



the
MAKING
of a
GENTLEMAN

THE
BEAUTIFUL
BARRINGTONS



Kathleen
Ayers

THE MAKING OF A GENTLEMAN

KATHLEEN AYERS

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Miss Olivia Nelson, self-professed perfect young lady and ward of the dowager duchess of Averell, pressed a hand to her midsection in an unsuccessful attempt to staunch the nausea pitching in her stomach. She told herself, *repeatedly*, that she had done nothing wrong. Her actions weren't questionable in the least.

Her fingers pressed more firmly, willing the dread to stop, even as she wished this conversation, one put off far too long, was already over. Olivia, by nature, disliked conflict, avoiding such clashes of opinion more often than not. This discussion was bound to be disagreeable.

“Olivia, dear. Are you ill?” Amanda, the dowager duchess and Olivia's guardian, regarded her with a concerned look. Dressed in pewter silk edged in black ribbon, Amanda's gown was a vast improvement over the unrelenting black she'd worn after the death of the Duke of Averell. Olivia longed to see her in bright colors once more. Green, possibly. Or blue.

“Not at all.” The time had come for Olivia to be honest about her lengthy walks in the park every other day at midmorning. *Always* alone, refusing even Phaedra's company. There were even times when she left the park completely, strolled to a waiting carriage, and indulged in an obscene number of biscuits accompanied by a pot of tea.

I've done nothing wrong.

Well, possibly not if one discounted the bribery of a footman. But William, the footman assigned to shadow Olivia

on her walks had had a sudden burst of conscience and decided Olivia's pin money was no longer worth losing his position. Which was just as well because even if William had been amenable, Olivia could no longer pay him to look the other way. Her funds were quite depleted.

Taking a sip of tea to steady herself, Olivia allowed the hot liquid to sit on her tongue until she felt compelled to speak. Swallowing, she gracefully bent forward, a move she'd practiced to ensure her back remained straight. She set the teacup upon its saucer without a sound.

"The lack of color in your cheeks would suggest otherwise. You've spent an enormous amount of time strolling about the park. Contrary to common advice, sunlight is as beneficial to young ladies as it is to the plants you so adore. Perhaps tilt your parasol to the side on occasion."

"You are the only matron in all of London who believes a bit of sun won't harm me."

Amanda had eccentric opinions on nearly every topic, as all the Barringtons did. Olivia had been the ward of the dowager duchess since the day of her birth, handed over as her own mother, Lady Millicent Halloway, had lain dying. Olivia had been raised among the Barringtons; indeed, she was thought of as a Barrington. But the fact remained that she was not.

Something Olivia had been reminded of recently.

"Will whatever it is you're holding inside you require me to add something to this cup?" Amanda tilted the styled mound of reddish-gold hair atop her head in the direction of the sideboard. "Possibly brandy or the like? Should I fortify myself?"

"You might wish a drop of brandy," Olivia replied. "My news is rather unexpected."

She reclasped her hands. Kept her posture perfectly straight, no matter the roiling sense of dread in her stomach. Lady Millicent Halloway, Olivia's long-dead mother, had been a great lady. One of impeccable posture, manner, and decorum.

As had Olivia's grandmother, Lady Daring. Such adherence to ladylike behavior wasn't often practiced in the Barrington household given Amanda's rather progressive attitudes toward rearing young women. While Romy, Theo, and Phaedra, Amanda's daughters, regularly tossed off the yoke of society's expectations, Olivia embraced all things proper, becoming more of a lady as if to make up for the other three. It was really the only way to stand out amongst the Barringtons.

Impeccable decorum was also useful in camouflaging Olivia's more unladylike attributes, because she *did* have them. No one ever suspected Olivia in the elaborate pranks that plagued the Duke of Averell's household.

Amanda made her way to the well-stocked sideboard, disregarding her cup of tea completely. "Don't keep me waiting, Olivia. I'm sure it isn't so terrible."

Olivia braced herself, hoping Amanda did not reach for the decanter of what looked like scotch but was not.

Fortunately, her fingers found the brandy. Holding on to the decanter, Amanda glanced over her shoulder at Olivia. "Should I ring for Tony?" she asked, referencing her stepson and the current duke. "Do not worry, dearest. We will fix this situation. It can't be any worse than Theodosia's *mishap*."

Theodosia, the middle Barrington daughter, had been ruined, rather publicly, at a birthday party for the Earl of Blythe and forced to marry the Marquess of Haven. Ironic given Theo had been tossing herself at Blythe for ages. An enormous scandal had enveloped them all.

Tony had been less than pleased. Another irony considering the rakish existence he'd lived prior to his marriage.

"I haven't ruined myself," Olivia assured Amanda. "I would *never* do such a thing."

"Never is a strong word, dearest. Leaves one little room to wiggle about. You should avoid using it." Amanda finally poured out a splash of brandy. "You might meet a gentleman who is worth ruining yourself over one day and rue those

words. But I was merely asking, not challenging your flawless behavior. Truthfully, out of the four, your dedication to behaving in a manner befitting your station has been a relief. If you haven't been compromised, what is it? Did you form a secret partnership of some sort? Disguise yourself as a man so that you might design the gardens of an earl's estate?"

"You have no worry on that score," Olivia said. The Barrington ladies were all possessed of talents which they practiced discreetly, for the most part. Romy, now the Duchess of Granby, was a modiste. Theo painted miniatures. Rosalind, the Barrington cousin, created fabulous pastries and was in a secret partnership with a baker. She supposed it was natural for Amanda to assume that Olivia might have found a way to practice her passion for plants beyond the walls of the Averell residence.

"I fear it is something else, Amanda."

"Well, out with it then."

Amanda's dislike of this topic was well known, and her opinion immovable. But Olivia had never exactly been *forbidden* to speak to the Earl of Daring. Still, a relationship had not been encouraged, nor had any effort been made to introduce Olivia to him. She'd been raised with a pointed avoidance of Daring, which in turn had given rise to a myriad of fear and trepidation upon hearing his name. Tony had even sat Olivia down shortly before she entered society and explained that Olivia was under no obligation to ever familiarize herself with Daring should she not wish it. Honestly, as a child, Olivia had imagined Daring, her own grandfather, possessing some sort of hideous deformity, such as a tail. Or horns.

Ridiculous.

Clearing her throat, Olivia lifted her chin. "I have become acquainted with the Earl of Daring."

Amanda said nothing, but her eyes widened dramatically. The glass of brandy was quickly tipped between her lips.

"My grandfather," Olivia clarified.

“I know who he is.” Amanda’s mouth ruffled and pursed as she struggled to hide her surprise. “Well, I suppose I was correct.” A deep breath left her. “You *were* meeting a gentleman in the park.” At Olivia’s look, she said, “Bribing a footman? I expected that of Phaedra perhaps, but not you.”

So, Olivia’s footman had already confessed to Pith, the Averell butler, who in turn had reported to Amanda. She was only surprised it had taken this long. “I was afraid you wouldn’t approve.”

Amanda’s lips drew into a line. “My disapproval of Daring is an understatement, an opinion of which you are well aware. Our mutual dislike was formed during the time I was in his employ as a lady’s companion to your mother. He was quite displeased that I wed the Duke of Averell, being that I was merely his wife’s poor relation whom he’d been forced to take in.” Amanda took another swallow of brandy. “All of which you know.”

Everyone in London knew the story, one Olivia had always thought terribly romantic, though most of society didn’t share that opinion. A lady’s companion reading *The Iliad* beneath a large oak tree meets a gentleman and falls in love, not knowing he is a duke—the very one Daring had expected to wed Lady Millicent Halloway.

“Millicent, wishing that I raise you rather than your grandparents, made it impossible for any other relationship to exist. We have always been at odds, Lord Daring and I.”

Olivia had never wondered why Amanda and Daring didn’t like each other given he had wanted the Duke of Averell for Millicent. He’d been justifiably angry, though Amanda’s actions hadn’t been meant to hurt anyone. But it was *odd* that Olivia had been given to the Barringtons and not raised by her grandparents.

“Meeting Lord Daring was quite accidental,” Olivia said, trying to ignore the look of betrayal on Amanda’s face. “I was walking in the park. It was a week or so after Rosalind’s wedding to Torrington.”

Amanda splashed another finger of brandy into her glass. “Coincidence, I’m sure. Rosalind was wed some time ago. You waited quite a while to tell me.”

“I apologize for doing so, Amanda. But I knew you wouldn’t approve. You might have insisted I stay away from him. Even forbidden his company. Am I wrong?”

