant. Had she been an observer of people who’d had too much to drink and lost their temper? Perhaps it was simply that she had seen the aftereffects of her parents’ parties at her house. She might not have attended those, but he had a distinct impression that she’d seen enough lords and ladies at their poorest to have a low opinion of over imbibing.

As they wound their way back into the crush, a young lady darted up to them, her spectacles gleaming in the ballroom candlelight.

“Mother is looking for you,” the young lady said, her face tense and yet sympathetic.

Lady Rose’s face paled. “Oh dear,” she said. “I knew she would be.”

The other young lady leaned in and asked softly and clearly with concern, “Where have you been?”

“I’ve been out in the garden,” Lady Rose informed, her eyes lighting for a moment.

“Without me?” the young lady piped up.

Damian was rather glad that it seemed that the young woman had such good sense and clear care for Lady Rose.

“This is my sister, Lady Hyacinth,” Lady Rose quickly explained as she slipped her free hand into her sister’s.

Clarence bowed his head to her, as did Abernathy, who eyed the young woman with interest.

Lady Hyacinth did not look relieved as she pushed her spectacles up her nose, which had drifted downwards in her seeming distress. “Well, I’m glad you are back now, but Mother is on the rampage.”

And as if the young lady had literally summoned the formidable countess out of the gates of hell, Lady Millbank charged through the crowd. Her dark hair was curled to perfection. Diamonds shone in almost every single coil. Her great fan of red silk and painted roses beat the air wildly, drawing back some of the heat, but also increasing the scent around them.

Her bosom was pressed up tightly within her stays, and the thin scrap of fabric barely covered Lady’s Millbank’s chest, which was the fashion of the day.

The expensive and perfectly cut gown fit her body in a style which suggested she had no plan on joining the older, staid ladies sitting by the wall drinking ratafia. It was clear that she’d once been extremely beautiful, and she was still quite statuesque and impressive.

Lady Millbank eyed him with the sort of honed assessment as a shark before going in for the kill. And for a moment he wanted to take a step back.

But then she trained her eyes on Lady Rose.

The woman looked as if she was going to take a bite out of her daughter.

And so instead he cleared his throat. “Good evening, Lady Millbank. It has been some time since I’ve had the pleasure of your company.”

Lady Millbank’s gaze swung back to him, and her features transformed into joviality and amusement.

“Ah,” she all but purred. “Viscount Clarence, it is good to see you here this evening. We have not had the pleasure of your company at such events in some time. You used to frequent them all the time.”

He groaned inwardly. In general, he had stayed away whilst he’d been at war. But he’d resumed his duties as of late and had apparently avoided her notice. “Yes. I have been very busy with the war.”

Lady Millbank pursed her lips and waved her fan. “Yes. So many gentlemen are busy with the war,” she said. “It leaves so little time for fun.”

He didn’t want to reply that war generally did not leave time for fun. Or if it did, it made men mad, fighting for their lives one moment and drinking their brains out and living as if there was no tomorrow the next.

Because for most of them, there wouldn’t be a tomorrow.

“I’ve just had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with your daughter,” he said. “And I was about to ask her to dance.”

Lady Millbank blinked. “My daughter?” she said, snapping her fan shut.

“Yes. Lady Rose,” he affirmed. “Do you approve?”

Lady Millbank let out a trill of a laugh, one that had no doubt been quite pleasant when she had been a girl but now grated ever so slightly. “Of course, Viscount Clarence. You must take her out on the floor immediately, if it so pleases you.”

Pleased him. It was the sentiment of the ton. It was the man who must be pleased in the end.

And with that, he gave a bow and led Lady Rose onto the dance floor, wondering if he'd just dug a deeper hole because he hadn't actually asked Rose to dance.

But he'd had the impulsive urge that it was the right thing to do.

"Thank you," Lady Rose breathed. "I think you just saved me from a terrifying and exceptionally long lecture."

"I hope so," he said. "Perhaps we can distract her into thinking that you have become the belle of the ball this evening, and she won't bother asking where you've been for the last several minutes."

She nodded. "I hope so."

"Your mother," he prompted, observing the other couples taking up the floor so that he might choose the best position. "She causes you a great deal of distress?"

"My mother and I simply don't see eye to eye," she said without self-indulgence. "And that is all."

He considered her comment and realized that she did not want him to press further. And so he did not. Instead, he placed his hand at the small of her back and took her free hand in his. The music changed to a waltz, a beautiful, slow minor key, one that he'd heard in Austria some months before.

He smiled down at her, wishing for them both to have a moment of escape. Escape from war, from mothers, from the pressures of the time.

"Do you like the waltz?" he asked.

"I like to waltz very much," she said, her expression opposing her words. "I just generally don't like who I waltz with."

He laughed at that and then... She beamed up at him.

Half the company seemed to turn and watch them. And with that, he slowly rocked them back and forth and then swiftly circled around the floor. Her gown belled out and swept against his legs. She tilted her head back to lock her gaze with his, as if the simple act of keeping her eyes on his face would ensure that naught would go amiss.

“That’s right, Lady Rose,” he said softly. “Just look at me. There’s nobody else here but the two of us. You and I on a vast floor dancing against the polished wood to beautiful music.”

She let out a soft breath then, and her face transformed to one of sheer beauty.

He couldn’t breathe as he witnessed the transformation from tension to bliss.

“It is beautiful music,” she agreed. “In truth, I don’t know what Abernathy is talking about.”

His lips twitched. “Complete balderdash, really. Little could gain his approval. You see, he plays the violin. He’s quite good at it. And he doesn’t like how most people play. He thinks they strangle the thing.”

She let out a laugh. “Oh dear. Quite a critic, is he?”

“Yes,” he affirmed. “I think, in the end, he’d be far happier playing in an orchestra than at war, but life does not allow such things. And gentlemen of his skills and rank are sent away to keep England safe.”

“It is a scandal,” she said firmly.

“A scandal?” he queried with a shake of his head, trying to understand her meaning.

“Yes, that those men... Boys must give up their dreams for the warmongering of a little man in France.”

“Napoleon’s not little,” he pointed out, fighting the urge to laugh because she’d been so serious.

“Surely he is! Everyone says so,” she gasped.

“Everyone talks tosh,” he returned. “He’s not little. He’s of average height. It is something that people say to diminish him and to make him seem less godlike.” he said. “I’ve actually seen the emperor.”

“You’ve seen him?” she bit out, her eyes widening with surprise.

He arched a brow. “Yes. And he’s actually quite average-looking. But his personality is something else. And I can understand why people follow him to their deaths, but you have the right of it. It is sad that so many must lose their lives because one man is determined to own all of Europe.”

“I think he wants to own the world,” she said tightly.

“Some people will never be satisfied,” he agreed, rather surprised at her astute assessment of current politics and the war.

“And you?” she queried softly. “Are you satisfied?”

“No,” he said honestly, gazing down into her eyes. “I am not. Not as long as men like my friend Abernathy struggle so. I cannot be.”

She gazed up at him with wonder and admiration before she replied softly, “Nor I.”

CHAPTER 5

*R*ose could scarce contain her shock. The man before her was so unique, so different to any of the gentlemen of the ton that she had met in the last months.

He did not talk of lace or Gentleman Jackson's. No, he was most committed to the care of his friend. To the care of her, a perfect stranger. It left her quite breathless, really.

“And how shall men like Abernathy be helped so that you are satisfied?” she dared to ask.

A muscle tightened in his jaw. “The way our society is? Many will never truly negotiate the fullness of it. But they can manage if given some support. Like you, they prefer to be away from the loud noises of parties and the city. The country often suits.”

She pressed her lips together. It was understandable, but not necessarily the answer she'd hoped for. Though she should not have been surprised. Even he could have no magic antidote. If he did, no one would suffer as Abernathy did. Or even herself.

“I see,” she sighed. “I do not have the option of stepping away from society.”

“No,” he agreed without dismay. “So we will find you a husband who prefers the country, loves to read, and doesn't like to throw balls.”

She grinned up at him. “Do you know anyone like that?”

He paused.

And for one shocking, delicious moment, she wondered if he could be like that, but he did not seem particularly interested in retiring to the country, and why should he?

He was a capable young man who was interested in war, and she had put him in such a position that he no doubt felt he

had to be chivalrous. And yet, for a moment, his gaze warmed as he looked at her. His eyes slowly studied her face, pausing on her lips, then going to her russet hair coiled on top of her head.

“We will find someone who suits you,” he promised.

“How?” she blurted.

“I will begin to think of the best way that people might see you for the jewel you are.”

Jewel.

She wasn't a diamond. She never would be. But suddenly, she wondered if she might be something better. At least in his eyes.

“However shall we manage such a thing?” she said.

Slowly, he turned her under his arm and skillfully rotated them in place as he gazed down upon her. “I shall come over to your establishment tomorrow and call upon you.”

“You're going to come and call upon me,” she clarified, her stomach tightening with both the excitement of seeing him and dread of the popularity that such a visit might bestow.

He nodded. “I think it's the wisest thing.”

“But then my mother will think that you are interested in me,” she pointed out quickly, not wishing him to risk being trapped.

But he didn't look concerned. In fact, he looked eager to begin. He winked. “I don't have to marry you even if she thinks that I'm interested in you.”

That wink did the strangest, most marvelous thing to her. “Fair point. But my mother is most determined. If she senses a worthy suitor, she might go after you.”

“Never you fear,” he said. “I can handle your mother.”

“Better you than me,” she returned.

He laughed again. His gaze swung about the ballroom.

“Are you looking for your friend?” she asked softly.

“How did you know?” he queried.

“Because you’re a good person.”

He tripped at that. “Steady on, Lady Rose.”

She kept her step easily as he covered the faux pas with a quick turn. “I’m the one who’s supposed to trip because I’m nervous,” she said. “Do you generally trip when you are nervous?”

“No,” he replied honestly. “I don’t, but you caught me off guard. Most people do not accuse me of being a good person.”

“It is not an accusation,” she said. “It is an observation and an earnest one. I would not entrust my future to someone who is not a good person.”

“And how can you be sure?” he asked, his gaze softening.

She lifted her chin and declared, “Because of the way you treated me in the garden, and because of the fact that you are so kind to Abernathy. I can see your patience with him.”

“Oh, he would not like to hear you say that,” he groaned.

“Perhaps he might not like it, but it’s true,” she stated without amendment. “People who have difficulty need people who can be patient with them, and he is clearly struggling too. He suffers from melancholia?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said carefully, clearly not wishing to share more than his friend might like. “He does. His entire world has changed from what he thought it would be.”

“And what did he think it would be?” she queried as she followed him in a quick series of steps.

He rotated her around slowly, his gloved hands gentle yet firm in their guidance. “He thought he would be a great general and that he would be written about in the history books, but he is a hero,” he said. “Though he may not be written about in the history books for it.”

“What makes him a hero?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“He saved a boy. Just a drummer boy,” he said, though the emotion rumbling in his voice belied the simplicity of his words.

“Just,” she echoed before she frowned. “What a terrible word when considering heroism. To save a boy—it is the height of heroism.”

“I think so too,” Clarence said, and he looked as if he truly admired her in that moment, and that was worth more than diamonds, or tiaras, or the title of being the Season’s incomparable.

Her mother would never agree.

But in that moment, Rose felt recognized for who she was inside, not how she appeared on the outside.

The music came to a halt. Her gown swung against his legs as he easily brought them to a pause, but he did not let go of her immediately.

“Until tomorrow,” he said.

“I do not want to let you go right now,” she said because he made her feel more alive, more present, more accepted than she had in all her life.

“Shall I go with you to your mother?”

“No,” she sighed. “Because if you do, we will cause a scandal, and I don’t wish to force you to marry me. It’ll be a terrible way to repay your kindness.”

“I don’t know if it would be terrible,” he said.

“But not what you were planning on,” she pointed out.

“No, it would not be what I planned on.”

There was long pause, and she wondered what he was thinking in that moment. If being married to her would be an appalling thing, or if plans really weren’t that important to

him. She wanted to ask him, but just as she started to, her sister came bounding up.

“Come along,” Lady Hyacinth urged. “Mother wishes to speak to you.”

“Oh,” Lady Rose said ruefully, “does she?”

Her sister nodded, her expression apologetic at the interruption.

Clarence bowed. “I will see you on the morrow. Let your mother know that I will call upon you. It might aid you in this moment to distract her.”

“I will,” she said, drawing herself up, readying herself for her mother’s abrasive conversation.

And with that, Clarence gave a bow and headed off into the crowd to look for his friend.

She felt a wave of such powerful emotion for him that she could not draw breath. She didn’t understand what she felt, but the wave of it was deep and strong.

It was wonderful to see a man care for another so intensely. In today’s society, stoicism was much appreciated, but it was a cold stoicism, not one of kindness and appreciation. Instead, it was one of pretending that emotions did not exist at all. Emotions did exist. That she knew quite well, and some people just hid them unbearably, imprisoning themselves in pain.

She did not want that for herself.

She did not want that for Clarence either.

But she wondered if he was so kind to Abernathy and to herself, was he as kind to himself? She doubted that a man like Clarence could go through war unscathed. So, how did he protect himself from those memories and those thoughts? Perhaps he could help her on that score too and not in just finding a husband.

She followed her sister through the crowd and at last came up to her mother, who was standing by a palm frond waving her fan, eyeing the crowd like a spider looking for flies to land in her web.

“Well done, my dear,” her mother crowed. “You have just established yourself as a significant lady of the season. I am proud of you.”

Those words should have been significant to any young woman, that their mother was proud. But all she cared about was that it had saved her from incrimination, from a shaming conversation, in which she was told she must do better.

She smiled at her mother. “I’m glad you are pleased,” she said.

“You should be pleased too,” Lady Millbank said, her gaze narrowing, her pleasure fleeting. “He’s quite a catch. He has a large fortune and an important title and a good position in government. He’s not going to die in war either, which is nice, or be wounded like his friend. Dear God. Imagine having to go about like that.”

“Mama,” she hissed, shocked at her mother’s cruelty. “That is an unkind thing to say.”

“Yes, but it is the truth,” Lady Millbank said without apology. “Imagine having to go about with a cripple.”

“Mama,” she gritted, anger coursing through her. “Don’t say that.”

Her mother’s eyes flared in shock at her daughter’s sudden boldness. “I beg your pardon?”

“I met his friend,” she bit out defiantly. “He’s a good man and a hero.”

Lady Millbank pursed her lips. “He may be a good man, and he may be a hero, but he’ll never be able to ask you to dance the waltz.”

Rose arched a brow, refusing to back down. Something had awakened in her. A spark. A spark that refused to go out.

“That hardly seems the worst thing, Mama.”

Her mama said nothing else, but she rolled her eyes as if Rose was exhausting.

“Clarence will come and call tomorrow,” Rose said, hoping to divert her mother away from another line of attack, knowing that, at present, she couldn’t escape her mother or her views.

But once she was married...

Her mother’s lips curled. “Good. Where he leads, others will follow. Well done, my dear. It does seem as if you’re going to do exactly what I require after all. My fears can be put to bed.”

She nodded, drawing in a breath.

Rose dug her toes into her slippers and felt the wood floor through the soles as Clarence had shown her how to do. She experienced a moment of peace and felt as if her heart would not beat out of her chest at her mother’s words.

She was almost painfully glad that she had met the strange viscount. And that she had an ally at last.

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CHAPTER 6

The boxing club rang with the sound of fists hitting flesh, of men shouting, calling to each other, instructing in martial blows.

Frankly, Clarence reveled in it.

He loved the sound of men at work, practicing with each other, making each other stronger, propping each other up, and forging bodies into metaphorical mettle so that they could survive the torments of this life.

The truth was that most men did not know how to talk to each other with any meaningful success.

At least, it didn't seem so anymore. Not after nearly twenty years of war.

They did not have a great capacity for deep conversation.

He certainly didn't.

He could be there for his friends. He could help them through hard times, but he himself could not utter the words that would often lead him to destruction. To a night out drinking too hard, too much brandy, or a late night in.

And he did not like those kinds of endeavors, so, instead, he chose physical pain to relieve him of his demons. Most of the men he knew did as well. They could not let the pain out, so they took the pain into their bodies, and it worked.

His friend, Abernathy, though struggling on his new wooden peg leg, had resisted the idea of a chair, and he had resisted the idea of giving up forever, surrendering to complacency.

Damian understood the battle that many men had to choose. Some would prefer to stay in a chair, but Abernathy could not. The lord tottered about the room, trying to find his balance, cursing often when he felt himself tilt to the left or

swing a little too far right and not have good control of the peg leg.

Damian did not go full boar at him.

Such a thing would only be devilish. Abernathy, of course, did not like it. He could tell from the way his friend's mouth was pressed into a thin line.

And Abernathy's eyes flashed with barely concealed anger, well-seasoned with frustration. "Come on, Clarence," he growled. "Come at me, you arse."

"I will come at you, my friend, when you are ready," Damian assured. "But I am not an arse."

Abernathy let out a dark laugh. "I can't quite agree with that, but I will say that you are not a tosser, and there is a difference."

Clarence laughed too, and then he stopped. He did not usually laugh so fully.

Abernathy's mouth quirked into a smirk, and the fury in him dimmed ever so slightly. "I see that you just recognized what you've done."

"What have I done?" Damian asked, his fists up, ready to begin.

Abernathy lifted his own fists, knuckles up. As he did, his shoulders adjusted to the linen shirt that was drenched over his muscled body. Many of his muscles had diminished over the last year because he had been so unwell, struggling to recuperate from having a limb amputated. But Abernathy struggled mightily to maintain a strong physical form so that he could still do many things without assistance. Because he hated assistance.

Something Damian understood all too well.

"You are laughing a great deal, my friend," Abernathy said, his dark brows rising with amusement. "As a matter of fact, I cannot recall seeing you laugh so much. Last night on

that ballroom floor was a revelation. Lady Rose has a remarkable effect on you.”

Damian narrowed his eyes. “She’s an interesting lady. I’ll agree with you on that point.”

“Interesting?” Abernathy scoffed. “She’s not like anybody you’ve ever met before. At least not in a dress.”

He rolled his eyes. “Cease, Abernathy.”

“You love to adopt broken birds.”

Damian scowled. “You are not a broken bird, Abernathy.”

Abernathy snorted. “I’m an eagle, aren’t I? Though I feel more like a crow these days.”

He didn’t want to argue with Abernathy on that point. He’d rather have his friend think of himself as a wild animal than an invalid. But the young lady was not a broken bird. No. She was simply an animal who had been put in a cage and was resisting said captivity.

She hated it. Rightly.

She needed freedom.

She needed fresh air, and she needed someone to set her aflight. Could he be that person? Should he be?

Bloody hell, he wanted to be.

Could he help her see how to take off? He did not know for certain, but damnation how he wanted to try.

And he would.

“Come on,” Abernathy called, shaking Damian from his reverie. “We haven’t got all day.”

“Are you truly ready?” Damian challenged, his gut twisting at the idea of possibly knocking Abernathy over. “A moment ago—”

“Look,” his friend cut in impatiently. “The only way I’m going to get better, and you know it, is if we go with this hard tilt. No mercy.”

Damian ground his teeth down.

He didn't like the idea of no mercy with a man standing on a peg leg. But it wasn't his right to decide. And he wasn't about to tell Abernathy what he could or couldn't do.

It wasn't his place. As a matter of fact, that kind of care often got the victims of it in trouble.

He knew that several of the people in Abernathy's family had wanted to tuck him up into bed and let him stay there, wasting away, rotting in sorrow.

The truth was staying abed was a good way to get bed sores and to lose all muscle tone. He rather admired his friend for being so demanding at this particular moment. "Right then. Let's go."

Abernathy cocked his head to the left, stretching out the muscles, and then gave him a hard stare and a cock of his chin as if to say Let's go.

In return, they began circling each other.

Abernathy led a strange sort of dance in which the thump of his peg leg hit the floor, creating a rhythm.

Damian paid no attention to it.

Instead, he kept his eyes locked on his friend's, waiting for a moment in which he could anticipate a blow. Damian did exactly as his friend ordered.

He darted in, swung to the right and landed a solid blow right into Abernathy's middle. Abernathy let out a wild groan and bent. He teetered for a moment, but then much to Clarence's shock, Abernathy twisted, bent low without toppling over, and swung his right fist up into Clarence's jaw.

He staggered back.

He had not anticipated his friend's ability to counter so quickly.

"You underestimated me," Abernathy stated.

“I did,” he wheezed. “I am an arse.”

Abernathy’s lips twitched. “I told you that you are.”

“But at least,” he drawled, thrilled to be back to banter, “I am not a tosser.”

Abernathy threw back his head, and for the first time, a rich rolling laugh passed his lips.

And in that moment, Damian would’ve welcomed a thousand uppercuts with his lip torn and blood coursing over his chin. He was glad Abernathy had nailed him so hard because the moment showed Abernathy that he was still capable. That he could do this. He could face the world, shoulders back, his stance wide and ready to take it on, because that’s what they all needed in the end.

For life could be beautiful and brutal and cruel and... Wonderful.

It would give one everything and take it all away again. And one had to be able to get back up. Damian had gotten back up time and time again, and Abernathy almost hadn’t.

And in this moment, it was proof that Abernathy had gotten back up, that he would continue to get back up, and that nothing would ever lay him low. He could see it now in Abernathy’s dark gaze. How he wanted to shout to the heavens that he had seen it happen and that he had been a part of it.

But he knew such an action would only draw attention to Abernathy’s struggles.

So instead, he turned to the left, pulled his fists up, and said, “Let’s go again.”

Abernathy gave another nod, and they began countering, dancing about as best they could. Damian did not make allowances. Instead, he kept his hands up by his chin and looked for another in.

But this time, Abernathy was the one who darted in first and fast, trying to get a blow into Damian’s kidneys.

As he turned ever so slightly, Damian danced back and popped Abernathy right in the nose. Abernathy's eyes widened, and he staggered back, the wooden peg leg making a clicking sound as he shot back over the waxed wood floor. He nearly slipped at that point, but then Abernathy pulled a remarkable move, swinging around on the peg leg like it was a pivot.

Abernathy then gave a roundhouse punch right into Damian's stomach.

Damian let out a groan and stumbled back. They continued on like this for several minutes until Abernathy was covered in sweat, and Damian had broken a sweat as well.

Finally, they both looked at each other and bowed.

It was time to stop. It wasn't an actual bout. It simply was a good exercise.

Slowly, they both crossed over to the benches lining the walls.

Abernathy threw himself down on one. He was allowing himself a moment—a moment to show that perhaps this was harder for him than for most of the people here.

Though Abernathy wasn't the only one who wasn't perfect of limb and body. It was something Clarence liked about this particular club.

It was full of soldiers who had been wounded on the Continent, whether it be of mind or body.

Not all were former military.

But this particular club had many in it.

Some of them had limbs that were tied to the chest so that they wouldn't flap about because they were weak and difficult to use. And others walked with limps from legs permanently scarred by war.

And some had faces that looked as if they had been burned and torched by fire, likely gunpowder.

Here was the place they had all come to heal, to face themselves, to continue on. Damian knew he looked perfect on the outside, like a proper gentleman, like a rake.

At least that's what he'd been told by several well-meaning ladies.

But the brutal truth was inside.

Inside, he was a twisted sort of man. His insides looked like the outsides of many of the men here, broken and hacked apart, struggling for healing.

Healing in ways that would not be pleasing for many to look upon. But still, at least he was not bleeding or oozing pus from his wounds inside anymore. At least he hoped not. Helping his friends had aided him in surviving.

That cause, at least, had given him the opportunity to dam up the pain rather than give in to it.

And he would never give in to that pain. He'd danced with that one too many times before, and he'd seen hell.

Once, he had teetered on the precipice and had nearly given in. Yes, that time that he had nearly surrendered to the agonies of seeing his friends blown to bits in war was still in his memory.

Watching whole regiments decimated by Napoleon's armies, and watching generals make the most horrific decisions, men who had very little experience in war and were just there because they managed to buy a commission? Those experiences had shaken him to his core. But he had clawed his way back from the horror of it.

Yes, he was grateful he had not given in to that darkness.

The pain of it had been extreme.

Instead, like so many of the men here, he'd pulled himself up from it, hand by hand, foothold by foothold, until he'd come back up over the precipice and determined that he would not let anyone else feel like that.

And in that moment, he knew that was why he had decided to help her. Why he would help her. Why he would do everything he could to help Lady Rose, because she was standing on that precipice too.

Many people simply wanted to shove her in, and, bloody hell, he would not allow it.

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CHAPTER 7

Lady Millbank should have been pleased as punch. The drawing room was filled with gentlemen, flowers decorated every possible surface, and the scent of it all was quite overpowering.

Rose sat perched on the edge of the French settee, her hands wound in her lap, her nails digging into her palms.

And the smile on her face, she was fairly certain, was more of a grimace than a grin.

The gentlemen were on their knees before her, thrusting posies and little written sonnets her way. She wanted to scream at them all to please run away, to give her a bit of distance, to allow her to have a moment to breathe.

There were so many of them!

And they were rattling off strange sayings, what they assumed were clever little bon mots. They all assumed such empty, rehearsed sayings would make her pleased, but she was not pleased.

And it wasn't because they, themselves, were awful.

It wasn't because the gentlemen were unpleasant.

It was because she felt completely surrounded and was certain that she was going to say the wrong thing at any moment, completely destroying the skein of finally woven opportunity that she and Clarence had created the night before.

Her mother stood by the fire, her face slowly turning to stone as she looked at her daughter. Rose caught sight of her mama and swallowed. She knew she had to do something because the gentlemen were beginning to act a little oddly, as if they weren't certain why she was so reticent in her comments regarding their myriad of compliments.

Several of them had complimented her gown. A few had written odes to her eyebrows, and a few had attempted to sing to her. Those had been particularly challenging because while she admired the attempt of any young person who wanted to be artistic, she knew that most of them did not have an artistic bone in their body. They had merely copied something out of some book or other, hoping to simply engage in the acts of courtship. Which would secure her for them in potential matrimony. And they were only interested in her because Clarence had deemed her interesting.

She forced herself to smile again.

She was hoping it was one of demure admiration, but the look on the gentleman's face before her did not seem to agree with that.

He actually pulled back, in a flurry of cologne and pressed linen, and stood. He looked at Lady Millbank. "Thank you for such a lovely morning, Lady Millbank, but I have another call to perform."

And with that, he whipped around on his polished, booted heel and strode out.

A few of the other gentlemen pushed in, hoping to thrust their posies at her. After all, she had been shown interest by one of the most important gentlemen in society last night.

Surely, she had something to offer, but Rose quickly began to realize that she had no idea what to say or how to act in this situation.

She was not prepared nor accustomed, even though her mother had forced her to practice witty banter and banal conversation for the last several months.

Hyacinth was no better.

Hyacinth kept bringing up Milton and Dante, and those gentlemen who did dare approach her seemed appalled by her apparent knowledge of various philosophical writers.

Their mama kept shooting dagger glares in between her forced smiles.

Hyacinth kept laughing behind her sleeve, her glasses glinting in the morning sun, as if she enjoyed pointing out that none of the gentlemen in the room knew the difference between Burke and Descartes.

After nearly an hour of such missteps, the gentlemen began to mill about, clearly having expected conversation about horses, hounds, and lace.

Rose had no idea how to capture their attention again.

And so, approaching desperation at her mother's growing displeasure, she stood. "Gentlemen, it was such a pleasure to have you all here. I hope, with all my heart, you shall come again."

And the moment those words came out of her mouth, she knew they were exactly the wrong things to say. She was supposed to praise their looks, their clothes, their intelligence. She wasn't supposed to sound desperate and as if she was afraid that they might never come back again.

As she drew in a breath, her body began to shake. She could feel the nerves washing through her. Her mother took a step forward, and she was certain that her mother, at any moment, was going to grab her by the arm, march her out of the room, and tell her to pull herself together and act like a young lady should when engaged with so many gentlemen.

She was lucky. She knew it.

Somehow, she had all of these gentlemen here, though she did not actually wish their attentions, and she was on the cusp of being the season's diamond, something she also did not want.

How she wished her mother could understand!

Just as she was about to give in, Clarence walked through the door. He strode in with such confidence that her jaw dropped.

She quickly snapped her mouth closed. She did not want to look a codfish or a fool in front of him because she actually liked him.

His mere presence beat back the wave of anxiety coursing through her body. Her heart rate began to slow, and she recalled some of the things that he had said to her the night before. She focused on the scent of the flowers in the room.

She drank it in. And rather than finding it overwhelming this time, she enjoyed it. She pushed her toes into her slippers, focusing on the silk feel of the stockings, and she let her hands trace over the fabric of her simple morning gown, letting her fingers trail over the embroidered flowers.

“Ladies,” Clarence said grandly, one hand behind his broad back. “It is a pleasure to see you. Thank you for allowing me to visit.”

With that, he produced a bouquet of beautiful pink roses.

It was exactly the sort of thing that her mama would adore. And she knew in that moment that those roses were not for her. Though the play on her name was amusing.

The flowers were to trick her mother.

And she found herself laughing.

The entire room swung their gazes to her.

“Do you find Clarence’s flowers amusing?” someone piped up, stunned.

“Of course I do,” she blurted. “Pink roses always fill one with joy and amusement, don’t they? If one cannot laugh at the sight of a pink rose and feel joy, then I feel one is dead inside. And my name is Rose! So clearly, he sees me as full of joy.”

The entire room gaped at her for a moment as if they were uncertain if she had just said something absolutely stupid or something brilliant.

Clarence bowed to her. “Beautifully said. Anyone who has been to war knows that one must enjoy the rarities in this life. Thank you for appreciating my presence and seeing my deep desire to fill you with the joy of roses, Lady Rose.”

The entire room suddenly beamed with acceptance.

If Clarence was giving his approval, then clearly she had said something witty, something correct.

And she had been correct.

She knew she was, but none of them would understand it.

But Clarence did.

He slowly crossed to her, and all the gentlemen got out of his way swiftly. He offered her the flowers, his eyes dancing. She took them into her hands, did not even bother to smell them, but then handed them over to her mama. “Would you please put these in a vase?”

Her mother let out a squeak of impulsive surprise at such a request.

Shaking herself, Lady Millbank raced forward and took the bouquet in her arms.

She headed quickly out to the hall, but before she did, she said with eyes now only for him as the best prize in the sea of gentlemen, “Please do make yourself at home, Clarence.”

“Oh, I have no intention of lingering,” Clarence intoned. “I’ve come to take Lady Rose for a ride. I know she has a great many suitors, but surely a ride in the park is just the thing.”

Her mother sputtered for a moment. “But, my lord, I don’t know what kind of vehicle you have brought.”

“My curricle,” he said as if it was the most logical thing in the world. “I think that she’ll enjoy a race about the park, don’t you, Lady Millbank?”

“As long as it is not too fast a conveyance. I could not bear the idea of my daughter being at risk.”

She wanted to choke at her mother's faux concern. Her mother would have tossed her into the Thames if it meant the chance at the title of viscountess.

"I would never put such a beautiful jewel at risk," he said, his brow arching as if in a secret quip with Rose. "I shall ensure that she is in an equally beautiful setting to make certain no harm can come to her. It shall be secure and perfect."

Lady Millbank all but swooned, and Rose wanted to shake her mother. Was she so easily led by a few words and such an important title? Obviously, the answer was yes.

Rose darted towards the viscount, and without waiting for him to offer her his arm, she plunked her own arm into the crook of his. "I think it sounds absolutely marvelous, Mama. Surely, you cannot object to such a jaunt. Besides, it will be wonderful to get an airing. I have a new dress after all."

Her mama blinked, stunned that Rose would say something so polished.

And she found herself stunned too because, usually, she would not be so manipulative in her speech, or so smooth. She did indeed have a new dress, and her mama would want everyone to see it, even if Rose did not.

Still, she felt she could bear it if she was beside Clarence in a curricule rather than in a crush of people.

Clarence's lips turned ever so slowly in the slyest of grins, and she found herself liking their alliance very much. She could not help but match his smile.

Lady Millbank smiled at them both and batted playfully at one of the petals of the flowers. "Well, of course I cannot object to such a marvelous thing. Do take her then, and please be careful. Enjoy the afternoon."

Clarence bowed, but before they could escape, Rose's mother continued with a gesture to the windows. "It looks very fine. We shall expect you back soon though. No going beyond the park, Clarence. We must protect our precious jewel."

“Of course, Lady Millbank,” he said. “No going beyond the park. I wouldn’t dream of it. Not in a month of Sundays.”

And with that, he turned and escorted Rose swiftly towards the arched door, leaving the gentlemen agog.

She could all but feel their astonishment behind her. A few moments before, they had all been certain they had found dross instead of gold by calling upon her.

But here Clarence was again, and here he was again showing what a jewel she was, so clearly someone to be sought after.

And as they nearly made their escape, the gentlemen raised their voices, all of them protesting.

“No, no.”

“She must come with me.”

“I was here before you, Clarence.”

“Please allow her to come for a walk with me.”

“I was planning on taking the young lady to look at bonbons and French lace,” another said.

Lady Millbank shot up her hands, the roses quivering, a few petals floating to the floor. “Alas, none of you asked. Just Clarence, and so he must take the upper hand.”

With a wolfish grin, Clarence drawled, “Of course, I have the upper hand, Lady Millbank. I always do.”

Without another word, he whisked Rose from the salon, down the hall, and out to the waiting vehicle.

Her heart raced, but not out of fear...

This time, out of excitement.

CHAPTER 8

The curricle raced at a quick clip along Rotten Row.

Everyone got out of his way. He didn't have to worry about that. He wasn't dangerous, but he was swift.

He loved the feel of a smoothly running vehicle, the horses in tandem, perfectly taking their paces as they raced along the Row.

People gaped, as they were meant to do, because the truth was that Rose was a beautiful woman. An exceptionally beautiful woman.

From her russet hair that curled perfectly around her heart-shaped face, to the blue eyes that shone like twin sapphires, to the pink in her cheeks?

She was perfection.

Her figure was lovely. She looked strong, and she had a grace about her when she moved. But he could tell by the way she had been at that ball, and then in that salon, she would never be the Season's diamond if left to her own devices.

For, most important of all, Rose clearly had no desire to rule society. And there it was.

Without a functional wish to be the ruler of the ton, one could never achieve it. Besides, it didn't suit her, and her mother trying to force her into the role was making her life a living hell.

Bloody hell, when he strode into that salon, he'd wanted to walk over to her mother and shake the roses in her face. Not gentlemanly of him, he knew, but he was certain her mother was bullying her.

He'd longed to grab hold of the lady and insist, "Can you not see what a wonder you have before you? Why the devil are you trying to force her into a mold that she does not fit?"

Of course, ton mamas had a distinct duty, and that was to make certain that their daughters married well.

Married men who would be able to financially support them in the style they were accustomed to for the entirety of their lives.

And he understood the importance of such a position. If the mama got it wrong and a young lady married a gentleman whose fortune was not as great as they thought, well, it would be a very miserable life for the daughter.

Also, there was a potential for scandal, a shame to the branch of a family tree, and all mamas wanted to make sure that no such thing befell their daughter.

After all, it was a quick way to ruin an entire family, and most people believed wealth equated with happiness, and sometimes it did. He certainly knew that poverty did not equal happiness, though many people would proclaim that they would give up everything for love.

He did not believe that love solved everything.

No, full bellies, warm beds, security, a good doctor if one was sick, and the kindness of another was what people should truly aspire to, not the sort of love that one read about in so many of the grandiose tales.

Such love? It did not exist.

Well, he'd never seen it. Not really.

Oh, he'd had friends who'd found love. His dear friend Brookhaven had found a remarkable wife, but their love was so perfect, so practical, so accepting. It wasn't grand, but it was beautiful and intimate.

Damian didn't think he'd ever have that for himself because he could not open himself to emotion like Brookhaven and his wife had done. He knew he had to keep himself locked up. He knew that he had to keep boxing. He had to keep his demons at bay. For he couldn't risk opening the dam of his

emotions. They were far too dangerous. The last time they had stormed, he had almost not made it to the other side.

No, the only way that he could survive this life was by lifting other people up and guiding them along the path, and he would get back to his war duties, and all would be well.

Damian quickly glanced over at Lady Rose.