“I suppose not.” Her guardian looked away. “Continue with your story.”

“As I said, I was in the park, meaning to take in the lilies blooming on that stretch of ground near one of the ponds. I adore lilies.”

“You adore anything that roots in the dirt. You have since you were a child. Shrubs. Trees. Flowers. Vines. It is no great surprise you wanted to spend a morning adoring a lily.”

Olivia was in *love* with plants. She spent hours learning techniques for grafting, rooting, and the like. Which plants worked well with others in perfectly manicured beds. The knowledge of stacking various types of flowers so there was always an abundance of color. She was fortunate that she could visit the park at any time to admire whatever tree or bloom struck her fancy. The London home of the Duke of Averell backed up to the park, a luxury afforded to only the oldest families who had built their homes so long ago. The Duke of Averell’s address was prestigious, rare, and highly coveted.

Much of London envied the Barringtons.

“An elderly gentleman was walking in the opposite direction from me on the path,” Olivia continued. “I noticed him because he limped badly, his cane barely supporting him. He stumbled, falling on one knee, and I rushed forward to help, concerned for his fragility. I assisted him to his feet and retrieved his cane, which had fallen into the grass. When he looked up at me to offer thanks, he nearly went to his knees once more.” Olivia swallowed remembering the moment. “He called me Millicent.”

“How dramatic,” Amanda said. “He could have merely sent you a note. Or found you at a ball.”

It was on the tip of Olivia’s tongue to remind Amanda that it was her hostility toward Daring that likely kept him from doing so.

“I was surprised to be addressed as if I were Lady Millicent.” It had been a boon to Olivia, to know that she looked like—*someone*. She’d often felt like a cuckoo in the nest of the Barringtons. She didn’t resemble any of them, with their magnificent blue eyes and windswept hair. “I—felt an immediate connection to Lord Daring.” Knowing she so strongly resembled her mother had filled Olivia with such joy.

“I suppose that was the point.” Amanda sipped at her brandy. “But you are under no obligation to further your relationship with Lord Daring if you don’t wish it.” She glanced at Olivia. “Though I fear you do wish it.”

Olivia raised her chin a trifle defiantly. “I do. I have enjoyed getting to know him these last months and feel no desire to end our acquaintance, but I also don’t wish to cause *you* distress, Amanda. Had we not met by accident, I would never have sought out Lord Daring. But he has made me realize that I have a place—” This was another difficult part. “He has reminded me that I am not just Olivia Nelson, your ward, but the Earl of Daring’s granddaughter. A Halloway. A Nelson.”

Daring rarely mentioned Olivia’s father or his family, but Olivia thought it an important fact to point out.

“We are your family.” The stricken words tumbled out of Amanda.

A sharp sensation struck Olivia, and she felt as though she were being torn apart. This was why she’d avoided telling Amanda for so long. She knew how much it would hurt her guardian. Olivia had never been treated as anything less than a daughter and sister by the Barringtons. She had no desire to cause them pain.

“But I’m *not* a Barrington,” she said softly. “At least not completely. I am also a Halloway. Can we at least agree upon that?”

Amanda looked away once more.

“Lord Daring has reminded me that I have a duty. A responsibility.” It had given Olivia a sense of purpose, that of duty to her newfound grandfather and her mother’s family. “I am the last of the Halloways.”

“You are also the last of the Nelsons.” Amanda’s grip on the glass she held tightened. “But I don’t suppose Daring allows you to dwell on such a mundane fact.”

Olivia’s hands twisted in her lap. “I know he didn’t approve of Millicent wedding my father. He’s admitted as much to me and regrets the pain the whole affair caused.” He’d been quite despondent in recounting how Millicent had wed against his wishes, causing an estrangement with his only child.

“So, you came upon him in the park. Daring stumbled and flailed about, but fortunately, you were there to catch him. I’m surprised a footman didn’t trail behind, given his frailty.”

“I had to help him to a nearby bench,” Olivia said, driven to defend Daring. “He was sobbing uncontrollably that I was his granddaughter, lost to him these many years.”

“You weren’t lost, Olivia. He knew exactly where you were.”

Amanda was determined to make this difficult. It would be a wasted effort to convince her guardian Daring’s intentions were honorable or that having a grandfather, an actual blood relation, meant the world to Olivia.

“Lord Daring is deeply sorry for the animosity between you. He takes full responsibility for the current state of affairs. He knows you didn’t steal the duke away from Lady Millicent out of ill intentions. He has admitted as much to me, Amanda.”

“How kind. Since the duke was Marcus, there was no stealing involved.”

Olivia steeled her shoulders. “I think him brave to admit his error to me. I respect him for doing so. He knows that in taking me from Millicent, you were only doing as she asked. In fact, he is grateful for your loving care of me.”

“How generous.” Amanda focused her attention on a view of the gardens, visible through the window.

“He desires my happiness above all else, Amanda. I was the one who insisted we meet in secret, not Daring. There is nothing suspicious in his actions.” She stared down at her twisting fingers. “This is important to me. Can you not see it? How much I crave knowing Daring and through him, my mother?”

“I do.” Amanda didn’t turn to her.

“I had never thought to have a grandfather,” Olivia continued. “Daring is elderly, his health failing. I am all he has left of both Millicent and my grandmother, so continuing our relationship is not only for my own sake, but his. I wish to be a comfort to him. I fear I would regret not doing so.” Olivia studied the line of Amanda’s profile, looking for some sign of agreement in her guardian.

“I understand, Olivia.” The words were soft. “I do. Daring *is* your grandfather. I would never presume to insist you sever your relationship with him,” she said, albeit reluctantly. “While I am still your guardian, I am not your jailor. Your life is your own. And I do believe you *would* regret not knowing another part of yourself.”

“You do?” The relief was so great Olivia fell back against the cushions.

“I will not stand in the way.”

Amanda might not completely approve, but at the least, she understood. “Thank you.” The question she’d been longing to ask since meeting Daring hovered on her tongue. “May I ask you something?”

“Anything, my dearest.” A weak smile pulled at Amanda’s lips.

“Why *did* Millicent give me to you and not my grandparents?” Olivia had never once questioned that choice, not until meeting Lord Daring. He was kind, affectionate, and had obviously adored Millicent. Why would Millicent insist on giving Olivia to Amanda? She’d nearly broached the subject with her newfound grandfather but had decided against doing so. Daring was so terribly fragile.

Amanda finally turned, the nearly empty glass of brandy dangling from one be-ringed hand. Moisture gathered in her eyes as she took in Olivia before nodding to herself, as if coming to a decision of sorts.

“I loved Millicent. And Bradford, your father.” Her mouth trembled. “It was a terrible day, the worst of my life until—” She blinked, and Olivia knew Amanda was thinking of the death of Marcus Barrington. “You were so tiny. The physician who attended Millie said it was too soon for you to appear, but there you were. It was not an easy birth. Millie—” she wiped at a tear threatening to spill from one eye. “When I held you in my arms, I fell hopelessly in love.” Sadness pulled at her lips. “I promised Millie I would care for you as if you had come from my own body. And I have. Marcus and I took you back to Cherry Hill that very day. After Millie—” A sob caught in her throat, and she hurriedly poured another splash of brandy.

Olivia sat quietly, waiting for Amanda to regain her composure. Obviously, the day Olivia was born had been a tragic, horrible day for all parties.

“Forgive me, but I still don’t understand. Why wasn’t I left in my grandmother’s care? She was alive at the time.” Lady Daring had been present at Olivia’s birth, though she’d followed Millicent to the grave not six months later. Daring had explained, gently, that his wife had died of a broken heart. She’d lost her daughter and granddaughter all in one day. It was simply too much for her. “I should have been raised at Halloway Park. Why would my mother choose—”

“Me?” Amanda glanced out the window once more, hiding her features from Olivia. “Millie and I were quite close. Lady Daring and my mother were cousins. But beyond that, I’m—afraid I don’t know the reason for Millie’s decision.” Her

words faltered. "I only did as she asked. Because I loved her." Wiping at another tear, she kept her gaze averted. "Perhaps Lord Daring knows more about his daughter's last wishes. You might ask him."

Daring, voice trembling, had explained that Millicent had been wracked with grief over the death of Bradford Nelson. She'd been distraught at the time of Olivia's birth and not in her right mind. When she'd insisted Olivia be given over to the Duke of Averell and his duchess, Daring had acceded to Millicent's dying wish even though it had pained him to do so, not wishing to upset his daughter further. The duke had taken a solicitor with him to Halloway Park, one who had presented documents and served as witness. There was little at the time that Daring could have done. And after, well, for so many years, he'd accepted the separation from his only grandchild. A punishment, of sorts, he claimed, for the pain he'd caused Millicent.

Olivia's heart ached for him.

"Will you reside with Daring, then?" Amanda said quietly. "I won't object."

Oddly enough, Olivia *didn't* wish to live with Daring. At least not at present. The idea was uncomfortable to her, despite the deep affection she felt for her grandfather.

"I have declined the invitation. Lord Daring only leases a home in London on occasion. Due to his age and failing health, he does not visit town often. I see no reason to cause upset when Daring will be in residence only a short time."

"If he is in such poor health, the journey to London must be difficult. Hard to believe Daring is only a few years my senior," Amanda replied in a casual tone. "Why would he make the effort to come to London now after avoiding it for so long?" She came away from the window and sat next to Olivia, setting her now empty brandy glass on the table.

Olivia searched for censure in Amanda's tone but found none. Only curiosity. Another wave of relief flooded her. She'd anticipated a horrible row over Daring. Certainly, that is what her grandfather had anticipated.

“Daring wishes his heir, Mr. Peter Thomlinson, to be introduced about society. Mr. Thomlinson is the son of his cousin and has been raised primarily in the country. He knows little of London,” Olivia answered.

“How lovely. Have you met Mr. Thomlinson?” The smile remained fixed on Amanda’s lips.

Olivia nodded. “I have. We shared tea with Grandfather just the other day.” It felt good to refer to Daring as her grandfather. It filled Olivia with a sense of family. Purpose. Yes, she loved the Barringtons, but this was different. “You would like Mr. Thomlinson.”

“Do you, Olivia? Like Mr. Thomlinson, Lord Daring’s heir?”

It was an unusual way to frame the question.

“Yes, I do. I find him kind and intelligent.” Olivia thought Mr. Thomlinson a lovely gentleman, though she didn’t know him well. Daring had asked her to ease his heir into the whirl of London society and help him learn the city. Her willingness had pleased Daring immeasurably, and she’d basked in his approval.

“Ah. I see.” A dubious look flitted across Amanda’s features before disappearing, and she smiled once more. “I look forward to making Mr. Thomlinson’s acquaintance. I do hope you’ll ask him to call. I have a vague memory of meeting his parents once.” She tapped a finger against her bottom lip. “Well before he was born.”

Disquiet suddenly swirled at Amanda’s easy acceptance of the situation, gnawing at the certainty, the *rightness* she’d been filled with only moments ago. This *was* what Olivia had hoped for, wasn’t it? That Amanda would understand the importance of her relationship with Daring and encourage her to embrace her newfound family. Why then, did Olivia feel . . . *hollow*? As if she weren’t—

“Child of my heart.” Amanda took Olivia’s hand. “You are my daughter as much as Phaedra, Theo, or Romy. Do not try to convince yourself otherwise because Lord Daring has

appeared. Nor has the guardianship, or you, ever been a burden. You have been and will continue to be a joy. I want your happiness; that is one thing Daring and I have in common.” Amanda hesitated, as if unsure of her words. “I believe you when you tell me that Daring has been nothing but kind to you. Loving and affectionate.” She pressed a kiss to Olivia’s hand. “As all grandfathers should be.”

“Perhaps I belong with Lord Daring. I feel as if I might be more . . . like my mother. A Halloway. I’m not bold. Or outrageous. Very unlike Phaedra, for instance.”

“Is that how you see yourself? As different from my other girls?” Amanda shook her head. “You are only more reserved, as you have been since you were a child. You didn’t even fuss in the cradle or cry to be picked up. But I would not see that as some sort of sign, Olivia, of your place in the world.”

“I’m dark and slender like Millicent. And being a proper young lady is important to me, as it was to her.” Olivia plucked at her skirts. “You told me she was known for her impeccable manners. Her soft speaking voice. The graceful way she walked. I’ve worked hard to live up to her memory.”

“I did say such things.” Amanda frowned. “But it was meant as more description of Millicent than encouragement for you to emulate her. In many ways you are nothing like Millie. There is another side of your personality—a valuable part—which you should not discount. Would you consider it proper behavior to apply glue to the hilt of Phaedra’s little rapier so that it stuck to her hand? Pith was prepared to search London for a solvent lest one of the staff lose an eye or appendage while Phaedra waved the thing about. Yet miraculously”—Amanda cast her a sideways glance— “a small bottle was found in my writing desk. I’ve no idea where it would have come from. I still don’t.”

“It is curious,” Olivia replied carefully. “Though I’m not certain what glue on Phaedra’s rapier has to do with me wishing to be like my mother. I believe the prank was Theodosia’s doing when she last visited.”

Putting glue on Phaedra's stupid rapier had been vastly entertaining. But it *was* troublesome that Amanda seemed to suspect Olivia's involvement.

"Marcus liked to play jokes on others. I suppose you learned to do so from him."

Olivia had, in fact, learned the beauty of a joke from Marcus Barrington. He'd taught her how to conceal a small frog in a bouquet of flowers so that when the bouquet was presented to Cousin Winnie, the frog leapt out onto her bosom. Olivia had been eight at the time. It had been difficult to keep her face composed into shock while her shoulders shook with laughter.

The memory brought with it a pinch of pain. She missed Marcus dreadfully.

"I fear you are mistaken, Amanda. I would never indulge in such childish behavior. I prefer to garden. Read. Goodness, the only thing I've desired is to honor Lady Millicent with my behavior."

"I know doing so makes you feel closer to Millie," Amanda said gently. "But do not exclude the other facets of your personality. Those are as much a part of you as mastering the graceful way to pour tea. While I'm sure Daring appreciates your efforts, please do not lose the part of you which placed a mustache on my bust of Julius Caesar. *That* Olivia is quite amusing."

Olivia remained quiet. It would do no good to encourage Amanda's assumptions and might possibly lead to the discovery that she'd replaced Tony's scotch, once again, with overly sweetened tea.

"You are Daring's granddaughter, but some of your very best parts come from us. I only don't wish you to forget that."

"I won't." How to explain to Amanda that being the granddaughter of Lord Daring made Olivia feel special. *Different*, in a good way. "I plan to visit Halloway Park in the future. I have a strong desire to see the place I was born. Where my mother lived."

“I agree.” Amanda nodded. “Time does change people, Olivia. I hope that Daring has embraced such a transformation through these years given to him. Daring and I will never be friendly, but we both love you.” She opened her arms wide. “I trust you to make wise decisions about your future, my brilliant girl. I love you, Olivia. *We* love you.” Amanda pressed a kiss to her forehead. “No matter whether you are Hallaway or Barrington.”

London, three months later

Olivia pulled the hood of the cloak tighter, hiding her features as the carriage rolled to a stop in front of a gated garden at the back of Elysium, London's notorious gambling hell and pleasure palace. This was madness. Utter and complete insanity. All because Phaedra claimed that Olivia had become a tedious bore who did nothing but languish on the sofa while reading books on gardening.

Truthfully, Olivia had to agree. For the last several months since the appearance of Lord Daring, her grandfather had gone to great lengths in praising Olivia for her modesty and was constantly comparing her to Millicent. The more proper Olivia became, the more Grandfather had complemented her. Olivia, wanting more of his approval had gone to even greater lengths to tamp down the less genteel aspects of her personality. Her grandfather was elderly. Ill. It was a small thing, to please him with her behavior. She'd even taken up embroidery, a detestable skill, stitching Grandfather's initials on a handkerchief. Poorly.

He'd been so incredibly pleased.

Lady Daring, Olivia's grandmother, had *excelled* at perfect stitches. She'd even woven tapestries when the mood struck her.

"We're almost there." Lady Phaedra Barrington, seated across from Olivia in the hack, was fairly bouncing about in

her eagerness to get to their destination. Thankfully, she wasn't carrying that ridiculous rapier beneath her skirts tonight. She had gone so far as to ask Romy to fashion a tiny scabbard so she could carry the silly thing around. Amanda, much to everyone's relief, forbade her to be seen in public with a sword strapped to her gown.

The problem with Phaedra was that she assumed her outrageous behavior endeared her to others.

It did not.