She was sitting with a smile upon her face and her body at ease, despite the speed and gale of the racing vehicle.

No wonder everyone was staring.

At this moment, she looked like the diamond and was even behaving like one.

Indeed, she looked as if she was meant to be a queen on a curricule, speeding along the Serpentine, showing off her beautiful and expensive new gown, her straw hat bedecked with silk and feathers and bobbing in the wind.

Just a few minutes before, she looked like she had literally been a captive in the gladiatorial arena about to be cut down by said gladiators in Ancient Rome.

“You look much improved with the change of setting,” he said.

She laughed. “I feel better too. Thank you for rescuing me so thoroughly. I don’t think I could have born another moment. Hyacinth was doing her very best, but it was all coming apart very rapidly.”

“Yes, I could see,” he admitted, for he did not think she’d be offended by his honesty. “But you were bearing up quite well, considering that it is not your particular milieu.”

She groaned. “I realized that it was obvious,” she said. “That I don’t fit in. Why can’t everyone else see and just leave me alone?”

“Ah,” he said carefully, keeping his hands light on the reins. “But you don’t wish to be left alone, do you?”

“Not entirely, no,” she sighed. “But I don’t want silly people reciting silly poetry at me.”

A laugh boomed out of him. He couldn’t stop it. Her dismay was so heartfelt that it all but echoed through him. “Yes, half the fools in London were in that room, weren’t they?”

She gave him a sheepish grimace. She hated to admit the truth of it, he could see, but then she nodded.

Her brow furrowed before she shuddered. “Yes, they had the most ridiculous things to say about my eyebrows.”

He barked with laughter. “If someone made a comment about my eyebrows and the praise of them, I’d shake them like a terrier would a rat.”

“If only I could,” she returned.

“Should I teach you how?” he teased. “I’m quite good with wrestling and boxing, you know.”

She let out a sound of such astonishment and joy that he beamed.

He’d done that.

He’d given her that joy.

Bloody hell, she deserved joy, because when she was joyful, her face lit like a radiant star. Yes. Not a diamond, a star, a glowing, shimmering, fiery bright star racing through the night sky.

How he wanted her to be like that all the time, and he would have to find a way for it to be so.

“Well,” she said. “Here we are. What do we do now?”

He winked because he had noted how much she had enjoyed it the night before. Clearly, she had known little play in this life. “Well, I’m going to take you around the park and over to—”

“No,” she rushed. “Not in the park. Not here in your magnificent curricle which, by the way, is quite nice.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“You are the perfect rake of a gentleman. Are you not?” she asked, tracing her hand along the beautifully appointed seat. “You’re exactly as you should be. Handsome, well-pedigreed, well-moneyed, and excellent on a dance floor.”

He gave her a skeptical look. “Is there a but coming?”

She nibbled her lower lip, then said, “But you have no wish to wed, do you?”

“I will wed one day,” he said honestly and without hesitation. “I must, after all. I must produce an heir. It is what we do. But I have not thought of doing so soon. It is a great task to find a partner for life.”

“Exactly,” she said, her eyes widening with pleasure at his comment. “I should like to at least like my husband.”

“I’d like to like my wife,” he agreed as he navigated through the riders on the row. “I must admit the idea of spending the rest of my life with someone who makes me miserable seems rather horrible. But, of course, I could simply ship her off to an estate where she can be happy if she doesn’t wish to be in my company.”

There was a strange look that crossed her face for a moment, and he had a sinking sensation. Good God, he hoped that she didn’t think...

As if she could sense his feeling, she said brightly, “No, no. You are not the gentleman for me. I could see that you like parties, and you like to go out and about. I should never want to take that away from you.”

He tensed. “I don’t want you to think that you will be causing some gentleman to sacrifice themselves by marrying you,” he protested.

“I don’t think that,” she said firmly. “But it is hard to tell what one truly wants when so few people say what they truly

mean.”

He stared at her for a long moment, taking in that statement, feeling it resonate through him with a shocking power.

So few did say what they meant... Except her.

She clapped her hands together. “Right. I don’t wish to waste your time. How will we manage this?”

“Manage this?” he echoed, still occupied by her clarity.

“My husband,” she said, blinking.

“Company is not for you,” he allowed, finding himself resistant to stop wasting time.

She let out a strangled note resembling the sound of a dying goose.

“I take it you agree with me?” he asked.

She let out a sigh. “How could I possibly argue? You’ve seen me twice now. Surrounded.”

“I saw you last night at the ball,” he said gently. “You seemed perfectly at ease when we were dancing.”

“Yes, but that’s because of you,” she said without any embarrassment. It was simply a statement of fact. “Somehow, you made it possible for me to be with all those people and not feel like running out into the night and across Hyde Park.”

He felt it again, that joyful experience that he could cause her to feel so at ease, so happy. But he would not be there to hold her hand through every event.

Even if he was her dearest friend, he would not be allowed to do such a thing when she wed.

When she wed.

He shook himself inwardly. There was a hint of something dangerous in that thought. Something he could not allow.

They were going to have to find other ways of her experiencing peace in company.

His hands gripped the reins, and for a moment one of the horses came out of step, as if the animal sensed his mixed feelings.

Quickly, he adjusted his hold and offered a word of encouragement to the stallion. Instantly, the curricule smoothed out as the horses matched step.

She said nothing at the odd moment but studied him carefully. So carefully, he felt a wave of heat travel over his skin.

The emotions that charged through him then were strange and hungry, lacing through him with a formidable power. “I think the best thing to do is to put you into circumstances where you feel the most at ease,” he rushed, determined to squelch his unwanted emotions.

“And those are?” she teased.

He cleared his throat, considering. “Well, for instance, right now you enjoy riding in the curricule, do you not?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Perhaps outdoor events,” he offered. “The races, here, walks in the park. I can arrange to meet gentlemen that I think would suit you. Perhaps Vauxhall gardens or a few outdoor parties would be just the thing,” he said, his heart pounding oddly as he rattled off possibilities.

She nodded slowly. “Those might do.”

He frowned as a terrible thought hit him. Terrible but sensible. “I suppose I could even arrange a marriage for you.”

She gaped. “No, no, I don’t want to do that,” she said.

“It’s worked for many people in the past,” he begrudged, rather loathing the possibility of picking the man who would hold her in his arms.

She scoffed. “Yes, but we live in a more modern time, and I’m not entirely certain that is exactly how I should wish to go

about it. I'd like to make certain that we share common ideas about the world."

"That will be difficult," he stated, not wishing to leave her in delusion about it.

"Will it?" she queried.

He pressed his lips together before stating, "You are singular."

"Thank you," she said, arching her brow as if she wasn't quite certain what he meant by that.

"It is a compliment," he insisted. "I can tell from the way you think and the way you view the world that not many people will share an affinity with you, but I'm sure we can find him."

She smiled slowly. "I fear I am far more trouble than you thought."

Trouble. She had no idea.

"No," he said, his gaze tracing slowly over her perfect, lithe body, cheeky grin, and bright eyes. "I don't think so, Lady Rose. You're beautiful. You're interesting. You're educated."

"My goodness," she teased. "You do know how to compliment a young lady."

"I have not given you compliments," he said honestly. "I have given you facts."

And with that, he snapped up the reins, racing them farther along the Serpentine until they passed into Kensington Gardens.

"Are we allowed to be here?" she asked.

"We may be anywhere I please. I'm Viscount Clarence."

He said it without arrogance.

The truth was that he was given free rein of most places. Almost everyone knew him. He was on familiar terms with the

royal family. Even if he didn't like half of them.

His family had been part of the power and prestige of England for a thousand years. His father had led England through great difficulties, and he had helped the king and Prince George from falling into complete disaster with each other on more than once occasion.

Yes, he was allowed to do largely as he pleased, though there were a few gentlemen at Horse Guards who would disagree. Those were the ones who made his life difficult.

Damian wished that he did not have that sort of resistance. But in resistance, one grew strong.

So he smiled at her. "What would you like to do first? Do you think we shall attempt a party at Vauxhall, or shall we do some other outdoor pursuit?"

"The races," she said suddenly. "I'd like to go to the races."

"Truly?" he asked, rather surprised, for they were often a sea of people.

"I like horses," she said.

He stared at her, amazed by her surprises. "I would never have guessed. You clearly love to be indoors with your books."

"Horses are different. Horses understand people," she said sagely, her passion for them clear. "Horses cannot be tricked or lied to. They will try to throw you off if you're a horrible person. And one can immediately tell by how a person handles a horse if they are a decent person or not."

"But at the races," he pointed out. "People shall not be riding."

She wagged her brows at him, her amusement suddenly bright. "No, but I will be able to tell if a gentleman is an awful sort or not from the way he reacts when he loses or wins on the wagers."

He stared at her, wondering if she truly needed him. Hoping that she would. For just a little while. For, in that moment, he knew he dearly loved her company.

“How very wise,” he murmured, and he realized that she was very wise indeed.

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CHAPTER 9

*D*amian couldn't sleep.

He tossed on his bed again and again. He threw an arm up over his head onto his pillow and stared up at his canopy. The green silk appeared shadowy and black at night. Moonlight spilled in through the windows. He let out a curse and turned over and pressed his face into the goose down-covered pillow. He held his breath.

Bloody hell, he could not drive Lady Rose out of his mind. He tried. Damnation, he tried. But with each moment that passed, rather than eradicating Lady Rose from his mind, Lady Rose seemed to inhabit more of it. The way her russet hair curled about her face, the way it lightly kissed her cheeks and neck, stroking ever so slightly like a lover's caress.

The way her perfect silk gown had clung to her body today.

Good God, he'd wanted to rip it from her frame. No, he'd wanted to peel it back slowly and worship every inch of her.

Of course, it was madness, complete and total madness.

He had not felt this sort of lust for a woman in years, perhaps a decade. Perhaps even before his time at Oxford, when he had last felt this sort of intense need.

As he lay on the bed, he forced himself to roll onto his back again, close his eyes, draw in a breath through his nose, and then blow it out slowly through his mouth. He did this several times, attempting to cool his heart and blood. He attempted mathematics, more and more complex problems over and over again.

But then he began to hear her beautiful voice whispering them out. In his mind, she whispered philosophy. She

whispered poetry. She had the voice of a siren, and he could not believe that the world did not know it.

Granted, she rarely spoke in company.

Very few people were privileged to hear how beautiful her voice was. But when she did speak around fools, she hitched her tone and hesitated because she hated it so much. But she loved being with him, and he adored being with her.

Bloody hell, there was something about her that made him feel completely alive, like he wanted to rip the world asunder and make it anew for her. And he would. He could. He'd do everything in his power to make the world bow and be at ease for her.

He would not make her fit the world. No. He would make the world fit Rose.

Hells bells, how he wanted to consume her with a kiss.

The kiss in his mind was so intense he could not shake it away with any attempt. The mathematics faded away as he saw her in his mind, beckoning to him, smiling, offering her mouth up to him. He wanted to devour those lips, to take them in a kiss that would leave her drunk with pleasure. He wanted to wrap his arms about her. He wanted... No, damnation, he needed her.

The power of it astonished him.

He'd had mistresses over the years. Of course, he had. As an officer and a lord? It was what the aristocracy did. All through his years at university and his time as a young buck on the town he'd enjoyed the company of women.

But he had no interest in any of that any longer.

He had grown more interested in the halls of power than the halls of passion. Besides, he liked to keep himself in even check. That's what his regime was for, his exercise, and the way he carefully kept his emotions in check. He knew he had to. Men like him, who had so much responsibility, could not be fools to passion.

Yet in this moment, he wanted to be a fool with Lady Rose.

He wanted to offer himself up to her, to take her into his bed, wrap her up in his crisp linen sheets, and show her just how magnificent she was. From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, he wanted to worship her.

My God.

He forced himself upright in bed and jolted out. He strode naked, grabbed his blue silk robe, and threw it onto his frame. He strode back and forth through his room, the passion charging through him. At this particular moment he wanted to tear out of his house, cross town, stand outside her door, and call out her name. Like in a novel, like in a play, like so many absurd things where love was shown through grand acts.

Love.

Surely, it was not the correct word. It couldn't be. He did not love anyone. He hadn't since he was small, and it hadn't even been his parents. He had perhaps loved his nanny who had taken such care of him when his parents had been away all the time. He'd known how to fend for himself, to not rely on the affection of others, but to be ready with a witty reply and prepared to face the world alone, fists up, ready to take on any comers who might try to shake him from his path.

Lady Rose was a very different sort of challenger, shaking him from his path with temptation.

Except she wasn't trying to seduce him or tease him or offer up sin. No, she was simply being herself, and, dear God in heaven, that was what made her so appealing. That was what made him want her with an intensity that nearly overwhelmed him.

He felt it in his soul, and it was terrifying indeed.

Damian threw open his window and stuck his head out into the night, wishing the cold air would swallow him up, but there was no cold air. So instead, he charged down to the

kitchens, broke into one of the barrels of water, and poured himself a basin.

He splashed himself, desperate, hoping that it would cool his ardor.

Then he swung his gaze to the table and realized he'd made a mess.

Cursing, he cleaned it up swiftly.

He was not one of those arrogant lords who believed that those under him should handle all his mess. No. He cleaned up his own messes, and he would take care of this.

He had to.

He would get himself under control. He owed it to Lady Rose. He owed it to her happiness. Besides, he was a man of control, and he would not be bowed by a little bit of lust.

Or a great deal.

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CHAPTER 10

*R*ose jolted awake.

The kiss.

Dear heaven, the kiss burned through her like liquid fire. She could almost taste his sensual lips upon hers. How had that happened? Good Lord. She could even feel the silkiness of his blond hair beneath her fingertips as she had thrust her hands into his thick locks.

His body had pressed to hers, his linen shirt thin, barely covering his muscled torso as he had held her tightly in his arms.

That kiss.

Dear heaven, she'd wanted to throw herself into the abyss of it, to give him anything he asked for, to offer herself up entirely and not care for rack or ruin.

Ruin.

She trembled on the bed, her skin so sensitive she felt as if her linen night rail was his caress.

If her dreams were anywhere close to the truth of it, she would gladly be ruined by him.

She gasped in the night, astonishing herself at such a thought. She couldn't possibly wish to be ruined, could she? With him, perhaps she could.

How many other young ladies had thrown themselves into the path of sin? So many. And now she understood why. Before, she'd always thought it'd been a bit of hyperbole, something that one found in novels and plays.

For, surely, that sort of defiance of a safe life only existed in silly people who had no control of their thoughts or feelings. But now she knew she'd been naive.

Not only that, but she'd also been arrogant and judgmental. For now, she understood that she had simply never met a man who could make her feel like she wanted to surrender everything, to throw away all caution, to give up all status, all money, all hopes of any staid, safe future for the present pleasure of his kiss.

And for a single moment she thought, why not?

The present was all they had. She did not know if she would be alive in five days' time, or five years. She could die from smallpox. She could die in childbirth. She could die in a coaching accident. Or she could eek out her days in a miserable existence that was barely living.

Why not seize happiness now?

It was a dangerous thought. What if he recoiled from her passion? What if he found her to be not only different in her nerves, but a fool in her passion for him? He did not seem to see her in that way, but in his curricle and in the garden, there had been a look, a moment, when he had studied her face. She had seen a spark in his eyes as if he wished to devour her.

And now she knew she wanted to be devoured, whatever that meant.

She did not have the proper education to understand what happened between a man and a woman, except for what she'd read in novels. And she understood that there were ladies who had thrown their entire lives away for it.

Some had run to the Continent, the bolters of this world. Some had given up their families. And others... Well, they had become mistresses, living an entirely different sort of life.

And for one instant, she wondered at the freedom of such a thing. Did those ladies feel free? She couldn't know. She had no access to ask them. But she wondered if they felt more powerful for having surrendered to their desires rather than keeping them in check.

She knew all books warned that a young lady must keep herself in check, except for a few of the very scandalous ones

she was not encouraged to read but had in secret.

After all, that way lay the line of ruin and terror and disease and poverty. There were enough books that suggested it, and certainly Hogarth's prints, *The Harlot's Progress*, had been made to show the descent of a young lady into such a hell.

Yes, a young lady must never stray from her home and her parents' advice, lest she end in a bard's trap. Rose would not end in such a way, and yet she could not stop herself from imagining Clarence's mouth upon hers, his hands slipping across her back.

But could she have that if he did not wish to marry her?

Oh heaven.

It did not seem fair that she could not taste his kiss if he was never to ask her to be his. And he wouldn't, she was sure of that. The agony of it hit her.

It seemed so ridiculous, so foolish. And yet she could not deny that it was painful to realize that she would never know the feel of his arms wrapped about her body in ardor. She would never know his lips tracing over hers. And in that breadth of a thought, she knew it was all she wanted, the only thing she wanted.

And that made her a fool indeed. Not a fool in name, not a fool in practice, and certainly not the fool her mother thought her to be, but it did make her a fool. For here in the dark, laying in her night rail, her body alive and wanting him, she would've given anything for his kiss.

No matter the cost.

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CHAPTER II

“*You* could marry her,” Damian ventured, wincing inwardly at the absurd thought he let pass his lips.

Abernathy nearly choked. “What the devil are you talking about?” the man demanded as they rode in Damian’s carriage towards the house that Lady Millbank kept off Oxford Street.

Damian dug his nails into his palms. He built the case this morning over his coffee. It felt rather weak now as he rattled, “It would be a good idea. You two would make each other incredibly happy.”

Abernathy shot him a ball-crushing stare. “Do not be a complete fool, man. I’m not going to marry her.”

“Why?” Damian protested, his ire building at any criticism of Lady Rose. “She’s beautiful, intelligent, interesting, and charming when you have her alone.”

Abernathy snorted, then leaned forward. “I’m not going to marry her because I can tell you have fantasized about having her in your bed, and I have no wish to share that much with you, my friend.”

Clarence ground his teeth. “I have not.”

Abernathy rolled his eyes. “Don’t lie to me. I can tell when you’re lying. I know you’re a spy and that most people can’t, but I’ve known you for years. You can’t trick me. I remember when you were in leading strings.”

Damian ground his teeth down further, likely losing a good layer of tooth. This was a devil of a problem. He had been in a foul mood since before dawn. He’d not been able to go back to sleep, consumed with thoughts of her.

He’d hoped an early morning ride would do the trick. It had not. He’d even tried a boxing round already with Brookhaven. Nothing was working.

And here he was now on the way to pick up said lady to take her to the races and show her off, to find her a husband who would eventually take her to bed.

And the truth was that in that moment, he wanted to murder anyone who might take her to bed. Even Abernathy, though he himself had suggested the idea.

Abernathy would make her a good husband.

He was a good man. He had a good heart. He had wealth and prestige. But he also knew Abernathy would never have said yes.

Abernathy considered himself to be too damaged and wounded to marry. It would've been nice in a way. Damian would've known that both of them were taken care of. Certainly, both of them would've taken excellent care of each other, at least so Damian hoped, but he was also no fool. Abernathy would not have said yes, which is likely why he had suggested it. He wanted to punch himself in the face.

Maybe he could get Abernathy to do it here in the confines of the carriage.

Abernathy threw back his dark head and laughed. "I can see it," he said. "But I'm not about to give you a matching set of bruises right before we show up to take your lady fair away, old man."

He scowled. "She's not my lady fair."

"She should be," Abernathy barked with an arch of his brow. "I've never seen anyone have such an effect on you."

Damian groaned. "It's because I think she is a marvelous and remarkable human being."

"Exactly. You should marry her."

"I don't wish to marry anyone at present," Damian pointed out. "She wants something I can't give, in any case."

"And what is that?" Abernathy demanded without mercy.

Damian sighed before he drove a hand through his hair. “She wants a real relationship, a personal friendship, something deep, and I’m not going to be able to give that to her. She wants to go live in the country and read books, and I am a politician and a war man, and I care deeply about society’s affairs right now.”

Abernathy stilled. “You’re too different. Is that what you’re saying?”

Damian gave a tight nod. “My life would make her miserable. Yes, I’m sure it would.”

“Why?” Abernathy asked bluntly.

Damian gaped at him before protesting, “Surely, I need a wife who will give balls and grand parties and convince lords to do what I want them to do. I need a lady who will convince other gentlemen’s wives of things too.”

“Is that what you actually need?” Abernathy asked softly. “Or is that what society has taught you that you need? Wouldn’t you rather have a wife who sustains you and makes you feel your best self rather than a hostess? Surely, you could have other people do that for you. After all, you’re doing bloody fine without an official hostess now.”

Damian looked out the window, but his thoughts were so intense he did not witness the bright show of London life outside.

The truth was that he didn’t know if Abernathy was right or not.

Could he? Could he marry her? Bloody hell, the thought shot through him so quickly that he swallowed. It was tempting. But could he do that to her if she said yes? He might be putting her in a lifetime of situations where she constantly had to be fighting the nerves she struggled with. Because he was in public often.

A man like himself spent a great deal of time in large crowds.

“I don’t want to hurt her,” he whispered.

“Now, don’t start that nonsense,” Abernathy said tightly.

“I beg your pardon?” Damian demanded, incensed.

Abernathy’s eyes narrowed, not with fury, but with the clear of intention of speaking hard truths. “Yesterday when we were in the boxing ring, you came at me when I insisted upon it, did you not?”

He nodded, wary of where his friend was leading. “Yes.”

Abernathy tilted his head to the side and ventured, “Do you think the lady would appreciate you managing her decisions without asking her?”

Willfully, he ignored Abernathy’s point. “I don’t think she deserves someone like me.”

Abernathy gaped. “A lord, a man of wealth, a man of prestige?”

He ground out, “A man who can never give her the love that she deserves.”

Abernathy rolled his eyes. “Dear God, we’re not on about that again, are we?”

“You know me. I must remain in control. I can’t—”

Abernathy let out a sigh. “Yes, I understand. I’m not going to try to convince you to be someone you’re not, Clarence. You’ve always been like this. Even when we were children. You never cried. You never gave embraces. You never threw yourself down and had a tantrum. You were always hiding behind a quick quip, ready to be a bit cold and icy. Rather like your hair.”

“My hair is not—”

“Icy?” Abernathy said, his lips twitching.

“Cease,” he said, longing to laugh but not quite able. “You know my concerns.”

Abernathy nodded. “I do. You don’t let anyone behind that wall, do you? You never have. It’s what makes you a great spy. It’s what makes you great at war. You can send men off to their deaths with—”

Damian gave him a warning stare. “Don’t. Don’t say that.”

“But it’s true,” Abernathy said factually with neither accusation nor sympathy. “You never would’ve saved the drummer boy the way I did. You would’ve saved the whole regiment, my friend. That’s what you would’ve done. But I don’t have that capacity to see the decisions that need to be made to prevent the regiment going into a situation in which it will be slaughtered. But you do. And I value you for it. But do not let it cut you off entirely.”

He swallowed. He wasn’t sure if his friend had just given him a compliment or an insult. At least he hadn’t said that he would’ve left the drummer boy to die while trying to pursue victory. He wouldn’t have.

But he also had a dangerous capacity to see what needed to be done to win the war. He understood that thousands would need to die in order to stop Napoleon. He looked out the window once more, his hands curled into fists. That was exactly why he wasn’t the man for Rose.

He knew the cost that had to be paid, and he was willing to pay it to stop Napoleon. Her heart was too good. She was too beautiful. She was too sensitive, too kind. She was everything that was good about this world. Everything that he wanted to protect and keep safe, and to expose her to a man like himself... He couldn’t do it.

Abernathy’s eyes narrowed anew. “I can see you doing it,” he said.

“What?” Damian barked.

“I can see you protecting yourself.”

He swung his gaze to his friend. “What the devil do mean by that?”

Abernathy leaned back against the silk-covered squabs, unconsciously rubbing his thigh which no doubt pained him. “You’re making certain that you can do the work you need to do, and if you open yourself up to her, you’re terrified that you might not be able to do it.”

He scowled. “You are speaking nonsense, man.”

“Am I?” Abernathy queried. But just as he was about to reply, the carriage rolled up before the Millbank’s house. The door opened and before he could say another word, Lady Millbank, Lady Hyacinth and Lady Rose bounded in with the help of his footman.

“Good day, my lord,” Lady Millbank trilled. “We were wondering if you might be late. Young lords are always late in the morning, what with all the jubulations of the night before.”

He gaped at the sight of the mother. He had expected Lady Hyacinth, and he had expected Rose, but he had not expected Lady Millbank.

He swallowed a sigh.

It was going to be a long day. Rose seemed more tense with her mother by her side. How he wished he could teach Rose to tell her mother to go to the devil, but it was no easy thing, a young lady telling her mother to go to the devil in such situations.

After all, her mother and father had complete control over her life.

He supposed she was rather lucky that Lord Millbank did not spend much time telling her what to do. Lady Millbank was certainly enough.

Lady Hyacinth immediately plunked down by Abernathy, gave him a quick smile, pushed her spectacles up her nose, and whipped out a small book from her reticule.

Abernathy let out a bark of laughter. “That stimulating of company, am I?” he queried.

“Oh, forgive me,” Lady Hyacinth said absently, her gaze locked firmly on the small book. “I have a paragraph to finish, and then I shall happily listen to any story you wish to tell me.”

“I don’t believe that for moment,” Abernathy said with amusement.

“You don’t?” she said. “How astute of you.”

Abernathy laughed again and then bit his lower lip, lest he bellow with amusement.

Lady Millbank looked at Lady Hyacinth as if she wished to reach across the carriage and throttle her daughter. She waited for Rose to sit beside the viscount, then sat beside Rose, ensuring Rose was shoved right up against him.

He swallowed.

Her gown pressed against his leg, and he could feel the warmth of her thigh touching his. He had to grind his teeth together now for an entirely different reason. Bloody hell. The feel of her against him was too much to bear. He’d spent the night trying to rid his thoughts of her, and now he knew what she felt like pressed against him.

He had not even had this experience while they were waltzing. That had just been his hands touching her body.

But now he would know how she felt, her limbs caressing his side. He let his hands rest softly on his knees. He had to keep himself in check.

He swung his gaze to the window for a moment, staring out at the vast array of people racing up and down the well-appointed street. The coaches were extremely expensive. Most of them were bought on credit, and he wondered at the lives of all these people desperately trying to appear as if they were in control. Were any of them in control? Certainly, he was barely in control at this moment.

Lady Millbank let out another loud trill of a laugh. “So good of you to take us to the races. It shall be an excellent day.

I do like to watch an animal in its prime charge the course, it's great chest heaving with exertion."

He stared at Lady Millbank, wondering what the blazes he was supposed to say in return. "Glad to know that you'll enjoy the day, my lady," he said.

Lady Millbank beamed. "And my daughter, of course, she adores horses. We couldn't keep her off them as a child."

"Truly," he stated. He'd understood Rose's comment before about horses, but he'd not realized her own devotion to them. Internally, he quite agreed with Rose.

Horses could not be fooled about whether a person was afraid or calm, or whether they were ill humored or not.

They were beautiful beasts, and he hated their use in the human tragedies of war.

Poor horses could be victims of it too. And the races weren't always pleasant.

But he wondered what Rose had been like as a child riding across fields, her hair whipping behind her.

Breaking his reverie, Lady Millbank added, "Yes, we had to break her of it as soon as she was fourteen years old. We allow her to ride, of course, in the morning. She looks marvelous on horseback and in her riding habit. But beyond that—"

"I would love to see her ride," he cut in swiftly.

"Would you?" Lady Millbank asked, blinking.

He smiled slowly, catching Rose's astonished but pleased eye. "Yes. I think it is wonderful when a lady has a good seat."

Lady Millbank cocked her head to the side. "Then we shall have to arrange it."

In that moment, he knew he might have made a terrible error. Clearly, Lady Millbank was certain that Rose was about to be the Viscountess Clarence. And she seemed certain that all of society would think so too.

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CHAPTER 12

The carriage ride to the races was something that Rose had not altogether expected. She certainly had not expected her mother to shove her over and almost into Clarence's lap.

For a delicious instant, she wondered what it would be like to sit in his lap.

She did not allow that thought to carry on because they were already descending from the green lacquered vehicle. Then they headed out towards the green to watch the most beautiful animals in England charge around a track to see who was the fastest and most enduring of the lot.

She rather thought Clarence had a great sense of endurance. He appeared strong and capable. She had a niggling feeling that he could run to Cornwall and back and barely show any effort for it. Certainly, the way he'd led her around the dance floor had made her think so. But as they headed into the crush of people eager to observe the horses racing around the track, she began to wonder if this was a terrible idea or a very good one.

Hyacinth and Abernathy were in intense debate about whether or not philosophy was really important or if action was the thing. Abernathy let out a laugh at something Hyacinth said, and Hyacinth shot him a death stare.

After all, Hyacinth did not like it when people made light of any of her sentiments. Hyacinth was a dear, but she did take herself rather seriously.

Rose drew in a slow breath, shaking off her nerves. "Stand up straight," her mother said behind her.

How she wished she could shake her mother from her. At this particular moment, all she wanted to do was cross the green, make a bet on which horse was would win, and keep an eye out for a gentleman who Clarence thought she might like.

And also, keep a wary eye out for Lord Scarsdale, who had paid her unwanted attention as of late. He seemed far too determined, enjoying her nerves rather than trying to ease them. She drank in the scent of the track, focusing on that rather than her concerns.

For today, there would be many country gentlemen in attendance. It was one of the highlights of the Season to come and watch the races, and country gentlemen did have to come to London to find wives.

Just like the ones who enjoyed London.

Clarence's eyes were darting about, taking in potential candidates. He spotted a tall fellow with the shoulders of a bull standing by an ale tent. "Well," he said in low whisper, "I do know that Lord Purefoy is an excellent fellow. He runs a good estate with lots of cattle."

Lady Millbank suddenly piped up. "Why are you speaking of Lord Purefoy? He's an absolute fool. Doesn't know the difference between tea and his beer." Her lips pursed. "He drinks beer like it is tea."

Clarence gave Lady Millbank a quick surprised stare.

"Truly," he said. "I had not heard that he was overly partial to beer."

"Absolutely loves the stuff," Lady Millbank said without judgment but exactitude. "Otherwise, he would've made a wonderful husband for Lady Rose, but I think someone of your temperament is certainly who we require."

Clarence paused, apparently stunned.

Rose swung her gaze back from her mother to Clarence, wondering if the two were about to spar. It was rather shocking that her mother had essentially suggested that Clarence and she were as good as married.

But he had called on her twice in two days, and he had asked her to dance the waltz at that ball.

And he showed a clear care of her.

She was going to have to distance herself.

But most interesting was the look on Clarence's face as the news hit him that Lord Purefoy liked beer a little too well. He clearly had not been aware of it. His mouth set into a dangerous line, and a muscle tightened in his jaw. Was it because he was wrong? He did not seem to be the sort of fellow who cared overmuch if he was wrong. He seemed to be able to take such things in stride.

But as they wandered further, he leaned in and said, "I'm going to have to be much more careful with the gentlemen I suggest for you. The last thing I want is you married to a brewery."

She grinned up at him. "I highly doubt you'd allow such a thing."

He positively glowered. "Yes. Well, I don't like the fact that your mother is more informed about suitors than I am. I know mamas are supposed to be, but that was damn irritating. I want to find you the right sort of person, and I find that the first person I suggest might not be suitable. She might also be exaggerating."

Rose shook her head. "She likely did exaggerate. She doesn't want you to go off the hunt."

He gazed down at her, a strange emotion shadowing his eyes. "Are you the fox then?"

"To my mother?" she queried sotto voce. "I am absolutely the fox, and in her mind? You must continue on hunting me until I am caught."

He took her arm and placed it in his.

"Where would you like to go?" he said.

"After that journey, I'd like to freshen myself." She turned to her sister who was still in growing debate with Abernathy. "Hyacinth?" she prompted.

Hyacinth jumped. "Yes?"

“Will you come?”

Hyacinth eyed Abernathy for a moment, then nodded.

She paused, looking at her mother, who had suddenly taken up discussion with the beleaguered-looking Abernathy. “Do we dare you leave you with mama?”

He grinned. “If I can face a French column, I can handle your mother. Besides, I assume your mother will wish to keep me informed about all of the wonderful things that you’ve learned, such as embroidery and drawing.”

She laughed. “Certainly, yes.”

And with that, she linked arms with Hyacinth, eager for a moment to collect herself because the crush of people was quite a lot.

But Hyacinth tugged on her arm as soon as they had wandered off behind the tents towards where the ladies might have a moment of privacy. “I shall return to you in five minutes.”

“Where are you going?” Rose protested.

“Just a bit of work.”

“Work? You don’t work.”

Hyacinth’s eyes widened behind her spectacles, pleading. “Please?”

Rose relented and smiled. “Meet me back here in five minutes then.”

With a look of glee, Hyacinth rushed off.

Rose smoothed her kid gloves down the front of her sage-green gown.

All would be well. This outing would be a success.

She did adore horses.

But as she lingered, she realized that, once again, this was a situation in which there were many people.

But she did not want Clarence feeling as if she overly relied upon him to keep her calm. She wanted to appear capable, in control with him, and not silly and needy.

So she drew in a slow breath and focused on the scent of horses that filled the air.

She loved the earthiness of it and the general joy of the races.

“You and Clarence look quite the pair,” a voice drawled from behind her.

She stuttered, “Thank you.”

Lord Scarsdale. She recoiled inwardly and suddenly felt her heart begin to pound for all the reasons she abhorred.

Aquiline eyes, dark hair, a sharp chin, and beautifully dressed, Scarsdale was the height of sophistication. And, she felt certain, cruelty.

He liked that she was on edge. She sensed it.

“You know,” he began, “If you are looking for a husband, I’m looking for a wife.”

But there was nothing in his voice that suggested he was actually interested in courting her. The way he said wife was rich with an undertone that was deeply unpleasant.

“Lady Rose,” he rumbled lowly, his voice a touch too silky, “I think we would be a marvelous pair. You need someone with a...strong hand.”

“I beg your pardon?” she gasped.

“I’ve seen you at balls plenty of times, hiding along the walls. I think you require a little bit of pruning. Your rose is not quite ready to bloom, is it, my dear?” he said softly. “You need a sure man to master you, to teach you the ways of life.” His eyes shone with excitement at her growing unease. “Clarence isn’t the right fellow for that.”

“Sir, you are most insulting,” she said and stepped back from him, for suddenly he felt far too close.

“I don’t think your mother will think so,” he countered. “I think she’d be quite happy if I offered for you.” His gaze trailed over her slowly, like she was his personal present and he could not wait to untie the bow. “And I do find a lady like you is just my taste.”

She drew up and bit out, “Sir, you should not even be speaking to me alone like this.”

He gave her a flourish of a bow.

“Forgive me, Lady Rose. I couldn’t resist you standing here alone... Waiting for attention.”

She winced. Scarsdale was an earl and a powerful one too. One who loved brightly colored vests and coats, such as his lemon-and-wine-colored set now. But he also had a reputation in society, a reputation for control, and a reputation for not being exactly the nicest man. He had a stable of horses that raced, but there were rumors that he used all sorts of tactics to ensure that his horses won.

As her heart began to pound with alarm, she searched for escape. “I must return to my mother at once.”

He reached out to take her hand with his burgundy leather-gloved hand. “Oh no, I don’t think you must, my dear. She would be so happy to learn that we were speaking together. Especially if I come and invite you out for a ride.” He slid his hand up her arm, his grip harder than it should have been. “Would you like that? A little curricule ride with me?”

Desperately, she looked around, determined not to cause a scene, lest she be trapped into matrimony with him. For, suddenly, she realized they were all but alone in the area between tents.

Where had everyone gone? She had not thought that going off in such a crush of people would be dangerous.

And no one had made a fuss of it. Of course, they had all assumed she would be with Hyacinth, and she wondered where her sister had gotten off to.

Surely, five minutes had passed.

And just as she was about to tug her arm back, her body beginning to vibrate with a wave of nerves, a voice called out from behind her. "Take your hands off her, Scarsdale."

"Oh, ho." Scarsdale let out a delightful purr as he dropped her arm and lifted his hands in mock surrender. "Is he your new sheep dog? Clarence?"

Clarence crossed to her and gently guided her behind his large frame.

"I'm happy to be thus," he said. "If you are the wolf."