Yes, the Barringtons tolerated Phaedra's fencing, her sudden enthusiasm for prize fighting, and the insistence to take up pistols. But the daughter of a duke shouldn't know the house odds on hazard or how to properly distill whisky. If the gossips in London knew the Duke of Averell had allowed his youngest sister to accompany him to the gambling hell owned by their bastard half-brother, Leo Murphy, a scandal the likes of which London had never seen would erupt.

Leo had been in New York, building a grand hotel and chasing Lady Masterson, now his wife. Upon his return to England, he had been *horrified* to find Phaedra working on Elysium's ledgers. She could even name the markers kept in Leo's office safe. Never mind that she'd negotiated with the wine merchant on Elysium's behalf. He had taken Phaedra aside and declared that his infant sister's help wasn't needed in running a gambling hell. He'd had more choice words for his ducal brother.

What sort of idiot prick are you, Tony?

Olivia pursed her lips. She didn't curse herself. Ladies did not. But that didn't mean Olivia didn't know an entire slew of vulgarities.

Now Olivia was in a hack headed to Elysium because Phaedra had decided sneaking in tonight, while both brothers were occupied elsewhere, was a capital idea, one for Olivia's particular benefit. Necessary, Phaedra had declared earlier, to keep Olivia from becoming an even more horrid, starched version of her ladylike self.

A tiny thrill shot through her. Secretly, she'd always wanted to come to Elysium but had refused to admit such to Phaedra. It was more fun to pretend she was being dragged here, against her better judgement. Perhaps she should pretend to swoon for good measure.

“Stop behaving as if I've kidnapped you for some nefarious purpose. Cringing into your cloak. What could possibly go wrong?” Phaedra puffed out.

“Nearly everything. We are sneaking into Elysium after tiptoeing downstairs and somehow coercing a footman not to tell Pith, before scurrying down two blocks to hail a hack. If we are seen, our reputations will be shredded. Not to mention what Leo will do to us.”

“There was no coercing. I bribed Johnson.” Phaedra made an unpolite noise. “And I realize you, Miss Perfect Flower of Womanhood, must agonize over your reputation on a near constant basis, but I do not.”

“That much is certainly clear.”

“I refuse to allow you to wed Mr. Dull Nitwit without at least experiencing some excitement.”

“His name is Peter Thomlinson, and he isn't dull. My grandfather's heir is a perfectly suitable match even if I haven't agreed to it.” *Not yet.*

Grandfather had first broached the subject a few weeks ago. A suggestion only, he had said. And a sensible one. Olivia was the last of the Halloways and Thomlinson the heir. Reluctantly, Olivia had agreed it would be a suitable match but had refused to commit herself further. Mr. Thomlinson *had* called upon Olivia, danced with her at a ball or two, and taken her for a carriage ride in the park. But nothing more. “He is not a nitwit,” she hissed at Phaedra. “Stop referring to him in such an unflattering way. It is unkind.”

“I *despair* of you, Olivia. You still look like you on the outside, but inside, you're an elderly matron wearing a lace cap.”

Olivia snorted. “Don’t forget that I favor donning a shawl as well. Perhaps I should get a cat for my lap.” Phaedra was prone to exaggeration. Olivia hadn’t become *that* staid.

“You haven’t played a trick on anyone for months, which I find incredibly alarming. You used to be very dependable with your pranks.”

Honestly, Olivia had thought herself much more discreet in her little jokes.

“You have me confused with someone else. I would *never* indulge in such immature behavior.” This morning it had been a struggle to resist tossing a bit of honeyed toast into Phaedra’s hair at breakfast, something Olivia did when Phaedra annoyed her, which was nearly *all* the time. Olivia was *striving* to be more like Grandfather’s descriptions of Lady Millicent, but some days were harder than others.

Phaedra rolled her eyes. “I know it was you, Princess Perfect, who put that chunk of manure in the foyer last year. Stuck it right in one of Mama’s Grecian urns. Don’t bother to deny it. Pith went crazy looking for the source of the stench. He was too embarrassed to open the door to callers for an entire week.”

“I would *never*, Phaedra,” Olivia said in mock outrage. “It sounds incredibly childish. More like something you are capable of than I.”

“You don’t even moon over Mr. Thomlinson, which I suppose is acceptable as he doesn’t merit any sort of ogling. At least name one of your plants after him. Perhaps that dull-looking bloom the color of tepid bathwater.”

“*Paeonia lactiflora* is a lovely white bloom which in no way resembles the water left in a bath. You are, in a word, exhausting.” Olivia pulled at the hood of her cloak once more. “And as I’ve said, I haven’t agreed to wed Mr. Thomlinson.” He *was* an excellent match for her. Olivia would not only be a countess, but as the last of the Halloways, she would preside over Grandfather’s estate. Halloway Park would be in her hands, then her children’s.

“You will agree to it, though. You would *never* disappoint Lord Daring. Just everyone else.” Phaedra sounded rather put out. “Including yourself.”

“Strange, Phaedra. I don’t feel disappointed. He’ll inherit my grandfather’s title and Halloway Park—”

“Which you’ve never seen and might very well hate.”

“I doubt it very much. My mother grew up there. And I want—to feel close to her. It has nothing to do with disappointing Lord Daring. He agrees the decision is mine.”

“How kind of him.”

Phaedra, in direct contradiction to the chaotic mess Olivia often thought of her as, was strangely intuitive of others, something she had in common with Theodosia.

Olivia *didn’t* want to disappoint Lord Daring. But what Olivia truly wished to avoid was her grandfather’s collapse. The slightest disagreement resulted in him seeking a chair and wiping at his brow. Any discussion of her *not* wedding Thomlinson was likely to result in Daring clutching his chest and calling for Dr. Phipps.

“Daring makes you feel guilty, and you aren’t even aware of it. As if somehow losing your mother and being given to mine is your fault and you must make it up to him.”

“He does nothing of the sort.” Olivia should never have allowed Phaedra to accompany her to the park the other day to walk with Lord Daring. But Phaedra had insisted she needed a respite from her fencing instructor. She’d walked off a distance from Olivia and Daring, pretending to skip stones across the pond and admire a small boy’s boat, but she’d been listening to their conversation. Fortunately, they hadn’t discussed anything of import. Thomlinson, for instance, hadn’t come up once.

“Grandfather isn’t nearly as devious as you make him out to be.”

“You’ve lost all your spirit.”

“I’ve plenty of spirit. I am not some mindless ninny simply because I appreciate good manners and polite conversation. There isn’t a thing wrong with projecting a calm, placid, demeanor. You might attempt it yourself.”

“Placidity is for cows, Olivia. While they’re wandering about the pasture.”

“Moo.”

“I can’t imagine what it is like,” Phaedra ignored her. “Floating about the drawing room as if you were a swan, except when perching, back ramrod straight, on the edge of a chair. Your posture is so flawless, I could put a dozen books on your head. Then, of course, there are your flowers. Arranging roses in a vase, as a young lady should, with a smattering of weeds —”

“Ferns, Phaedra. Not weeds. My floral arrangements are lovely. Everyone says so.” A bit of smugness crept into her voice. “It isn’t my fault you haven’t an ounce of creativity.”

“Fine. Ferns.” Phaedra waved her hand. “Then there is the flute playing.”

“So bitter,” Olivia taunted, knowing how it annoyed Phaedra. “Just because your plucking of the violin resembles the screeching of alley cats. We are all grateful you have given up on what little musical talent you possess.”

“The strings kept breaking. Seemed useless.” Phaedra narrowed her eyes but stopped short of accusing Olivia of the crime. “You can’t fence.”

“Nor do I wish to. Goodness. Why would I? As you’ve said, I’ve more than enough to occupy my days, what with arranging flowers cut from the very garden where I nurture the blooms, playing the flute, and drifting about being admired.”

“Yes, but there’s the *manure*, Olivia.” Phaedra shot her a snide look. “Let’s not forget the manure.”

“You seem overly obsessed with manure, not I. You keep bringing it up. At any rate, plants must be fed properly. Fertilized. Especially roses. Manure, while an offense to the olfactory senses, is a key component of a happy garden.”

Phaedra rolled her eyes. “Ugh. You malign my pursuits, Olivia, while rolling about in what amounts to s—”

“Don’t you dare say the word,” Olivia said, interrupting her erstwhile sister and slapping the leather of the seat with one hand. “Not a sound.”

“You’ve no idea what I was going to say,” Phaedra insisted.

“I can guess.”

“You’ll thank me one day for bringing you to Elysium tonight. When Mr. Thomlinson bores you to death at dinner after you’re wed and you fall forward, unconscious, to drown in a bowl of soup. Your nostrils filled with pureed peas —”

“Peas?”

“Yes, it is pea soup you’ve fallen into. Mr. Thomlinson seems the sort to adore pea soup. At any rate, you’ll be grateful that I made sure you had some excitement in your life.”

Olivia burst into laughter. “Stop, Phaedra. He isn’t that bad. You just refuse to give him the benefit of the doubt or become better acquainted. I’ve no idea why you object so fiercely to him.”

Truthfully, none of the Barringtons were overly excited by Mr. Thomlinson, though Olivia thought it more because Daring wanted the match than out of objection to Thomlinson himself. There wasn’t anything wrong with him, nor anything right, either. Which Olivia found rather bothersome.

“Lackluster in the extreme.”

“I hardly think Elysium is going to dissuade me”—Olivia raised a hand to stop Phaedra’s protest—“though I have absolutely *not* decided on Thomlinson.”

“I doubt Thomlinson would be caught dead at Elysium. The entire rest of your existence will be spent darning his socks while he reads books on animal husbandry. I don’t know why you find any of that to be appealing. Don’t you want to be just a bit reckless? Just once? The most irresponsible thing

you've done as of late is to toss away your dance card at Lady Milkwood's ball."

Fed up after dancing with proper young gentlemen who'd spoken of nothing but the weather, and irritated after the third conversation of the evening on hail, of all things, Olivia may have intentionally lost her list of dance partners. "You make it sound as if I did so on purpose. I merely drifted outside to admire the *Alcea rosea* in the gardens. I must have dropped my dance card there."

"No one cares that you speak Latin, Olivia. Stop tossing it about and showing off. The point remains there is little real trouble we can get into at Elysium. We won't be seen, and even if we were, no one would dare put a hand on us. We'll be completely safe."

Anticipation trickled down Olivia's spine. This *would* be fun. "You promise we won't be seen?" If her grandfather ever caught wind of this adventure with Phaedra, he would likely seek his bed immediately. Even Dr. Phipps wouldn't be able to save him.

"It isn't as if I'm going to take you straight to a table and teach you faro. Goodness."

"I already know how to play." Card games, the sort indulged in by members of Elysium, were often how the Barringtons spent a rainy day. Buttons served as a common wager, though once there had been a tournament and the winner had received the entire basket of tarts Cousin Rosalind had baked. Tony had won. He usually did unless Leo was playing.

"We could visit Leo's office. I'll show you the stack of markers in the safe. I've tallied them up for Tony in a large black ledger. You wouldn't believe the sum Lord Hastings owes."

"No, thank you." Phaedra probably knew as much about the management of Elysium at this point as Leo did, which wouldn't be helpful to her future at all. Not many gentlemen in London wanted a wife who could run a gambling establishment. Or a wife like Phaedra, in general.

“Fine. We shall confine our visit to the second floor on the other side of Leo’s office. There’s a spot where we can watch the floor below,” Phaedra assured her. “I promise we won’t be seen, so you don’t have to worry over your pristine reputation.”

The hack rolled to a stop.

“We’re here. Look.” Phaedra waved to a small courtyard before them while hopping out of the hack. “A perfectly lovely collection of plants. Very welcoming. This is where Tony and Leo lounge about with their cheroots. No one else is allowed to use the courtyard.” Phaedra took Olivia’s hand. “Possibly Georgina, on occasion.” Phaedra spoke of Leo’s wife. “I smoked one once. A cheroot. Took it right from Leo’s office.”

Honestly, nothing Phaedra did surprised Olivia anymore. “A disgusting habit and one in which a lady should not indulge,” Olivia answered in an imperious tone. The taste of a cheroot was a curiosity though. Gentlemen seemed to enjoy their cheroots quite a bit.

“Are you saying Georgina isn’t a lady?” Phaedra gave her an innocent look.

“She’s from New York. They do things differently there.” Not that Olivia actually thought New York society was terribly different from London. Only that Georgina liked to make her own rules.

“You’ll be pleased to know I didn’t find a cheroot to be as compelling as I’d hoped,” Phaedra informed her, striding along the stone path. “Now, a good glass of brandy. *That*, I can see the benefit. Makes you cough a bit but leaves a lovely ball of warmth in your stomach.”

Olivia didn’t comment. She’d developed a taste for scotch. *Accidentally*. But that was information she would keep to herself. “Sherry, Phaedra, is what a lady enjoys. Or ratafia.” Olivia stopped abruptly beside the large fountain in the middle of the courtyard. Water spouted out of the mouth of a woman sporting enormous marble breasts with the longest—*nipples* Olivia had ever seen. Two lascivious cupids cavorted below

her, arms and tongues held up to the marble globes of her breasts.

“Good lord. Leo has terrible taste in statuary.”

“Oh, that.” Phaedra looked up at the marble monstrosity. “Leo told me the fountain came with the house. I can’t imagine who would have sculpted such a thing, can you?” She gestured up to the three-story mansion before them. “Hurry up. Don’t stare at her. You might faint.”

“I’d swoon, Phaedra. Gracefully.” Olivia hadn’t fainted a day in her life. She’d come close once, after being cinched too tight, but had rallied to keep herself upright. The idea of lying prone on a settee while others waved smelling salts beneath her nose didn’t appeal to Olivia in the least.

Phaedra paused midstride and looked at her. “Don’t you ever get tired of being so perfect all the time, Olivia?”

“No, in fact, I don’t. I pride myself on being a brilliant example of decorum,” she replied, mostly to annoy Phaedra. Everyone admired Olivia’s ladylike demeanor. Especially her grandfather. It was also why no one suspected she had switched out Tony’s decanter of scotch for overly sweetened tea. She’d had to carry the stolen scotch to her greenhouse in the teapot, meaning to empty it in the dirt, but she had not. Instead, she’d hidden the teapot behind a bench holding her gardening tools.

Thus, her accidental taste for scotch.

See? I’m not boring.

“Leo really needs to do something about the wisteria,” she said as Phaedra tugged her forward in the direction of an iron gate set into the stone. Looking up at the spiraling vines climbing in haphazard fashion up the side of Elysium, she said, “The entire plant should be pruned and trained on a proper trellis.”

“Well, you can’t tell him. Because then he’ll ask how you know so much about the wisteria in his private courtyard at Elysium.” She shook her head. “Does Daring suspect you like mucking about in a worn pair of breeches to tend your beloved

plants? If he so much as catches a whiff, which he will because your breeches usually smell of manure, he'll insist you do nothing but roam about looking beautiful and useless. He'll put out the eyes of any man who has seen you. Imagine, our gardener, Kelliworth, attempting to manage the gardens completely blind."

Olivia laughed. "Grandfather would do nothing of the sort. I've mentioned my breeches and manure to him. He found it amusing." *Mildly* amusing. "And I know you don't like Lord Daring. Or Mr. Thomlinson. Your feelings are duly noted. There's no reason for you to keep reminding me."

Sadly, the part of Olivia that enjoyed practical jokes and wore breeches while flinging about dirt *knew* Phaedra wasn't completely wrong in her assumptions. Grandfather was of an older, less progressive generation. He appreciated maturity and a modest demeanor, as other gentlemen of his ilk did. If Olivia had to stifle some of her questionable behavior to keep from distressing her grandfather, she would. It was a small price to pay for his continued good health. Besides, *if* she married Thomlinson, Olivia would be a countess. No countess she knew of mucked about in trousers or put manure in a large Grecian urn to annoy the butler.

"It is only that—I think Daring has given you the impression that you—*stick out* amongst the Barringtons. Well, possibly you do a bit because you're so demure and ladylike, but *only* because of that, and we all find it irritating. I know he is your family. But so are we. I don't want you to forget that." A pensive look crossed her features. "He's trying to make you into someone else."

"That isn't true in the least. I have never been more myself. Are we going in or not?" Olivia snapped.

"We are. If Elysium can't brush the boring off you, I don't know what will."

"I'm *not* boring. I'm simply not a disaster waiting to happen, as you are."

"We're far more alike than you think, Olivia," Phaedra replied, not the least put out to be called a disaster. "You just

wrap it up in dulcet tones and fan waving, like some sort of a disguise. You'll see I'm right." Phaedra gave her a smile and pulled a small key out of her pocket. "Filched this from Tony. He'll never miss it. Peckham is in charge tonight, which means he won't be on the second floor. His office is downstairs near the hazard table. I should also tell you that I've never been to Elysium when it is filled with patrons. It's still early enough, though. The second-floor rooms shouldn't all be in use. We'll be able to take a peek, if we wish."