"You admit it. She is a lamb, a delicious one," Scarsdale said, his lips curving in an anticipatory smile. "Are you looking forward to fleecing her? I think it will take a man with a little bit more aggression than you. I think she needs someone like me."

Clarence's entire body tensed. "You? That won't be necessary."

"Why not?" Scarsdale challenged, clearly enjoying Clarence's growing anger. "She's on the market, and I'm sure she could be mine if I wish it. She's almost a diamond, isn't she? Personally, I like an imperfect jewel to mold. Or are you polishing her to make certain that she will be yours?"

Clarence's hands curled into fists, and then he abruptly strode forward, drew back his arm, and punched Scarsdale right in the face.

Scarsdale's head cracked back, and he staggered. He brought his hands up to his bloodied nose, his eyes blazing with fury. The man was clearly unaccustomed to actual consequences or retaliation. "I should call you out for that."

"Do," Clarence said with deadly calm, even though his body seemed to hum with power.

She swung her gaze from man to man, stunned by the events but extremely grateful to be out of Scarsdale's clutches.

Even as dread began to pool in her belly. For Scarsdale was a vindictive sort.

Scarsdale backed away. “Right. If you want her that much, then you can have her.” His lip curled. “Perhaps you already have. You best marry her and be done. But everyone will know you lost your temper over her lack of honor. Everyone will know that she’s nothing without you.”

“Go to hell, Scarsdale,” Clarence ground out.

Scarsdale backed away, a petulant child, furious that his toy had been taken away. And ready to damage any and all because of his own weakness.

She felt herself shaking.

Those words—nothing without Clarence—shot through her.

Good God, it was true. Wasn’t it?

And not only that but Clarence had just thrown everything away for her. Because unless he married her, this entire interlude would provide the most horrific scandal for the ton to feast upon. Everyone would be talking about her!

And the things that he had said.

She began to panic. The world raced around in her head, but she could not fall apart. She had to stand firm.

“You did not need to do that, but thank you,” she said as she looked up at Clarence.

“I did,” he growled softly.

She sucked in a breath at the intensity of his gaze. “Why?” she said.

“Because I cannot have you treated thus,” he ground out, even as his gaze softened. “You deserve the world to be at your feet. You should not have to beg to be treated well.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “But do you know what you’ve done to yourself?”

He stared at her for a long moment. Then a look of pure horror washed over his face as he clearly realized that, yes, he did know what he had done.

“Now what?” she lamented as she rushed alongside his long strides. “Will any man have me after what Scarsdale said?”

Scarsdale would no doubt proclaim the event to anyone who would hear because he had been shamed. He’d been afraid to fight a duel with Clarence. She felt that in her bones. Clarence was far too dangerous. He could get away with almost anything he wanted... Except shaming a man like Scarsdale.

“Why did you punch him?” she asked, still struggling to understand.

“Because I could not tolerate him treating you like that.”

“And I’m honored,” she said. “That you think so highly of me. But now you have put yourself into the noose. Or...” She swallowed.

“Or what?” he demanded. He stopped, his hand moving to cup her cheek softly.

“I could run away to Italy?” she blurted, desperate to save him, shocked at how she longed for his gentle touch.

“You will not run away to Italy,” he ground out.

“Then what shall I do?” she demanded.

“You shall marry me,” he said simply. Darkly.

“I will not,” she replied swiftly, her throat tightening. “Not for anything, not for the world. I will not do that to you.”

And then he gathered her into his arms and took her mouth in a fiery kiss. He did not seem to care that anyone might be watching. He did not care about gossip. No. In that moment, he only seemed to care to show her just how much he desired her.

And much to her horror, she realized she desired him too.
Come rack or ruin as she had thought.

And this was the cost that she was going to have to pay.
The fact that he had no wish to marry her but must do so
anyway.

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CHAPTER 13

“What has happened?” Lady Millbank hissed.

He did not repeat the story. He knew Lady Millbank understood it. Her face was white with fury.

“Forgive the scandal,” he said fiercely. “But I could not allow Scarsdale to harm her.”

Lady Millbank gave a grim nod. “That clod should not be allowed out in society. I shall give him the cut direct myself. Thank you for aiding my daughter.”

For a moment, he was astonished that her mother would so defend her daughter. She had not seemed overly fond of Rose.

The truth was that many mamas would throw their daughters under the proverbial horses’ hooves to make certain that scandal did not touch their family. Thus, he was surprised that Lady Millbank was so completely ready to protect Rose from a match with a husband who might drink too much.

Perhaps Lady Millbank was not all bad, but she was not good either.

“Scarsdale may try to cause a scandal, Mama,” Rose warned. “He confronted me, and he wanted... Well, he said things that were most ungentlemanly.”

He waited for Lady Millbank to protest. But why were you alone? How could you be alone with him?

But instead, Lady Millbank’s face twisted. “Unfortunately, my dear, many ladies have such experiences. Scarsdale will not keep it to himself. Other gentlemen would not want people to know it is true that they have behaved in such fashion, but Scarsdale takes pride in intimidating people. He will happily tell whatever happened.”

Lady Millbank paused as she gave him a rather plucky look. “Did you truly punch him?”

“Indeed, I did,” Clarence said.

Her dark brows rose. “Bully for you, my lord. My proverbial hat is off to you. But we now face a mess, do we not? Scarsdale is not a man who will take that sort of thing well.”

“No,” Clarence agreed, wishing he’d tossed the man tied to a large boulder into the Thames. “But there is no difficulty as your daughter and I shall wed. Immediately.”

“Wonderful. But a swift ceremony?” she mused. “Do you think it wise?”

“Why not?” he bit out. Now that he was going to have to do it, he did not wish to prevaricate.

“Because—”

“It’s what I prefer,” he ground out.

Lady Millbank drew in a breath, studying him and then her daughter carefully.

“I see,” she said with a hint of amazement. “This is not just a marriage of scandal. It is one of passion. You genuinely admire my daughter and want her to be your wife at once.”

The woman’s words hit him like blows.

And he thought of Abernathy’s words in the carriage.

Suddenly, he wondered if he had arranged this somehow. Because Abernathy would say that he had.

It was the only way he could have her, after all. If he was forced, and he was being forced.

He could not bear the idea of her being thrown into such a scandal without his aid.

But he couldn’t escape the fact that he was supposed to have saved her from difficulty, not increase it. And that’s exactly what he had done when he had punched Scarsdale in the face.

Rose stared up at him, apparently astonished by his determination to wed at once. He noted that she did not argue and took hope in that. She was damned sensible and honorable.

Italy. Ha! He was glad she had dropped that notion quickly.

“I want your daughter, Lady Millbank,” he stated. “It is true, and I shall make sure that she’s well taken care of.”

“Oh, I’m sure you shall,” Lady Millbank said. “But the question is, can you make certain that she’s happy?”

“Mama, surely you are not concerned about that above scandal,” Rose pointed out earnestly.

Lady Millbank swung her gaze to her daughter and said with a shocking dose of emotion, “Of course I care if you are happy, Rose. It’s why I’ve been trying so hard to teach you how to succeed in society.”

“Mama,” Rose returned. “That is not how you can make me happy. You make me feel as if I am—”

“Not here,” her mother said. “Not in company.”

Her daughter winced. “Never anywhere, Mama. You never allow me to talk.”

Lady Millbank scowled. “I have many faults, my dear. I’m aware of it. I’m sorry that I am not the mother that you wish I was. I regret my limitations. But you are going to be married. It is going to be a great match, and all of London will not say a word against you if you are Clarence’s wife.”

Lady Millbank stopped and suddenly tensed. “You are going to marry him, aren’t you? You’ve said yes?”

Rose nodded, resigned. “I know my position, Mama. I do not fancy going off to some foreign country where I know nothing of the world, with no one and nothing to live for.”

Lady Millbank let out a relieved sigh. “Good. I’m glad to hear it,” she said.

For one moment, Clarence wondered if Rose would be happier in some other part of the world where nothing was expected of her, where no one would try to make her behave in ways that she did not want.

But with him as her husband, she would not have to retreat to some unknown land.

No, he would make certain that she was happy. He had to. It was the only thing that he could do now to appease his own sense of honor.

“Right then,” Lady Millbank said. “Is it a special license since scandal is afoot?”

He gave a tight nod. “Scarsdale will rush with gossip. And I think that what you should say is that a marriage was arranged between the two of us since before the Season started. And that’s why she wasn’t eagerly looking for suitors.”

Lady Millbank cocked her head to the side. “My, my, a love match made over the summer when you briefly visited us. Is that correct?”

It did not matter that he had not visited them. The ton would love the story. For they adored such things as long as it always ended in a wedding. And once she was his wife, no one would say a word. For no one would risk his wrath.

“Yes,” he agreed.

Lady Millbank clapped her gloved hands together. “I think that sounds perfect. We shall get ahead of this scandal before it can take place. And I think we should stay for the rest of the day at the races so no one says a word.”

“Can we not say that I feel unwell, Mama?” Rose asked, rather wishing to get away from the scene.

“If you run away from here, my dear, then everyone might think you have done something amiss. But if you wish to go, we shall.”

Rose drew herself up. She wouldn't let Scarsdale determine her actions. She was made of sterner stuff than that. "Then let us stay," she replied firmly.

Her mother gave her a look of shocking support before she suddenly glanced about. "Where is Hyacinth?" Lady Millbank demanded.

And as if on call, Hyacinth suddenly rushed forward through a thick crowd, brandishing a pamphlet.

"I have been giving these out, Mama!" Hyacinth gushed.

Lady Millbank's stare turned to ice. "Your sister was accosted while you were off handing out pamphlets."

Hyacinth blinked and swung a horrified gaze to her sister. "I beg your pardon?"

Rose gave her the best smile she could. "It doesn't matter. I am well."

"It does matter," Hyacinth protested, her joy draining swiftly from her face.

"It matters a great deal," Lady Millbank added. "But all shall be well. For she'll be marrying Clarence forthwith."

Hyacinth's jaw dropped. "What have I done?" she whispered.

"Nothing," Rose protested, clearly determined that Hyacinth would not blame herself for Scarsdale's sins.

Clarence took a step forward.

"Hyacinth, what happened was not your fault. You've nothing to do with Scarsdale's behavior."

"Scarsdale?" Hyacinth gasped. "He has been eyeing my sister for weeks, though he was reticent to approach her whenever Mama was about. He's like a vulture." She shuddered. "He's vermin."

"Yes," Damian agreed without hesitation. "He is a vulture, and we shall make certain he has no more meat to feed upon."

Hyacinth gave a tight nod, but she did not look assured. Rose crossed to her and took her hands.

“You must not blame yourself,” Rose insisted. “I did not have to go off on my own. I could have insisted you stay with me. Perhaps I should have. But the responsibility of it does not rest with you.”

“It does,” Hyacinth groaned. “I don’t struggle in company like you.”

“You are bold, and I admire you for it,” Rose replied passionately.

Hyacinth’s eyes filled with tears all the same. “He doesn’t wish to marry you though, does he?” she whispered.

Lady Millbank let out a note of warning. “Don’t you dare start, Hyacinth. I don’t care about your fine intelligence here or your honesty. You are about to ruin things just as badly as Scarsdale.”

And with that, Hyacinth winced, her face paling.

“You’re right, Mama,” she replied. “Forgive me.”

“Now, we best go and put on a good face before everyone.” And with that, Lady Millbank strode into the crowd.

“Go and place your wagers,” she said. “And meet me in a moment. I shall be telling everyone that I am the future mother-in-law of Viscount Clarence.”

And with that, Lady Millbank strolled off as if she was indeed the queen of the world, having conquered everyone before her, and roses were being tossed beneath her feet. And for a moment, Rose did not know what to make of the situation.

She was going to make a great marriage to a man who would need a great wife. She lifted her gaze to Clarence.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she said. “I’m not the kind of woman that you need.”

A strange look overtook his face. “You are exactly the kind of woman that I need. Never think twice about it.”

But she did.

She was certain that she was not the right one for him, even if he seemed insistent on it in this moment, even if he was being so kind. How she longed to rail against fate. She wished in that moment that he had never been kind to her in the garden, that they had never met, that she had continued on her own, facing her struggles by herself. Because the last thing she wanted was a man to sacrifice himself for her, especially a man like Clarence.

His eyes searched her face. “Don’t,” he murmured. “There’s no one’s fault in this. We were all true to our natures.”

Although he looked furious at himself for being true to his. And in that moment, she knew he must have regretted it.

He regretted what he had done because he was trapped, and there was no going back.

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CHAPTER 14

*T*here was not enough brandy in the whole world.

Damian lifted the snifter to his mouth, realized it was empty, grabbed the decanter, and lifted that instead. He took a long swig, the burn of the drink having disappeared several minutes ago.

Brookhaven charged down the long hall lined with tables and leather chairs. The club was largely empty, and it was clear the earl was seeking him out.

It was tempting to slump down and hide.

But he wasn't the sort who hid, so he raised his hand.

Brookhaven caught sight of him sitting on the floor and his jaw dropped. "Good God, man. What the bloody hell are you doing?"

"Drowning my problems in French drink," Damian returned with a salute of the decanter.

"Old boy," Brookhaven groaned. "You're drunk."

"Not yet," Damian declared with forced joviality. "But I am determined to achieve that status."

Brookhaven rolled his eyes as he closed the distance between them, winding between the polished oak tables. "You have not been drunk in a decade, man."

"Then it is absolutely time for it," Damian pointed out.

He lifted the brandy decanter and passed it to Brookhaven. Brookhaven let out a sigh and sat down beside him. "I suppose if you can't beat them, join them."

"Indeed, at least you seem to suggest I am winning," Damian drawled.

“To me? You are. But the news of your marriage is spreading through the ton like wildfire. So, I’m here to save you from yourself.” Brookhaven paused, his hand gripping the decanter easily. “Abernathy told me that you were in the devil’s own humor and that you came here to get blazing drunk. Something you don’t do.”

“I’ve managed to cockup my life, you see,” Damian returned.

“Have you?” Brookhaven queried, arching a brow. “It doesn’t sound like that to me. You’ve asked a wonderful lady to marry you. I don’t see how that is a cockup.”

Damian scowled. “Because she deserves better than me.”

“Bloody hell.” Brookhaven rolled his eyes and thrust out a single leg, the richly tailored fabric of his buff-colored breeches barely able to contain his muscled appendage. “You’re not going to start that sort of line, are you? You’re an incredible fellow. You are a gentleman. You’re a man of honor. You are capable—”

“Cease the barrage of compliments. I’m quite aware of how capable I am.”

“Good. So, where is the difficulty?” Brookhaven challenged.

“I don’t do feelings,” Damian grumbled.

Brookhaven’s lip twitched before he sighed. “Yes, I can see that.”

“You are making fun of me,” Damian accused.

“Only because it’s so easy to do at this particular moment,” Brookhaven teased.

Damian dropped his head back, studying the gilded plasterwork. “Look, it’s all well and good for you. You got married to a woman that you like and admire—”

“That’s essentially true, but it is quite off the mark,” Brookhaven cut in swiftly, clearly not interested in any sort of

indulgence at present. “I didn’t marry her because I wanted to.”

“I beg your pardon?” Damian blurted.

Brookhaven drew in a long breath and then admitted, “I married her because I had to, just like you.”

“Not just like me,” Damian countered. “You did not punch a blighter in the face and cause a scandal.”

Brookhaven laughed ruefully. “That is true. I married my wife because it was my duty, and I was told to do so. My father arranged it. But I’d never met her, and I had to marry her.” Brookhaven’s brow furrowed as he recalled the events of the previous months. “She didn’t want to marry me, but look how it worked out. The same will be true for you, I think.”

“No. She makes me lose control of myself, and that is a very bad thing indeed,” Damian explained, grabbing the decanter and taking a swig.

“Oh, and you are such a champion at keeping control of yourself.”

“Yes, a champion,” he said with all seriousness.

Brookhaven studied him. “And what exactly are you doing now?”

“You see!” Damian exclaimed, his gestures beginning to get a bit muddled. He frowned and cleared his throat. “This is all because of how I feel for her. I have started down a terrible path because she makes me feel...”

“What?” Brookhaven prompted.

“I don’t even know,” Damian whispered. “I cannot point out exactly what she’s done to me. No.” Damian stopped, getting a hold of his line of thinking, “I will not blame her. This has nothing to do with her. It has to do with me. I have fallen. I have lost control of myself, and I must buoy my bastions. I must secure my fortress, and I must make certain that I do not ever do something so impulsive again.”

Brookhaven let out another sigh, grabbed the decanter, and took a long drink himself. Then he eyed his friend. “The truth is that your present fall is almost certainly because you’ve been in control so long. You can’t hold tight like that forever, my friend.”

“Of course, I can,” Damian defended. He had to. The army and the future of England depended on it.

Apparently, Brookhaven disagreed because he turned towards him and said with surprising force, “You’ve contained your emotions so entirely that finally, at last, the bottle could no longer contain them. And something shook that bottle. It enraged you, and you acted out on those feelings, and it was likely a good thing that you did too. The bottle exploded in the moment.” Brookhaven frowned. “Scarsdale is the devil.”

He tensed. “How do you know about Scarsdale?”

Brookhaven shrugged, took another drink, and said, “Abernathy told me.”

And as if the devil could be called with words, Abernathy strode into the room, his wooden peg leg making its familiar echo.

Abernathy crossed over, pulled up a chair, and sat down. “I’m not risking it down there,” he warned. “While it’s technically true that one cannot fall off the floor, I fear that once I get down there, neither of you will pull me back up to stand.”

“That is a horrific thing to say,” Damian said, his mind swimming a bit.

Abernathy wagged his brows. “At least here, if you decide to run off, I can follow you with ease.”

Damian narrowed his eyes. “Why would I run off?”

“Because you are being a coward,” Abernathy said simply. “I’m half afraid that you are going to run off to Italy rather than marry her.”

Coward. That word rang through him with a shuddering force. Anyone could call him a coward, and he would ignore it. Generally, he was not easily angered, and he also knew it wasn't true.

But when Abernathy said it...

"I would never do such a thing," Damian insisted before he lifted the decanter, sloshing it about. He frowned. "We're going to need another one of these if you're going to have a drink."

Abernathy let out a laugh. "I will not be having a drink. It's hard enough to stay on my leg without being three sheets to the wind. Thank you very much. I'll happily watch you two get obliterated from above."