The rooms on Elysium's second floor were entirely devoted to sexual pleasure. It was no great secret.

Phaedra unlocked the iron gate, and it swung open easily without a sound. "There shouldn't be anyone on the other side of this door tonight since neither Tony nor Leo are expected. At least, I don't think so." She next inserted the key into the door, pushing the heavy wood open just a crack. She peeked inside before opening it wide with a flourish.

A flight of stairs stretched upward.

"These go straight up to the second floor to a secret entrance set into the wall next to Leo's office. Elysium is riddled with passageways." Phaedra's hands fumbled about a bit before she produced a lamp. "Leo has even admitted to not having found all of them."

For only a moment, jealousy brushed Olivia. Phaedra had gotten to come to Elysium with Tony. Not Olivia. She *would* have liked to see the inner workings of such a notorious establishment. Or count the markers in Leo's office. That was the *disadvantage* of cultivating a ladylike demeanor. No one thought you ever wanted to do anything improper. Which wasn't the case at all.

"It makes me curious," Olivia whispered, following closely behind Phaedra. "What sort of gentleman owned Elysium before Leo? Wasn't he a merchant of some sort?"

"A wealthy one, but he had to have been involved in smuggling," Phaedra said. "With all the secret passageways in and out of Elysium. Every so often, Leo finds a dusty bottle of whisky tucked between the walls. Though now that he no

longer resides here, he won't be finding anything else, I suppose."

Leo had recently bought a house in London just a short walk from the residence of the Duke of Averell for himself, Georgina, and their son, Daniel. They would eventually return to New York but not for some time. Georgina was *enormously* with child. She could barely walk about.

"Do you think Georgina is going to have twins?" Olivia whispered.

"Possibly. Keep up." Phaedra gestured with the lamp.

"Don't set the walls on fire, please." Olivia took the next two steps until her face was nearly touching Phaedra's back.

"There is an alcove just around the corner from Leo's office, right behind the landing. Usually, he likes to stand up there, like a king on the castle ramparts, watching everything below. But sometimes, when he doesn't wish to be seen, he uses the alcove to spy on the gaming floor. Make sure Peckham is doing his job and the like. I tried it myself. Tony sent me down to the carriage, but I snuck back up these stairs and into the alcove so I could see the members as they wandered in. Not one person downstairs saw me. Not even Tony. But Lady Cambridge *did* glance my way when she passed on the way to the room she'd secured for the night. Barely paid me any notice." Phaedra paused. "She had two strapping young men in riding breeches with her, Olivia. I do not think she meant to discuss horses or a ride in the park."

"Lady Cambridge is notorious for tugging nearly everyone." Olivia had heard the countess's proclivities whispered about at a ball she'd attended. She'd had to fan herself because the room had grown so warm.

"Tugging? For shame, Olivia. I didn't even know you knew such a word. I imagined you closing your eyes on your wedding night. Laying perfectly still. Like a corpse."

Olivia punched Phaedra in the shoulder. "I received the same education you did." Amanda had been *exceptionally* descriptive in relaying the information on marital relations to

Olivia and Phaedra. A young woman should be educated and not fearful. That was the dowager duchess's reasoning. Amanda also believed, firmly, that a wife should be an active participant in what she referred to as *bedsport*. Both parties should enjoy marital relations. There was no need to simply lie there and concentrate on the dinner menu while one's husband went about his business. She had then placed a copy of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* in Olivia's hands to review. Enlightening to say the least.

"I can't quite wrap my head around Lady Cambridge having . . . relations with both men. At the same time. Or do you suppose they take turns? There are only so many . . . *areas* in which to put—"

"Phaedra." Olivia's voice was tight. The very thought of the pleasures Lady Cambridge enjoyed had the blood pulsing beneath the surface of Olivia's skin. She had a good idea of the particulars thanks to Amanda, though a certain body part still remained fuzzy despite the illustrations in *Aristotle's Masterpiece*. "I'm sure Lady Cambridge coordinates their efforts."

She pushed a strand of hair off her forehead, unsurprised to find herself slightly heated at thinking of Lady Cambridge and sexual relations. Olivia had realized early on that she grew quite warm at such thoughts. Ladies did not and should not imagine male skin and certain appendages while potting plants. Perhaps it was an abnormality in her character.

"Wouldn't you like to be Lady Cambridge?" Phaedra said in a whisper. "Just for a moment? If I could ascertain where everything . . . went, I—"

"Phaedra," Olivia said again, this time in a much firmer tone. It would do no good to let Phaedra know that on more than one occasion, Olivia had indeed considered Lady Cambridge and her amorous activities. The widow was notorious for her affairs, the stories as shocking as they were titillating. It led Olivia to the observation of attractive gentlemen from beneath veiled lashes far more often than she wished. Her gaze often wandered to the edge of their waistcoats, imagining the drawings she'd seen, wondering

how everything got sorted out down there. She'd then pick up her fan to cover her blushing face and lower her eyes, terrified someone would notice.

“Don't be dull,” Phaedra admonished her.

If Phaedra only knew what was going on inside Olivia's head, she'd likely topple back down the stairs they'd so recently traversed. “You should worry less about me and more about yourself.” Phaedra was goading her toward bad behavior, and Olivia didn't require the push. If anything, she feared liking Elysium a little *too* much.

Phaedra brought her to the top of the stairs. A square of light, the outline of a door set into the wall, could be clearly seen. Blowing out the lamp, Phaedra set it on yet another shelf, one Olivia couldn't quite make out. A popping sound filled the air as the hidden door silently swung open.

“How many times have you done this?”

“I told you. Tony sent me out to the carriage, and I snuck back in. He never knew. Wait.” Phaedra pulled something out of her pocket. “For courage. I thought you might need it.” She handed a small flask to Olivia, barely discernable in the dim light.

Olivia unscrewed the top and took a whiff. Brandy, she possibly would have said no to but—“You've taken some of Tony's scotch.”

“Yes. Pith nearly caught me. Try some.”

Pith had never caught Olivia. Not once.

And, well, she was here. At Elysium. If there was a place where she should embrace her love of scotch . . .

What *if* she had nothing but a dutiful, boring existence ahead of her? She could grow to enjoy embroidery at any moment. Olivia took a large swallow of the scotch and handed the flask back to Phaedra. Warmth immediately spread across her midsection.

“You've had scotch before.”

“Perhaps. I'm ready.”

The door, which Phaedra shut with a quiet click, did indeed empty into the hall on Elysium's second floor. Looking behind her, Olivia struggled to see the outline of the door they'd just exited. It was nearly impossible to find unless one looked for it.

"Leo's office is just around the corner." Phaedra moved forward as the hum of voices floated up to Olivia's ears, along with peals of drunken laughter and the muted notes of a piano. It was early, not yet midnight, but Elysium hummed with life.

Olivia wanted to stand still and absorb all of it. Breathe in the atmosphere of wickedness. "Wait, Phaedra."

"I brought the scotch to fortify you. Far too late for second thoughts, Olivia. Good lord, Daring is making you into a walking doll dressed to resemble what he deems a better version of you. Or Lady Millicent. I can't decide which."

A burst of anger erupted inside Olivia, partially because she worried what Phaedra said might be true. "Stop poking at me. I'm here, aren't I?" The scotch set fire to the recklessness Olivia rarely allowed to burn, especially lately, since becoming closer to her grandfather. "Hand me the scotch again."

Phaedra gave over the flask. "Don't get foxed. I won't be able to carry you out."

Olivia took another swallow. "I am *not* turning into someone else. Nor am I going to faint or swoon. I was merely soaking in the atmosphere. Letting all the sin seep into my bones. Isn't that the entire point of our excursion this evening?" Pushing the flask at Phaedra, Olivia turned and moved down the hall in the direction of where she assumed the alcove lay hidden. "What a lovely *chamaedorea elegans*."

"A what?"

"A potted palm. Several of them. Quite large. I wonder what Leo is feeding them. Aren't you coming?" Olivia hurried to the alcove. "Do hurry along."

Phaedra looked both ways, then scurried down the carpeted hall. The alcove was small, barely big enough for one

person, but she and Phaedra managed to squeeze in. The palms were set at such an angle as to cover whoever hid behind them.

Olivia pulled back a frond with one hand, examining the texture. “Does Leo have someone who cares for these palms?”

“Dear God, Olivia. Who cares? Look.”

She peered through the greenery. *Oh, how marvelous.*

An enormous chandelier hung from the ceiling, illuminating the denizens of the gaming floor below. Groups of gentlemen hovered about tables covered in green baize, outnumbering the smattering of ladies, dotting the landscape in their colorful gowns. The walls were covered in rich claret edged in gold. Velvet curtains hung from various entrances leading into and out of the gaming floor. Leo’s employees, identified by the armbands they wore, roamed about, watching the patrons.

A loud roar came from the furthest corner.

“That’s where the hazard table is,” Phaedra said.

Hazard.

Coins and cards were tossed, curses thrown. Heated discussions rose in the air. The throaty laughter of a woman, a large feather perched atop her head, floated upward. A portly red-faced gentleman nuzzled against the woman’s neck, his fingers dipping into her bodice. Two gentlemen pushed at each other while one of Leo’s runners interceded before fists were thrown. The scent of liquor, pomade, and perfumes filled the air.

“Glorious, isn’t it?” Phaedra whispered. “Admit it.”

Another woman, dressed in emerald silk with a wealth of bright-red hair, leaned over the hazard table, her bosom nearly spilling out of her bodice. She raised her hand, kissed her clutched fingers, and then tossed the dice.

“Lady Filbert,” Phaedra informed Olivia. “She’s here all the time.”

A thin gentleman with an extravagant mustache stumbled about, spilling the contents of the glass he held, nearly getting

punched by a young lord who was playing cards.

Olivia could not look away. This was far better than spending the evening at home with a book. The excitement of Elysium seemed to force the blood in her veins to pump harder, making the tips of her bosom tingle.

“I can’t imagine being anywhere else,” Phaedra said. “If I were male, I’d force Tony and Leo to give me Elysium for my own.”

The maelstrom below beckoned to Olivia. She’d always enjoyed playing cards. Wagering buttons and biscuits. But this? It was all far more . . . intriguing than what she’d envisioned. No wonder Phaedra was fascinated with Elysium. It was dazzling.

“That’s where the pleasures take place.” Phaedra nudged Olivia and pointed to a row of doors on the opposite side of the landing, all numbered in gold paint.

Olivia studied the doors, all identical except that some had a wooden block with a single gold dot hanging on the front from a hook, and some did not. “What are the dots for?”

“It means the room is occupied,” Phaedra answered. “Do you need another sip from my flask?” She held up the scotch.

“I do not.” Olivia paused. “Well, perhaps one more.” She took another swallow to bolster her courage though she hardly needed it. Her curiosity about things of a sexual nature was already moving her feet forward.

“Perhaps you aren’t so despairingly dull as I thought. Tedious Thomlinson and Dreary Daring haven’t managed to entirely steal your sense of adventure.”

“If we are caught,” Olivia cautioned, “I will blame you for this outing. I’ll say you lied to get me into the hack and tricked me into coming inside.”

“Only because you are expected to be good, and I am not.” Phaedra sounded strangely despondent. “No one suspects the least bit of wildness in you.”

“That doesn’t make me boring.” Olivia started off in the direction of one door. “I’m reserved. There is a difference.”

Phaedra hurried behind her. “Remember, if a dot hangs from the hook on the door, the room is occupied. The rooms are reserved in advance and the —uh—*tools* requested by Elysium’s members are specified ahead of time.”

“Tools?” Olivia moved slowly past one door bearing a dot. A loud moan of pleasure sounded from behind the wood, making her come to a stop. The most delicious sensation started low in her belly. “What do you mean, tools?”

“Bits of silk. Feathers, though I don’t see anything alluring about an ostrich feather.” Phaedra tapped her chin. “Peckham once mentioned a riding crop. He didn’t know I was listening.”

Another tentative ripple wound through Olivia’s midsection. “We should have left our cloaks on the stairs. It’s very warm in here.”

“I haven’t noticed. Mama explained what transpires between a man and woman to both of us, but I don’t recall her mentioning a riding crop or scented oils. Do you?”

“I believe”—Olivia’s pulse picked up—“the use of such things is to enhance the enjoyment of the participants during . . . relations.”

Passing by yet another door with a dot, the sound of creaking bed springs sounded, along with a woman begging, her words broken and low. The sound of a whip cracking through the air had Phaedra’s eyes widening.

“Did you hear that?”

“Yes.” Olivia stood transfixed, trying to picture what was happening just on the other side of the door. “I most certainly did.”

“Here’s an empty room.” Phaedra tugged at her hand. “No dot. Let’s have a look inside. Unless you’re terrified you might faint.”

“Do I look as if I’m about to faint?”

Phaedra scanned the deserted hall once more before swinging open the door to reveal the contents of the room. “We should be quick. It looks as though someone is expected.”

The small space was dimly lit, the sole lamp barely enough to keep one from stubbing a toe on the dais upon which sat an enormous bed. At least four people could fit comfortably beneath the bed’s shimmering crimson coverlet. A small side table held two bottles of wine, a decanter of brandy, a bowl of custard, and a cluster of grapes.

“What an odd assortment of refreshments.”

But it was the silk restraints hanging from all four bedposts that drew Olivia’s attention. Her stomach tightened, curling about deliciously as she walked forward, reaching out to touch the silk.

“What do you think this is?” There was a tray at the foot of the bed covered in velvet and Phaedra plucked a long, slightly bulbous piece of marble from its depths. “Looks like a cucumber, doesn’t it? But a bit thicker. This end is shaped oddly. A deformity of sorts. Very strange.” She waved the piece of marble in the air like a wand.

Olivia cleared her throat. It didn’t take a great deal of creativity to envision a use for such an item. Unlike Phaedra, Olivia *had* read *Aristotle’s Masterpiece*. “I believe, Phaedra, that the marble is meant to mimic—what I mean to say is—well it looks very like what I *suppose* a male appendage—one would likely insert—” She stopped, feeling the heat on her skin and a pulse at the notch of her thighs.

Phaedra dropped the piece of marble, face ghostly white in the faint glow of the lamp. “Of course. I knew that. I only wanted to see if you, ladylike thing that you are, suspected the use of such an item.”

Olivia kept her features composed. Lips tight to keep from giggling. Phaedra, for all her bravado, was much more reserved about carnal matters than Olivia. She’d blushed furiously during the entirety of Amanda’s discussion on marital relations and had barely said a word. She’d refused to

even glance at the book they'd been given. Strange, considering the time she'd spent at Elysium with Tony.

Along with the scarves at each bedpost, there was a small basket of other restraints peeking out from beneath the bed. Olivia could make out a rope, another pile of scarves, what looked like shackles, and a selection of cravats.

"Oh my," she said under her breath.

Images flooded her mind. What would it be like to lie here on this very bed, restrained, perhaps, for the purpose of sexual enjoyment?

Olivia pushed the thought away as quickly as it came.

"Hurry along, Olivia. We've been here too long. We might be able to find another open room. Keep to the wall. We don't want to be seen." Phaedra slipped out, waving for Olivia to follow.

"Don't you find it warm in here?" Olivia fanned herself.

"You're wearing a cloak, as am I." Phaedra shook her head.

The next three doors each had a dot hanging from the front. All sorts of sounds echoed from the rooms. Another moan. Giggles. Something that suspiciously sounded like a person being . . . spanked?

The fourth door, however, had no dot. Empty.

Just as her hand fell on the knob, Phaedra stiffened, pushing Olivia flush against the door. "Bollocks. It's Peckham," she said in a panicked tone.

A shadow lingered at the far end of the hall, just before the landing.

Oh, this wasn't good at all. True, it wasn't as if Peckham would be gossiping to anyone about her and Phaedra, but he would certainly inform Leo. Worse, he'd probably *send* for Leo. Or Tony. Possibly both.

"I thought you said he'd be downstairs?" Olivia hissed.

“I was wrong, wasn’t I?” Phaedra reached behind her and flung open the door. “I’ll get rid of him. Come back for you later.”

“No. Phaedra, wait—” Olivia started as Phaedra pushed her inside the room, shutting the door behind her with a soft click. She stumbled, tripping over her cloak, before pressing her ear against the door.

“Lady Phaedra.” Peckham’s voice sounded just outside. “You shouldn’t be here without Mr. Murphy or the duke.”

“Peckham, how lovely to see you. I just need to retrieve my gloves from Leo’s office. I must have forgotten them the other day. I’ll just go get them and be on my way.”