"This is a damned coil," Damian growled, the image of his bride coming to mind. And the way he was going to disappoint her.

"Yes, it is," Abernathy agreed without sympathy. "You're going to have to pull yourself together and be a man."

He scowled. "Now, I say. You keep insinuating that I am not being—"

Brookhaven raised a hand. "Abernathy is just suggesting that you are being rather self-indulgent at the moment, old boy."

He swung his gaze between his friends. "Wouldn't you be self-indulgent if you had forced a young lady to marry you that didn't want to?"

"How do you know she doesn't want to?" Abernathy countered. "I think she likes you quite a lot."

He stilled. "That's worse," he said softly.

"Why is it worse?" Brookhaven asked. "To my mind, that is the most ridiculous drunken prattle I've ever heard."

His insides twisted. "But if she likes me so very well, and I like her so well, how will I control my emotions?"

“Good God. You sound like a complete arse,” Brookhaven groaned.

“But still not a tosser,” Damian said.

Abernathy shook his dark head. “Actually, right now, you actually do sound like a tosser.”

He plunked the decanter on the floor, rather disliking the way the room was beginning to feel a bit blurry. “Do I really?”

“You sound like someone who’s afraid. That’s for certain,” Brookhaven said honestly.

“Well,” Damian whispered, swallowing. “I am afraid. What if I don’t make her happy?”

“It’s not your job to make her happy, old boy,” Abernathy said. “It’s her job to make herself happy. But don’t get in the way of that happiness.”

“But she’ll be my responsibility,” Damian insisted.

“That’s true,” Brookhaven agreed. “Your wife is your responsibility. The best thing I can say is to let her be herself. Give her money. Tell her to go do whatever she pleases and then...let her, without intervening.”

“You can’t be serious,” he stated. “Just give her money and leave her be.”

“Not entirely! I don’t recommend ignoring the bedroom, old boy. That way lies disaster.” Brookhaven leaned back on his forearms. “It’s worked out quite well for me and my wife, and she’s taken London by storm with the encouragement I gave her. She’s done more on her own than I could have ever done by telling her what to do. So, don’t try to control Lady Rose. Don’t even try to help her too much. Just let her be herself. I don’t think anybody has probably ever let her do that. I’ve heard about the young lady in question, and it seems, despite her beauty, she disappears into the wallpaper.”

The idea that Lady Rose could disappear into the wallpaper was one of the most appalling things he’d ever heard.

“She’s stunning, of heart and mind, never mind of body,” Damian declared.

“Yes, but usually no one sees that because she’s so quiet. It’s a miracle everybody doesn’t just think she’s a complete snob,” Abernathy said.

Damian snorted. “She doesn’t have the ability to look like a snob. I think she’s generally extremely uncomfortable in company. Surely, you understand that, don’t you, Abernathy?”

“I do,” Abernathy allowed, a muscle tightening in his jaw. “But I won’t let it get me down. I don’t think she will either with your support, but I agree with our friend here. Do as Brookhaven says. Don’t try to do things for her. Remember what I told you about the boxing match.”

Damian let out a sigh. “You two love to give lectures, don’t you?”

“Of course, old boy, who doesn’t love to give a lecture?” Brookhaven pounded him on the back with such intense amusement that Damian nearly choked.

“Come,” Brookhaven asked. “When is the wedding?”

“First thing in the morning,” Damian said.

“Luckily, you’re only a little drunk, my friend. Best put a stop to it now, don’t you think?” Brookhaven asked with shocking kindness.

He nodded and pushed the decanter away. A wave of disappointment in himself crashed over him. How would Rose feel if he came to the wedding with a sore head?

No, he wouldn’t do that to her. He’d put a stop to it now.

He hesitated, then explained, “I didn’t know how to get through the night. I was never supposed to marry someone like her.”

“Someone like her?” Abernathy asked.

“Yes, so wonderful.”

Brookhaven gave him a slow smile. “This is going to be a devil of a time for you as you surrender to her.”

Surrender? What the blazes was the man talking about?

Abernathy grinned. “I don’t know. I think it might be the most wonderful thing that’s ever happened to him.”

Damian narrowed his eyes. “I was supposed to find her a country gentleman.”

“A country gentleman,” Brookhaven echoed, rolling his eyes. “I don’t know if that’s what she really wants. Do you think that’s what she really wants? The Millbanks aren’t actually from the country.”

“She likes horses,” Damian replied.

“Splendid,” Brookhaven said. “Buy her a horse then and be done with your self-recrimination.”

That stopped him. He could buy her a horse. He could buy her a hundred. He could buy her a stable, and she could do whatever she pleased.

“By God, you’re a genius, Brookhaven.”

“Thank you,” Brookhaven said. “But I already had a high estimation of my ability. Now, let’s get you on your feet, and let’s get a great deal of water inside you so you don’t look like death at your wedding tomorrow morning.”

Damian stood and swayed. “Bloody hell.”

Abernathy let out a laugh. “You have been out of practice, oh boy. And of course, lack of drink is why you look so damn good.”

Damian frowned. “In truth?”

Brookhaven nodded oh so seriously. “Yes. You have the best skin in all of England.”

A laugh bubbled out of him. “Cease trying to make me feel better. I’m not a vain fellow.”

“It’s not meant to make you feel better, Clarence. It’s the truth. The way you live makes you look younger,” Abernathy countered. “Now, don’t start making yourself look a fool just because a wonderful young lady is going to be your wife.”

Damian thought about that for a moment. He couldn’t be a fool. He had to be strong. He had to be a good husband, and he had to take Brookhaven’s and Abernathy’s advice. Because if he didn’t, he was going to destroy everything. And he’d do the exact opposite of what he had set out to do.

He wanted to open the world to her, and if he wasn’t careful, he would shut it. No, it was his job to make certain that she could do whatever she pleased, and he was going to start now.

And once the marriage license was signed, he could give her the world with a bow on it.

“To water and a long walk, my friends,” he declared and headed in a mostly straight line for the door.

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CHAPTER 15

*R*ose's soon-to-be husband looked resolved.

Clarence wore the expression of a man who was about to go into battle and was absolutely determined to emerge victorious. Resolute.

That was the word.

He was beautiful in that resolution. There was no question. He stood resplendent in a black morning coat. His white cravat was starched within an inch of its life. His fawn breeches were tight, and his polished boots shone like mirrors.

His shoulders were back, proud, strong under that perfectly tailored coat. With his muscled stature, he looked like Atlas bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. Oh, and his beautiful jawline, how it cut above the points of his shirt and cravat. His blond hair was almost as snowy as his linen shirt.

Clarence was about to be hers in the eyes of God and the laws of England. But he did not wish it. And in that case, nor did she.

Still, there was no going back, not any longer. But at the head of the nave of the Christopher Wren church, she felt her body beginning to shake. It was so slight that no one could see it. But she could feel it.

She loathed that this was a state that she occasionally had to deal with, but here it was. It was a part of her, and no matter what she did, it seemed to come again and again. And as she locked eyes with Clarence, a thought suddenly struck her. Did she need to fight this feeling? Did she need to resist it, or could she simply accept that this was who she was? That the feeling was a warning bell and an alarm telling her that something needed to be changed?

Yes, she thought to herself as she stood waiting with her arm resting on her father's rigid arm. The man was so absent from her life that she barely felt his distant presence as he led her to her future.

Indeed, something needed to be changed. But what was it? And in that moment, she made a clear decision. She would not be a victim of circumstance. It was true that she was here because Scarsdale had nearly ruined everything. She was here because Clarence had stepped in and wanted to help her.

She was here because she had chosen not to chance the total unknown and the dangers of a life of an unprotected woman by running off to Italy.

And she was going to make the blasted most of it.

So, she lifted her chin, clutched her bouquet of pink roses and white lilies, then took bold steps down the aisle as her father, Lord Millbank, scowled.

He had said but a few words to her upon the announcement of her swift marriage. She and her father were all but strangers, in any case. She had no desire to have a profound conversation with him.

Much to her relief, he did not seem to have time, interest, or inclination to either berate her or congratulate her. And yet she could tell from the line of his brow that he was pleased she was about to become a viscountess, no matter how it had occurred, for his family had come from a long line of interesting marriages.

Marriages that resulted in power, if not love.

They processed up to the altar. Lord Millbank passed her off as simply as if she were a load of goods being transferred to a new owner. Her hand slipped over Clarence's gloved one, and he looked down at her with his stony face. For a single moment, that visage remained expressionless.

But then, oh, then, his eyes lit, and he gave her that wink, that delicious wink that assured her that all was well with the world. And in his presence, she was glad she had marched

down the nave boldly, that she had told her fear, that rattling sensation within her, that she was in command, not it. It did not mean that it was not there. Oh, she felt it spinning inside her now.

She felt fear that the church was going to collapse in on them, that the world was going to turn its back on her, and that she had made the worst decision of her life by asking him for help.

Yes, the fear was still inside her, but she was not going to live her life as a ship tossed about in storm. No. She would do what she could to ride it out and be victorious, just as he was clearly determined to be.

The archbishop looked at the two of them, peered through his spectacles, opened the good book with shaking, gnarled fingers, and began to drone the words of the ceremony in sonorous tones.

Before she knew what had happened, the ceremony was done. It was shocking how quickly the event transpired as her head spun with thoughts of Clarence and their future.

She knew that she had said the words, I do, as had he, but she had focused on the feel of her hand atop his, on the feel of the ring slipping onto her third left finger. And she had focused on the feel of the smooth stones beneath her feet, stones that had been worn smooth by thousands of people like her. They had all come to this place to offer up their lives before God in various ceremonies meant to mark the passing of a life.

She looked up to her husband, and he lifted her thin veil, bringing it back over her bonnet. Then, much to her astonishment, he gently touched her chin with his thumb and forefinger, tilted her face up, and in a completely impulsive action, bent down and touched his lips to hers.

She nearly gasped against his mouth at the feel of that kiss. This was going to be hers. At last, she was going to have him and that kiss that she had dreamed about. That kiss that had

taken place at the races had been a promise, in the end, of so much more.

Clarence did not say another word, but he took her arm in his and whisked her down the nave, out to the steps of the church and the coach waiting below. He did not stop to speak with his friends. He did not stop to speak with her mother or her father. Oh, no. He was a man on a mission, and she found that she was possessed by whatever desire he had as well. She wanted to be alone with him, truly alone. And it seemed that he wanted the same.

His footman threw open the door of the green lacquered carriage, and Clarence helped her in swiftly. He pulled himself up behind, and the door slammed shut behind them. He tugged the carriage curtains shut.

Leaving them without an audience.

Clarence pounded on the roof, and the carriage rattled down the narrow street through the City of London.

He blew out a long breath, his massive shoulders relaxing ever so slightly.

She sat still watching him, wondering what he might say.

“Wife,” he growled softly, his eyes alight.

Her insides did something different then rattle this time. Her insides thrilled, for there was a promise in that tone that sent desire slipping through her blood.

“Husband,” she returned.

“Are you afraid right now?” he asked.

“That is a ridiculous question,” she said, taken aback. “I have never been afraid of you. You know that you actually make me feel quite at peace.”

“Just at peace?” he asked softly. “I must ask, because the truth is I have dreamed of being alone with you, truly alone. And I think you feel the same, but I want to be certain.”

She admired him for inquiring. He knew that she sometimes struggled. She licked her lips, leaned forward, and said, "I have dreamt of you. I have imagined your arms about me and your lips on mine. And when you kissed me at the races, I wanted more, so much more."

"Good," he growled, "because I feel the same."

She gasped. "You do?" she said, hardly daring to believe her ears. She knew that he had wanted to kiss her. The races had shown that. But more?

He hesitated, then explained in a low rumble, "I think you believe that I've had to marry you out of some sort of burden and that I have no will to be with you."

She was still for a moment. She didn't want to deny it, because if she tried, it would be a lie.

When she made no reply, he continued, "Let me tell you something. I denied myself the opportunity to ask you to be mine not out of a lack of desire, Rose. I denied myself because I want you so very, very much."

Those words hung between them, thickening the air with his hunger, and she let out a small note of shock. "You wanted to deny yourself because you want me," she stated. "I don't understand."

"You don't have to understand the way I have thought over the years, but know this," he said firmly, his hands tightening into fists as if he wanted to reach across the coach and seize her now without explanation but held himself in check. "I will not deny myself now. There is no point. I will not hold back, and I hope you won't either."

Hope... Hope sprang to life in her then, and anticipation.

Fairly humming now with wonder at what was about to occur between them, she held her hand out to him again, mirroring what she had done in the garden.

"I will not hold back either," she assured as she willed herself to match his resolve. "I have lived so much of my life

in fear, but here in this moment, this day, it is a new day. Of opportunity. I do not want to live in fear. I do not want to be a victim to society. I want to seize what is mine. I want to seize this life. I want to seize you.”

A smile curved his lips. It was slow and full of male satisfaction.

“Then seize away,” he said softly. “My lady wife.”

And so she did. Without hesitation, without another thought, without allowing that fear which always roared to life in her head to take hold. She told that fear, that thought, that quaking inside her, that she had heard the alarm, that she had heard the warning, but she did not care.

This was what she wanted. This moment, this man, this marriage, above all things. And she was going to do whatever she must to make a success of it.

Nothing was going to stand in the way of it, not even herself.

And so she crossed over to his side of the coach, slid her arms over his shoulders, and sat upon his lap.

It was the strangest sensation, feeling his powerful body bear her weight, for she did not know what she was doing.

She did it awkwardly, she knew, but she did not care. This was a time for learning. Perfection did not exist. And if she was going to know her husband, she had to get on with it.

With a low rumble of pleasure, as if to say mine, he pulled her tighter to him and gazed down upon her face.

Though he said nothing as his eyes trailed over her features, she felt as if, somehow, he could see deep past her visage and into her soul.

And for a single breath, she was certain that he saw the very core of her soul. That he did not care about the trappings of society, that he did not care about the rules that they would have to face, that all he cared about in that moment was their two souls entwined.

She leaned her head back and whispered, “Kiss me. Kiss me now as if the world depended upon it.”

“Whatever you command, Rose,” he replied before he lowered his mouth to hers.



It was all Damian could do not to have taken her in the coach with her upon his lap. Bloody hell, how he'd wanted to slide her skirts up to her waist, stroke her legs, her thighs, her hips, slip into her wet core, and show her what pleasure was.

But he also wanted her to feel secure. They barely knew each other.

Not really.

And though their souls seemed matched, their minds too, he did not wish to cause her fear. He wanted her at ease, relaxed, and so he had held her in the coach for the journey between the church and his townhouse. Held her in his arms, allowing her body to become familiar with his.

He had stroked her cheeks with the backs of his knuckles, teased his fingers along her arms, gazed into her eyes, and willed her to know how very much he wanted her. How much pleasure he wanted to give her.

How very much he was willing to go at her pace.

And yet he knew she did not want to wait. She'd made that fairly clear. Neither of them did. Neither of them wanted to postpone that which they both felt for each other. Passion. A wild, hungry passion.

Her eyes had spoken so in the coach as they had neared his house. And now as they stood in his bedchamber, the fire crackling, candles lit everywhere despite the fact that it was not yet night, he hungered for her and no longer needed to wait. He had wanted this moment to be romantic, to be perfect for her. A bottle of bubbling French wine sat in a silver carafe by the fire. He went to the polished mahogany table. The wine

had already been corked. Quickly, he poured two flutes and then crossed to her.

“For you,” he said, holding out one of the crystal glasses. She crossed the chamber to him, her skirts dancing over her legs. Her movements were a bit rushed, and he knew she was nervous but not afraid.

Oh, how he could understand.

This was something she’d never done before. She’d barely been alone with a man and certainly not in his bedchamber. Surely, anything that one had never done before might cause nerves, and this was certainly more intimate than anything either of them had ever partaken in.

Yes, even him. For he had never in his whole life made love to a woman like her, a woman he wanted so entirely. A woman he so admired.

She took the flute, their fingertips skimming before she lifted the vessel to her lips and took a small sip.

And then she smiled tentatively as she lowered the champagne. “I want to be fully present for this. Not touched by drink.”

He drew in a stunned breath, honored that she trusted him and did not feel the need for liquid courage. She was so much braver than she knew. “I’m glad,” he said softly, his voice a low rumble, “that you wish such a thing, and so shall I be.”

He placed his glass down atop the mahogany table and took her into his arms. Gently, he slipped hers from her fingers and placed it beside his.

“This is what you want?” he rasped.

“Do you dare ask me?” she challenged with an arch of her brow and a curve of her lips.

“Well,” he said. “I suppose I do because I care so much.”

Her eyes welled with emotion. “And that is why I want you so much. It is not because you’re handsome or strong or

powerful. But because of the way you have always wanted to care for me, to see that I am safe, to see that I grow in this world.”

He stilled. “Is it so very obvious?”

“Oh, yes,” she returned. “It fairly emanates from you.”

He smiled slowly, cupped her cheek in his hand, bent his head down, and took her mouth in the softest of kisses. He wanted to seize her mouth. He wanted to tear her clothes from her body and devour her.

But this was her first time, and he would never do such a thing. No, he wanted her to want this over and over and over again. And so, like the first taste of a decadent dessert, he took his time.

He savored her mouth. Damian gave her soft kiss after soft kiss until, at last, her lips parted, and he teased his tongue forward. He tasted the inside of her mouth until her tongue tangled with his.

Her hands came up to his waist. And much to his amazement, she pulled him tightly to her body. She pressed herself into him as if she might be able to become one with him. It nearly undid him, that feeling.

For he wanted to become one with her as well. To forget the rest of the world, to think of nothing but her, and to give in to this feeling. He never gave in. But with her? He did.

Oh, how he did, and he would not recriminate himself for it. Perhaps... Perhaps he needed one person to give in with, and oh how she was the right one. Of that, he was certain.

He traced his fingers along her neck, loving the gentle curve of it, and then down to her clavicles. His hands worked at the pins and ties of her gown until it whooshed to her feet, and she stood in nothing but her pale chemise, stockings, and shoes.

Then, oh so slowly, he knelt before her. He pressed kisses along her belly through the lightweight chemise. And then he

carefully eased her slippers from her feet, one after the other. The sound of the shoes thunked on his Axminster rug.

Damian gazed up at her, his soul open, and she stared down at him with wonder. Clearly never having considered a man like him kneeling to her.

He trailed his hands from her ankles to her calves, slowly working them upward past the ribbons tying her stockings just above her knees, and then he skimmed his fingertips up over her hips.

Gently, he cupped her bottom and bit his lower lip as desire pulsed through him. He leaned forward and lifted her chemise, baring the apex of her thighs to him.

She gasped. “What are you doing?”

“Gazing upon what is mine now,” he said softly. “Just as I am yours.”

“And what are you going to do?” she asked, her brow furrowed. “I do not understand.”

“You do not know?” he asked softly.

She gave a tight shake of her head.

He licked his lips in anticipation. “I’m going to kiss you and give you pleasure. But if you don’t like what I do, you must tell me. Promise?” he queried.

A breath shuddered out of her as she nodded.

“Do you trust me?”

A slow smile curved her lips. “I trust you more than anyone,” she said.

“Good,” he replied, pride rippling through him.

And then he slipped his fingers between her thighs and found the soft folds there. The soft folds that would welcome his hard cock. But for now, he wanted her wet and hungry for him. And so, he took his time, delicately stroking those folds

with the tips of his fingers, slipping into the wet heat and skipping back over the outer softness.

When he could bear it no longer, he parted her thighs, leaned in, and took her into his mouth. Her legs shook at that, and she nearly collapsed. Damian held her upright with one strong arm as he kissed her sex over and over, teasing with his tongue and mouth.

He groaned in satisfaction at the taste of her.

How he loved this. He wanted it more than anything, the feel of her in his mouth, against his lips and his tongue. As he explored her every curve, she let out a ragged breath of building pleasure.

“Damian!” she cried out, and then her body tightened. Her pleasure rolled from her throat, and she let out a moan of such bliss.

He smiled against her as her release swept over her.

After her body relaxed as she drew in slow breaths, he stood and swept her up into his arms. Damian carried her easily to the bed.

He whipped off her chemise and joined her on the soft mattress. Within moments, he tore off his own shirt and breeches, no longer able to be so painstakingly slow anymore. He was possessed. Possessed with need for her now that she was ready for him.

He parted her thighs and gazed into her eyes. He took in her beautiful form—the soft curve of her breasts, that soft strength of her body, her hips, the way her knees fell open for him.

A low growl passed his lips as he stroked her thighs again and took himself in his hands, rested the head of his cock against her wet folds, and stroked up and down.

Her eyes widened in astonishment, but he did not stop, and the feel of her slick, wet, welcoming heat nearly undid him in that moment.

What was he? A green boy?

It seemed that she made him so, but he would not stop. He rubbed that slick desire, nearly gasping at the feel of it against the head of his sex, but then he stopped at her opening and began to rock gently. Slowly.

“This might hurt a bit,” he groaned.

She nodded. “I understand,” she replied, her hands coming up to grip his shoulders. To steady her as if heading into a storm.

But this time, he could tell she was not afraid. He rocked forward in a slow, steady thrust. Her eyes widened and her nails dug into his back, but then she let out a slow sigh. Whatever pain she felt seemed to vanish as he patiently worked his way into her body.

The tightness, the heat of her... He'd felt nothing like it in his whole life. She was his match in every way. He longed to savor this moment, to hold on, but his body demanded that he begin to thrust his hips.

He pistoned slowly, making sure that he stroked the most delicious part of her body. Her cheeks were pink, her mouth parted, and her chest rose as if her entire body would rise to meet him.

She was the most beautiful sight in the world.

Then her arms wrapped about his, and he began to increase his pace. His own breath hitched in his throat as pleasure began to pummel him, the promise of it just out of reach.

He stroked her inside as he had out, slowly rocking his hips, undulating until, at last, he felt her tighten about him.

Another wave of pleasure coursed through her as she cried out his name again. As she reached the zenith of her pleasure, he could hold back no more, and he thrust home.

Yes, home.

As pleasure charged through his body, the most intense he'd ever known, he surrendered to her and the wild emotions of finally feeling free in her embrace.

He held her to him then as he fell to the bed. His body completely at ease now. His breath ragged and his world... New.

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CHAPTER 16

The first days of their marriage were a flourish of excitement, of learning, of discovery, of hours upon hours spent in bed. Neither of them wanted to leave the canopied bed in his massive chamber. It was their haven, their new realm.

Though this marriage had been forced, they both found delicious solace in each other's arms for very different reasons.

Damian could not believe the power he found in her arms. Some men thought women were of little importance.

How, he wondered, could they think such a foolish thing? He knew that when he had seen her in the garden, he'd thought he could ride to her proverbial rescue like some chivalrous knight and give her a future. Yes, as if she was a maiden fair in a tower, and he'd save her.

What a fool he'd been, for it was here, in these quiet moments in the dark, as they discussed novels and people, that he began to unravel. To feel the tension of a whole life slip away as he dared to share secret after secret, memory after memory.

She was saving him. With each whispered word and caress.

Slowly, he unfolded the cold quiet of his childhood, of being a boy alone in the nursery, taking tea with nanny and then his tutors as he'd aged.

His parents had not even come for holidays. So often, they were traveling the world, refusing to take a child with them because of the risks and effort.

He had not even had the fifteen minutes that most of his peers had with their parents at tea time as children.

No, he had not been able to share in the joys of discovery, to tell his parents about the frogs that he had found in the pond, or the bugs in the stream, or the trees he had climbed and the knees he had skinned.

His parents had simply not been interested. Nor present.

They had been on a journey of discovery around the world that did not include him. He'd felt as if he was an unnecessary addition, an unwanted inconvenience. He had simply been a necessary infant to continue the Clarence line, and nothing more.

And he realized that while Lord and Lady Millbank had not gone around the world, there was a great deal of similarity between himself and his wife.

She also had not had the opportunity to share with a parent her innermost thoughts, her dreams, her desires. Oh, Hyacinth had been there as a companion for Rose, but there had been no one to truly offer a hand to her, to see her.

But all that was changing now.

They saw each other.

Damian did not know what it was about her that dared him to be so free in his speech and feelings. Perhaps it had been Brookhaven's and Abernathy's words. Perhaps it had been the realization that he could not be a fool with her.

Perhaps it was the fact that she had bewitched him entirely. He did not wish to hold back anymore. He did not wish to be a fortress. For fortresses could always be torn asunder or breached. There was no great wall that could not be taken. There was no river that could not be crossed.

And much to his chagrin, with little effort she had crossed all his fortifications. Yes, she had crossed the line of his determination, and he had no desire to try to keep her out.

Not anymore.

Not since realizing how he wanted to remake the world for her.

And what astonished him most of all was that it seemed to be making him stronger. For every hour he spent in her arms, tracing his hands along her beautiful tresses, teasing his fingertips over her cheeks and lips, discussing Milton, Dante, Burke, Shakespeare, he found his soul renewing. And Damian realized he had been a well that had nearly run dry, and she was a spring filling him up, giving him new life.

Oh, how he longed to give that to her in turn.

For though he still went to Horse Guards every day—he had to as the war had not stopped—he knew that she was not entirely certain what her next step should be.

Since she was a lady of the ton, the general attitude would be that his wife should hold a party, a ball, or a dinner, but she had no wish for such things.

And he realized again that Brookhaven and Abernathy were correct. He did not require a hostess. He had been very successful in all his endeavors for years. Why would he follow others' expectation now?

Expectations were boring.

He wanted his wife to thrive. He wanted the world to change, and if he kept doing the same things that everyone else did, nothing would ever change.

And so he made a decision.

After weeks of making love and sharing confidences at his London townhouse, he put a plan into action.

After a hearty breakfast of toast with rich butter, coffee, kippers, rashers, and beautifully done eggs, they rode out in his curricule into the country.

His planned destination was not far from London. With a good conveyance or horse, it was less than an hour.

After all, he did not wish her to leave him every day or spend weeks away from him. Though not uncommon in ton marriages, such a thing felt unbearable to him.

No, this place was on the outskirts of the western part of the city.

He drove his curricle quickly, bouncing over the rutted roads. She laughed under the verdant green trees, clutching her bonnet to her head, the light green ribbons streaming behind her.

The music of the sound was delightful to his ears. For he knew that she had not always been so free, nor given the opportunity to feel alive. And he was so grateful that he made her feel the same as she did him.

They drove past flowering fields until finally they pulled up to green pastures, one after another, next to a rolling stream.

Wildflowers dotted the tall, wild grasses, and she gasped. “How beautiful,” she breathed. At the pure wonder in her voice, he slowly beamed.

For she had spotted exactly what he hoped she would by coming this way. Horses dotted the landscape. Beautiful horses, strong, vibrant, and full of life. Their muscles were under lustrous coats of many hues.

Quick magic, each one of them.

“Do you like them?” he said softly.

“Like them? You have no idea,” she whispered, her voice full emotion. “Look at them. They are so perfect, like art or music. There’s nothing like a beautiful horse,” she mused, leaning forward, her hands gripping the curricle’s seat. “Their spirit? They set my mind on fire,” she breathed.

He studied her. She looked so alive, so happy, simply glancing upon them.

He secured the reins and then began, “I’ve done something, or at least I will do so with your approval.”

She swung her gaze to him. “Oh?” she said. “What have you done? Should I be alarmed?”

“It depends,” he said.

“Depends on what?” she queried, her brows rising, though it was clear she did not truly wish to look away from the animals who were grazing upon the wild grasses.

“I’ve bought this for you,” he stated.

She hesitated, then swung her gaze to him, her eyes wide. “For me? It? What have you bought?”

He gestured to the scene before them. “The horses, the fields, all of it. There is a stable beautifully kept. It is for you,” he said.

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“They make you so happy,” he said softly, shocked at the power of the emotion racing through him as he explained his gift. “And your mother and father took it away from you. If you don’t want it, of course I shall not force it upon you, but if you do...”

“Don’t want it,” she rushed. “Of course, I do! You don’t mind?”

“Mind what?” he queried, relieved and overjoyed at the happiness brightening her eyes.

She quirked a brow. “That I wish to spend my days with horses. And books.”

He drew in a breath as he gazed upon her with wonder. “I will build you a library in the stable if that is what you want.”

She began to laugh slowly, softly. “Oh Damian, if you do that, I may never come home.”

“I will have lost my love to the races?” he teased.

“Not to the races,” she said, gesturing out to the fields. “But to this life, to this place.” She gazed upon it as if she had seen heaven. “You would do this for me? You don’t want me to go and be a ton wife?”

“How could I want you to be what you are not?” he said, refusing to be afraid that, indeed, he might lose her to the races. But he would not let fear rule him now. He never truly had. And he was not about to start. “I love you for who you are.”

He pressed his lips together, shocked at the words that had come out of his mouth.

“Love?” she breathed, her eyes dancing with hope.

He nodded. “I cannot describe what it is that I feel,” he said to her. “But love seems to be the only word for it. I feel so much that I cannot contain it any longer, and I pray to God that you will accept it.”

“How could I deny your love?” she said, turning fully towards him, tears of joy shining in her eyes. “And in this moment, Damian, you are showing me how much you care. That you’d be willing to let me come here every day to live my life with this as my purpose rather than attempting to give balls, and dinners, and parties. There is no greater sign of your love.”

He reached out and tucked a fluttering lock of her hair back behind her ear. “I want you to be full of joy,” he said. “Because your joy gives me joy.”

She reached out and cupped his cheek. “But is that enough, Damian? Your life is full of so much purpose. Will it bring you contentment to have me here, for me to keep company amongst the horses, and then return at night?”

He took her hand in his. “Yes. I already have purpose, and I want that for you too. I don’t want you wasting the hours of your life with lace and silk and worries about a ball when none of that is truly important, not to you. I want you to do what you love, and I will never forget the look on your face when your mother said that they’d had to break you of the habit of riding when you were fourteen. That was a dream broken, wasn’t it?”

She looked away for a moment, and her face twisted at the memory. But then she shook her head and rushed, “I often wondered when I was younger what it would be like to be born a man. I don’t wish to be a man,” she amended quickly. “Men are ridiculous creatures.”

He laughed. “I won’t take umbrage at that. Nor will I argue.”

“Good,” she teased. “I’m glad because I quite like you compared to most men. But I did dream of what the freedom might be like in being a man. Of being able to choose what I wanted, read what books I pleased without an allowance. I wondered what it would be like going out into the world and making my way without having to be judged on my face, or my curtsy, or my deportment. What would it be like to get up every morning and ride to the devil?” she said with a laugh. “And now you are handing me that chance, and I don’t have to be born a man.”

He smiled slowly at her. “I am very glad you weren’t,” he said, teasing her lips with his thumb.

“As am I, Damian,” she said softly, kissing the edge of his thumb, then taking his hand in hers. “Now come along and show me the stables,” she said.

“With pleasure, my love,” he said, his heart so full. “With pleasure.”

CHAPTER 17

Riding the steely gray stallion over the pastures felt like flying. How she adored it. She'd not been allowed such freedom in years.

The feel of the wind against her face, the scent of earth, sunshine, and flowers surrounded her, and the beat of the horse's hooves filled her with a sense of purpose and heaven.

Damian, her magnificent husband, raced behind her, barely able to catch up, and she let out a gleeful laugh of sheer joy. She felt the sort of joy one feels as a child. Pure, perfect, impossible to match or beat. The kind of joy that could not be eradicated by darkness or the cruelty of humanity.

And so she lifted her reins, raised herself up on the stirrups in her breeches, and charged faster. The stallion adored it, loving the sensation of freedom just as much as she did as they tore across the English countryside.

She did not look back to see if Damian was behind her. She knew he could keep up. She had little fear of losing him as they charged across logs and streams, easily taking hurdles as if they were nothing.

Heaven.

She had found heaven.

Being Damian's wife was heaven.

She never could have thought that she would find such bliss, such beauty, because in this moment, she understood that she'd found what she had always hoped for. What she'd thought was completely unattainable for so long and that was her freedom.

Through her husband. She had hoped, oh, how she had hoped that he might be able to find her a husband in which she did not have to struggle through life. Struggle?

She was not struggling now. She was ablaze with excitement for life. This was a muse of fire! A bliss of the Greek gods and their temples and their mountains basking over her, showering her with the opportunity of a beautiful life, grander than any she'd even known could exist.

When at last the stallion's heart was pounding hard in its chest, its coat wet with sweat, she swung his head round and began the slow walk back to the stables.

Her husband pulled up beside her, his face both proud and terrified. "My God woman, your mother was not joking. It seems to me that you should have been born to be a centaur."

She grinned at him as she stroked her stallion's neck. "Are there lady centaurs?"

"There must be," he said, considering. "After all, somehow they've reproduced."

"Perhaps they're magical," she said. "Simply popping up."

He arched a brow. "How very disappointing," he said.

She laughed at that. "Thank you for coming out to ride with me this morning," she said.

She was pleased that he so often joined her first thing, rather than heading directly into the city or the halls of power.

"What more pleasure could I hope to derive than to ride with my wife in the morning after having such a pleasurable tumble in bed?"

She wanted to tease him, and so she said, "Ah, a ride after a ride then, is it?"

He nearly choked.

"My goodness, I have shocked my own husband. Have I crossed a line too far?"

"Never, my love," he assured. "You have not, for I know the books that you read."

She waggled her brows, delighted. “Only because of you,” she said. “Mother would never have allowed such additions. And now there is nothing beyond my grasp.”

It was true.

He had expanded her horizons in many ways. There was nothing that was out of her reach now. Nothing that he would deny her. And she could not express enough gratitude or admiration for him. But he did not want her to feel gratitude. He seemed to think that everyone should have the opportunity, not just her. And she loved him all the more for it.

He wanted the world to know freedom. To know peace and joy. And that was why he went to Horse Guards every day and fought so hard to make certain that there would be no more young men or women or children crushed under Napoleon’s determination for power.

She wondered how he survived each day and the crushing, never-ending cruelty of the war reports.

After all, he read the lists of casualties and wounded every morning. He saw every name.

He read the reports on the travesties that occurred in the continental countryside as Napoleon blazed his way across the land.

Somehow, Damian managed to not let it pull him apart. But she’d begun to believe that over the last weeks she’d become an instrumental part in his ability to do his work now.

He came with her to the stables every morning. It did not matter if he needed to be at Parliament or at some meeting. They rose before dawn and went out together. They’d eat a light breakfast of bread and cheese and apples every day, and then he left her to her work of building her stables.

She had decided that she would create the greatest stables in England. Their horses would be the most renowned in the world. She would soon find animals that were worthy of being champions and breeding champions.

And of course, she would also have horses who simply needed to live out the last of their days in peace and contentment, eating good oats and lazing in the fields.

Her stables would be the sort of place that had foals and fillies and horses who had reached the time of retirement.

So many places simply got rid of such animals. She would not be like that. No, her horses would be surrounded by kindness.

For she understood, as so many did not, that horses, in many ways, were like people. They needed their community, their companions. That they felt love and anger and fear just as any person.

And horses accepted her exactly as she was.

When she was with them, when she put her hands upon their quivering muscles and saw their long lashes blinking over their liquid eyes, she felt no fear. The world stopped. There was no rattling, no quivering, no sensation that she was about to lose control of everything and everyone.

With them, she felt the ground beneath her feet, as her husband had once instructed her to do. And she felt the power of the ages in their strong bones and in their spirits. It was such a gift to be with them. And she wondered if perhaps that had been the beginning of the end for her—when she had lost her ability to ride with abandon as she had loved to do.

She could not remember that earth-shattering fear in company before then.

Had the horses been what made it possible for her to overcome such things in the past? And then, ironically, in her mother's determination to prepare her for society, she had ruined her daughter's chances?

There was no way to know.

But Rose did know that the company of her husband and the horses surrounding her had brought her a peace she had not

known in years. And not a retiring sort of peace. She wanted to shout to the world how powerful she felt now.

How strong.

And as they rode the horses back into the stable and dismounted, handing them over to grooms who would make certain the horses were entirely cooled down, wiped down, and put out to pasture for their own breakfasts, she propped her hands on her hips, looked at her husband, and smiled.

“I suppose you must go and save the world now?” she sallied.

He let out a droll laugh. “That sounds far too grand,” he said.

“But is it not accurate?” she teased.

“I don’t know if I’m going to save it,” he ventured. “And certainly not alone. A vast many of us will make the attempt, and we will continue to do so day after day after day.”

“And that is why I admire you,” she said, tracing her fingertips along the buttons of his navy waistcoat.

“Why?” he said. “Because I’m going to try to save the day?”

“No,” she said earnestly. “Because you do it day after day after day with very little gratitude. And because you know that it will not be over soon, and yet you continue to face it.”

“Just as you have faced your fears,” he murmured, stroking her cheek with his gloved hand, his gaze full of admiration.

“My fears are so small compared to what you face.”

“The truth is, my love,” he countered. “Our brains are tricky things. Fear is fear. And the mind sometimes cannot tell what is real or not. But you? You have learned to master yours. How have you done it?”

“You have not deduced it?” she blurted, surprised.

“No,” he said. “I have not.”

“I thank it,” she said firmly.

He blinked, clearly thinking he had misheard. “I beg your pardon?”

She cleared her throat and affirmed, “I thank my fear because it’s simply trying to tell me something. And actually, I still feel it, my love,” she returned. She gestured to the stables about them. “Even with the horses, even with you giving me the freedoms you have, I think I shall feel fear all my life. It is part of my makeup, but I no longer reject it now.”

He cupped her cheek tenderly. “What do you do instead?” he queried, his face soft as he waited for her answer.

“My fear? It is a warning. Not of imminent danger. At least not most of the time,” she said. She placed her hands on his chest, savoring his strength. “That fear? It tells me that something is wrong. That I must do something. That I must change my life and no longer accept the prison of it.”

“And have you been feeling imprisoned?” he queried softly.

“No, not with you,” she rushed. “But I will tell you this. Every day, I find a new barrier that I must climb over. And once I do? I realize such things do not hold me back. Only I can realize that,” she added. “Because you have given me freedom over my life. Something I’d never had before.”

“It’s all I want for you,” he said. “Freedom.”

“It’s not all I want for myself,” she said. “Freedom,” she looked up at him and said. “Is just the beginning.”

“The beginning?” he queried.

“Yes,” she said. “But the rest of it is love. The freedom to love. The freedom to choose. The freedom to make a better life. To make it as I wish. And I know that I could not do that without you.”

His eyes widened with amazement and understanding before he took her lips in a soft kiss.

Oh, how she wished that she could give him the same in return. Oh, how she wished she was as important to his life as he had been to hers. He had changed her life monumentally, and she wanted to do something to show him she valued that.

“I will see you at the end of the day,” he said softly. And with that, he turned and headed back towards the city to do the work that was so important to him and to all.

She did not feel any nerves watching him go. She felt strong. She felt capable. And she knew that she wanted to show him how very much she cared.

And she knew exactly how she could.

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CHAPTER 18

Damian stopped dead in his tracks on the pavement leading around Hyde Park.

Lights spilled from his townhouse out to the street.

The crush of carriages navigating the line up the exclusive way stopped at his door. Members of the ton in grand attire were getting out, walking up the steps, drifting past beautiful, colored lanterns that bobbed along the way. And entering his house.

What the bloody hell was happening?

He was not aware that anyone had arranged a ball, and suddenly he felt a wave of panic. What was wrong? What had happened, and where was his wife?

She hated crushes.

She hated vast amounts of people, and yet vast amounts of people were entering his foyer, dressed in beautiful silks and cloth of gold.

They were all shimmering with jewels, laughing and gossiping, all clearly excited to enter.

Damian caught the sound of an orchestra playing, the perfect silvery notes wafting through the air. He strode up the pavement, around the side of his large establishment, and entered the back of the house.

He wasn't about to enter through that wild choke of aristocrats, and yet when he came in through the kitchen, he gaped.

Food was racing back and forth, everything beautifully prepared. A banquet of all sorts of bright foods and wines and punches were passing him, heading upstairs. The servants were gleeful, their faces alight as they happily went back and forth, taking trays up the stairs and back down.

He caught sight of Cook, who looked extremely busy but in command, not a single grey hair out of place under her mob cap.

“What the blazes is happening?” he managed.

Cook stopped and wiped her red hands on her apron. “Why, it is a ball, my lord. It is your ball. Did the viscountess not tell you?”

He blinked. “No,” he stated.

The cook suddenly let out a laugh, then covered her mouth as she realized her faux pas. “Oh dear, my lord. She did say she wanted to keep it rather quiet, but I thought she had told you. This must be a surprise for you! And I have gone and blurted it out.”

The cook pursed her lips. “I do hope the viscountess will not be angry at me. She’s such a dear soul.”

He cocked his head to the side. “I am sure she will not, and I’m certain she will be pleased that you care for her so much.”

Cook smiled. “She is a bright soul. She brings cheer to us every day. It’s clear she cares for each one of us. I’ve never had a mistress be so good or so kind in the entirety of my career. She brought me flowers the other day from the country. Can you believe it? Flowers for me?” Cook all but blushed at the sign of being so valued.

Cook let out a sigh of happiness. “Beautiful, beautiful things they were. Wild. I’ve never had the opportunity to see such a thing, and she said at the end of the summer, she’s taking us all to the seaside. Can you believe it, my lord?”

He blinked again as he took in this information, and he rather wished to kick himself for not thinking of something like that himself.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he said. “And I shall pass on your good words to the viscountess.”

Cook nodded. “Now you best get on. I have many things to prepare, and you need to get dressed, don’t you? Surely your

guests will be waiting.”

He gave a nod, feeling as if he was in a dream.

Was he dreaming?

It certainly felt thus.

He headed through the hall, darting about the servants who were all scampering and skipping back and forth, apparently quite delighted by what seemed to be a successful evening.

He could not quite shake his mixed unease and curiosity. He headed up through the back stairs, up the servant's entrance, and into his chambers, where he quickly put on his evening kit without the aid of his valet.

Where was his wife?

He would find her. He had to. Her chambers next to his were empty, but he could smell the soft scent of lilac perfume. Hers.

He stared at the darkened space and wondered what the blazes was going on. He could not stop his own heart from hammering. This was so out of character for her. She hated these events, and yet it seemed as if she had organized it herself without telling him. Why, he wondered.

Once turned out as best as he could so quickly and without aid, he raced down through the hall, determined to find her. He wound his way through the dark ways until he heard her voice in his office.

“Do you think I'm afraid?” she challenged.

Damian stopped, an icy knife of alarm plunging through him. “Why yes, I do, my lady,” a man's voice said. “I've always seen that fear in you. It was what drew me to you.”

Scarsdale.

Damian's hands curled into fists. He started forward, grabbed the door handle, and was ready to rip the man asunder until he heard his wife's firm voice cut through the air.

“Then you are a fool, for I am not afraid of anything anymore. And if I am, I face it head-on.”

Damian forced himself to stop, for he could hear her own power resonate through the door. If he needed to, he would race in to save his wife. But in that shocking and remarkable instant, he realized she no longer needed saving, and this, he realized, was the greatest night of his life.

For he had helped her find the freedom of her new strength.



Scarsdale stared at her, his eyes glimmering with anticipation.

“Good God, man,” she scoffed with a curl of her lip. “You are like a foul bug that one can’t get rid of. Why are you here? You were not invited.”

Scarsdale scowled, taken aback by her fierce response. “No, I was not,” he said. “But you have made my life a living hell.”

“How?” she retorted, though she felt her body hum with the alarm of being alone in a room with someone like Scarsdale. She no longer cared if she caused gossip. She would shout the house down or slap him without pause, and she knew Damian would support her. “Surely, you’ve done that yourself.”

“I am the object of gossip,” Scarsdale seethed. “Your mother has been spreading it about that...”

“What has my mother been saying?” she demanded, curious. “You see, I have no idea what she is up to, for I am not particularly interested in my mother’s gossip. She runs in an entirely different set than I do, don’t you know?”

His mouth worked as he began to understand she was not going to cower as he had so clearly hoped. “Yes, I do know, but she is in with some of the most powerful ladies who run the most important set in this town. They all think...”

“What do they think?” she asked coolly.

His mouth clapped into a line.

She wondered what terrible thing it could be.

“Your mother has insinuated that I have the pox,” he bit out.

“And do you?” she asked, only knowing what the pox was because of the books that she had read recently.

She wondered because Scarsdale suddenly went very quiet.

“Aha,” she replied. “You do, sir. I think it is a good thing that my mother is warning other ladies about you, lest they are foolish enough to get into bed with someone like you.”

She shook her head, allowing her disgust to show, feeling her own strength and capability course through her. “And to think that you wanted to marry me, to scare me, to humiliate me, to hurt me. I realize now that it’s because you think so little of yourself that you need to crush others. I feel certain that is the only way you can feel good about your own person.”

His face whitened, and he took a step forward. “I ought to...”

“What?” she demanded, squaring her shoulders. “You ought to what? Make me cower in a corner? Try to make me feel completely powerless? Well, I’ll tell you something, Scarsdale. I am not afraid anymore. Oh, I feel fear, for I am not a fool,” she said. “But what I have come to understand through my husband and through his friends is that fear is not a weakness. Fear is important. It tells you when you should be on your guard. And you know what?” she said. “Courage is not the absence of fear, sir. Courage is being afraid and fighting anyway. It is the courage to stand up for one’s self.”

“And will you stand up for yourself?” he demanded as he crossed to her slowly.

She cocked her head to the side, let her fingers slip to her husband's desk, and discreetly picked up the letter opener. She slid it into her skirts.

She matched his steps and crossed to him slowly, sauntering as if he was no threat.

He looked ready to throttle her.

“You have no idea, my lord, what I'm willing to do,” she declared. “And I will not let you spoil this evening that I have arranged. Go slither back to the dark cave that you came from. I'm sure you came through one of the side doors. If you do not use it to make a hasty retreat, I shall call for the bailiffs, and you shall be taken away as the trespasser that you are.”

He took a step forward, raising his hand, ready to hit her, but she lifted her slippered foot and brought it down hard on top of his.

He let out a yelp of pain and wheeled backwards. “Good God, you vicious little—”

“You are a coward, sir,” she cut in ferociously. “I do not think you will hit me now, knowing that I shall retaliate.” And with that, she showed her letter opener.

He looked at it and winced. His shoulders sinking, he took a step back. “You are not what I thought,” he said.

“No,” she said, her heart hammering but her head high. “I am not. Now go.”

And with that, she heard soft applause from the doorway, and her husband came into view.

Scarsdale let out a small note of distress. He took another step back and staggered to the fire. His tailcoat went into the flame and smoked. He batted at it wildly, cursing as his hands hit flames as he jumped away.

“Well done, my love,” Damian said, his voice deep with pride.

And despite the feelings of alarm racing through her, she smiled at him. “Thank you,” she said. “Were you there the whole time?”

“No,” he said quickly. “Only just. I considered coming in, but you seemed to be handling him quite well yourself.”

“Indeed, I did,” she said, pleased that he was so sure of her capability.

She’d wondered once if he did not think her capable at all and if that was why he felt the need to rescue her. But now she knew that was not true. He could see how capable she was, and he was proud of her for it. And she knew he would’ve intervened if he had to.

Clearly, he had realized that she could take care of herself. But she was still glad to know that if she ever needed assistance, he would be there for her.

At last, she had someone who would support her and champion her, no matter what.

Her heart swelled with that understanding.

They both turned on Scarsdale.

“Go,” her husband instructed. “Before I have you put in prison. I’m sure we can arrange some sort of charge. As my wife insinuated, slither away. Know this though. I shall be watching you, Scarsdale. Make no mistake, I shall make your life an ever-living hell if I hear of any dark deeds done by your hand.”

Damian gazed at the man with utter disdain. “I don’t know why you thought you could come here and intimidate my wife. You clearly did not know her mettle.”

And with that, Scarsdale backed away, ran for the French doors, and darted out into the gardens.

“Do you think we’ll ever hear from him again?” she said, her hands now beginning to shake as she placed the letter opener back on the desk.

“No,” Damian replied swiftly, closing the distance between them and pulling her into his arms. “You showed him that you will defend yourself. He only likes women he thinks he can hurt, who will not dare to hurt him back, who have no one to defend them.”

She wrapped her arms about his waist, savoring his strength and warmth. She drank in his masculine scent and began to feel at ease. “I wish that we could stop him from hurting anyone else.”

“I will find a way,” he promised softly. “Abernathy, myself, and Brookhaven will come up with a plan to stop that man. Men like him have to be stopped. It is clear that he will only respond to strong measures.”

“Good,” she said firmly. “Make certain that he understands.”

Damian slid his hands along her back and blew out a breath, as if he had been holding in a wave of tension. But then he looked towards the door. “Why are all those people here?” he asked.

“That sounds rather like an accusation,” she said, tracing her hands along his shoulders.

“It’s not an accusation,” he countered, trying to understand. “I’m simply stunned. Cook told me you’ve been planning this event for weeks.”

“Oh dear,” she said. “Did she really?”

He nodded, his voice a low rumble in the shadows of his office. “Yes, but she sounds absolutely delighted by you.”

“Thank heavens!” She nibbled her lower lip as she considered her possible victory. “Cook wasn’t so certain about me when I first began. She’s quite a tough nut, that one, to crack. But I’m glad if she’s pleased.”

“She’s looking forward to her trip to the seaside,” he teased.

She laughed. “Good. They all deserve country air. We all deserve it,” she said. She paused, trying to decide exactly what she wanted to say. “The horses,” she began. “Have been a wonder for me. You gave that to me, and now... I want to give this to you.”

“What?” he queried, his brow furrowing.

She glanced to the door, then back to him. “This ball.”

And in that moment, his eyes widened. “This is for me?” he whispered and then understanding dawned. “You want me to see that you are not afraid anymore?”

“Oh, I’m afraid,” she said. “But as I told you at the stables, and like I told Scarsdale now, that doesn’t matter. I know that I can get through this. I know that my feelings, my nerves, will pass, and I will be by your side. I want you to know that I will always be by your side as you have been by mine, and I can endure any difficulty.”

“But I don’t want you to endure things,” he protested.

“Cease,” she said, lifting her hand to his sensual lips. “We all must learn to endure hardship. I am going to do this not just for you, but for myself, for I want to do the things that will assist you in making your work a success. I want to make it possible for you. Just as you have made it possible for me to do mine.”

His eyes shone in the darkness, and his hands tightened about her. Emotion danced over his face as he realized how much she understood him, how much she wished to be a part of his life.

“Now, my lord,” she lilted. “Will you not ask me to dance?”

And then she held out her hand. Just as she had done at their wedding and just as she had done in the garden the night they’d met.

Damian studied her white gloved appendage, his face full of love, and then took her hand in his.

“Always, my love,” he vowed. “Always and forever.”

And in that moment, Rose knew that though she might feel fear every day of her life for no seeming good reason, she would always be able to face it because he would be with her, and with him, she had found the strength of love within her heart to always overcome it.

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EPILOGUE

Damian easily held his five-year-old daughter, Penelope, before him on the polished leather saddle. On his wife's beautifully trained horse, they moved at a peaceful pace, the mare aware of the preciousness of her cargo. Seabreeze loved children. She often whispered her lips along the children's hair whenever they came near her, her beautiful eyes soft, her body relaxed as she carefully stood while they ran and played about her.

Because of his wife's excellent care of the massive, strong, beautiful creatures, he had no fears as they traced through the English countryside.

Summer sun beamed down on them, teasing the flowers and grasses that grew in the pastures and paddocks that his wife had made sure grew with such care and love.

The warm air bathed them in a delicious glow where anything felt possible.

Just ahead of him, Rose and their son, Theodore, rode atop the strong but reliable King's Lad, ambling their way over a stream. Theodore let out a laugh as the water splashed up from the horse's hooves and flicked him in the face. His beautiful russet hair curled around his chubby cheeks. He was a little over three years old and full of such remarkable and infectious joy.

Penelope studied the world with wide-eyed interest. She was so like her mother. Damian held his little girl close, carefully, but not too carefully.

For he wanted Penelope to feel capable, to look at the world without fear, to know that she had her mother, her father, and her brother to be there for her whenever things might feel dark or frightening.

He felt the same way about Theodore as he looked at his wife with her hair braided down her back, wearing a white linen shirt and breeches on her strong legs.

Suddenly, in this perfect moment, a strange question hit him.

If things had been different, would Rose have felt so free?

If they had not met that night in the garden, and she had married another man... A man her parents picked, without any affection, would she have allowed her children to ride horses? Would she have lived so boldly? Would he ever have opened his heart, or would he still be an unscalable fortress?

He didn't know.

And such dreams?

Well, they were pointless because the truth was that one could never go back.

And he was bloody glad.

Together? He and Rose and their children were safe, and the world was full of wonders.

Though they could not escape the vagaries of time or the dangers of the world, there was a safety in knowing one was loved. That one was cared for. And oh, how he loved his family, and they loved him.

Over the years, Damian had discovered that he was no longer terrified that if he lost control, he would not be able to do his work.

For he had found that in having a family and loving intensely, he had learned to fight even harder, with more care, and with more exactitude.

His family did not make him a risk to his nation, but an asset, for he knew exactly what he was fighting for.

It was in his arms and on the horse before him ambling through the fields of a nation that was beautiful. A nation of artists and kings and warriors. Of scientists and philosophers

and poets, of simple people who loved their land, who worked hard despite the sometimes crushing hand of fate.

And he was proud to be a part of it. Of them.

But most of all, he was proud that he had gone into the garden one night, met Rose, and when she'd asked for help?

He had given it.

That was the greatest moment of his life. True, he'd had many great moments since. Their marriage, their love, the births of their children, and the creation of a family.

But it had been there, in the late spring air, under a willow tree in his friend's garden that it had all begun.

And he could not imagine his life now without her or the happiness that he had found.

Love, it seemed, was truly the greatest power in the world. No matter what any warrior or politician might think. No matter what any country might say. No matter what any general might instruct.

Love was always the way.

And he gave it with all his heart now. And he always would.

[The Beast's Broken Heart](#)

Lord Abernathy has seen the face of war and sacrificed his heart to it. Though his friends long for him to return to society and find joy again, his dreams are tormented by memories of battle fields and heartbreak. So, when a feisty young lady meets him in the library at a ball, he's determined to send her on her way. . . But something about her speaks to his soul and the heart he thought that could never mend.

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