“I was given very specific instructions, my lady. Your brothers, either of them, will have my head if I allow you to roam about unescorted.”

“Come now, Peckham. You understand how we women are, always misplacing our gloves or favorite bonnet. How is your wife, by the way?”

“I won’t be distracted,” Peckham grunted. “This way, my lady. Mr. Murphy’s office is in the other direction.”

“Oh, so it is. I seem to have gotten turned around, and it would do no good if I were to be seen.” Their footsteps thudded on the carpet, then faded away completely. Silence surrounded Olivia, except for the incessant pounding against the wall from the room next door and a man’s voice crying out, “This is for Waterloo.”

“Bloody hell.” Olivia pressed her forehead to the door, immediately chastising herself for uttering a curse out loud, even if there wasn’t a soul to hear her. Ladies didn’t indulge in vulgarities. Though this situation certainly merited cursing.

There was nothing she could do until Phaedra returned, which hopefully, would be soon. Even if she were to flee this minute, Olivia wasn’t sure she could find the bloody—

See, there I go again.

Barely a half-hour with Phaedra inside the decadence of Elysium and Olivia's decorum was melting away like the frosting Rosalind had made for a chocolate cake once when the dining room had grown overly heated.

She raised her forehead from the wood of the door, composing herself. The room was empty. Neither her reputation nor her person was in any immediate danger. If Phaedra *didn't* return in a quarter of an hour, Olivia would simply have to slip out and make her way to the alcove. She'd hide behind the lovely palm. Phaedra was bound to show up eventually. She would never leave Olivia alone at Elysium. Nodding to herself, she straightened and pushed the hood of her cloak back. There wasn't any reason why she couldn't explore this room while she waited—

“Hiding from someone? I hope it isn't me.”

The rich, chocolatey words echoed out of the depths of the room.

Oh dear.

Not unoccupied after all.

Bollocks.

Another curse. Good lord, that was three in less than a quarter-hour. Olivia would be tossing out vulgarities like biscuits if this continued. And if this continued, she was bound to forget herself in front of Grandfather, who would clutch his chest and turn blue. And—

“Cat got your tongue?”

Olivia didn’t dare turn around. There was an odd cadence to the speaker’s words, a decided lack of the crisp accent one heard in London society. The vowels were flattened. Dulled.

Olivia commanded herself to throw open the door and flee down the hall.

“Turn around.”

“There’s no dot,” she said under her breath while turning, grateful the light from the room’s sole lamp didn’t quite reach her.

“Dot?” Confusion bled from the whisky-soaked voice.

Dat. There was something vaguely familiar about the way he spoke, but Olivia couldn’t quite place it.

“Oh, you mean this.” A small block of wood appeared on the coverlet, tossed by an unseen hand. “Wondered what that was for. The instructions weren’t exactly clear when I arranged for your . . . visit.”

“You’re supposed to—” She hesitated and cleared her throat. “Put it on the door so that others know the room is occupied, and you aren’t disturbed.”

Shadows shifted at the far corner of the room, on the other side of the bed. The darkness lengthened as the man stood, and a lean form took shape. The chair he’d been seated on groaned as his weight lifted and his booted feet settled on the floor.

Run, Olivia.

Her fingers curled around the doorknob once more, the metal sweaty beneath her palm. The embarrassment of running down the hall, screaming for Peckham, was the only thing that kept her from flinging the door open.

“Don’t.” The single word cracked like a whip in the otherwise quiet room, and her fingers immediately fell away.

Slivers of light slashed across the roughly hewn edges of the man’s features as he made his way toward her. She caught a glimpse of high cheekbones. Eyes tipped up at the corners like a big cat, though the light was too poor to make out the color. Hair dark, but with a hint of copper when he entered the circle of lamplight. He was absent of cravat and coat, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up along muscled forearms.

Olivia’s gaze fell to his wrists, mesmerized by the play of light along the large bones. His sharply cut jaw was tilted to the side, studying her as a large wolf does a lamb it has found wandering about in the forest.

Bollocks. I’m the lamb.

She winced immediately. Another curse. This was Phaedra’s fault. All of it.

“I only mean,” he purred in her direction, “you’ve kept me waiting for over an hour, but now you wish to leave. I should have something for my trouble. An apology of some kind.”

Olivia swallowed. Now would be an excellent time to flee, but her feet refused to listen.

“Don’t look so terrified. I only meant a kiss. Not”—those tipped eyes widened—“ravishment.”

Her skin tingled in the most alarming way. “A kiss.”

OLIVIA KEPT HERSELF FIRMLY PRESSED AGAINST THE DOOR, her blood coursing through her veins and her heart racing. Not from fear, exactly. More from an awareness of him. Akin to watching a wild animal prowl in her direction.

The man swung himself gracefully around the bedpost and moved closer.

“I can see I’m not what you expected.” He nodded in understanding. “Fair enough.”

“No, not at all,” she managed. Scarves maybe. A bottle of wine. More interesting tools. That was what Olivia had expected. Not some oversized male with a hint of menace clinging to his shoulders. “I don’t think I should be here.”

“You sound unsure. Perhaps I can convince you,” he purred.

“I’m not sure a kiss would sway me,” she replied boldly with the bravado of three swallows of scotch and the knowledge that Phaedra would surely reappear at any moment.

“A kiss from me might.”

Olivia found herself drawn to the sensual lines of his mouth. There was a low vibration below her skin, settling lower in her body.

“You’re very sure of yourself.” She supposed he had every reason to be, given his appearance.

A mischievous grin crossed his lovely mouth, almost boyish. It was meant to disarm her. “Only a kiss,” he murmured in that whisky tone with its flattened vowels.

The scent of pine with a hint of something clean caught in her nostrils. A forest at night in the winter. Most of the gentlemen she knew smelled of bergamot. Or mint.

He stalked toward her, lowering his gaze to travel down her form, partially hidden by the cloak. Lush, dark lashes fell over his cheeks as he regarded her, rather improperly.

He thinks I'm a courtesan.

The thought surprised Olivia. The last thing she had ever thought to be mistaken for was a courtesan or a lightskirt. It was rather thrilling, all things considered. This certainly qualified as doing something reckless. Pretending to be a courtesan and negotiating with a handsome stranger for a kiss. It was a dangerous proposition, but there was security in knowing Peckham and the rest of Elysium's employees were at her disposal. And Phaedra *would* eventually return.

I embroidered a handkerchief. Poorly.

The reminder of how she'd been spending her time as of late prompted her to further madness.

"One kiss?" she heard herself say. "But if you fail to change my mind, I'm free to go. Agreed?"

"If I haven't properly convinced you with one kiss"—his handsome features bled in and out of the circle of light as he pressed a large palm over his heart—"off you go. You have my word."

Olivia considered the opportunity before her. He *was* handsome. Breathtaking in a raw, masculine way that left her body pulsing gently in his direction. The kisses she'd received thus far in her life, ones stolen from her lips at a series of balls, had left Olivia unimpressed and wondering what the fuss was all about. Mr. Thomlinson hadn't even dared touch her hand. She might *never* be properly kissed. Olivia glanced at the door, then back at him.

"I've never forced a woman in my life." A sly smile crossed his lovely mouth. "I've never had to."

Olivia believed him. He probably knew a great deal about kissing and *other* things. Thomlinson might well be the only other man she would kiss if they wed—which left a feeling of disappointment clinging to her chest. It was that thought which ultimately helped Olivia make up her mind.

"Agreed. One kiss," she said in a breathy tone. Her heart bumped hard beneath her ribs at such daring. This brutally beautiful stranger would kiss her, and then she would leave.

Her curiosity would be satisfied. The knowledge she'd been bold and outrageous secured.

"I make an excellent argument." That boyish grin played at his mouth again; this man was certain of his appeal. "Perhaps you'll decide to stay."

"Or perhaps not."

"I am known for being persuasive." He circled her, putting himself between Olivia and the door. "I did ask for someone delicate and proper. I must say, my request was followed to the letter."

Good grief. He had?

"I adore this entire portrayal of a proper young lady. Slightly prudish. Full of decorum. It's a marked preference of mine."

"Why?" Who in the world asked for a demure courtesan?

"It appeals to me." His breath fanned along her ear while the tip of his nose glided along the back of her head, pushing through the tight braid of her hair. "I like the idea of debauching a prim young lady."

Well, he wouldn't be debauching *her*, even if the very idea had sparks sprouting all over her skin. "I've only offered a kiss."

"Indeed, you have." His big shoulders shrugged. "You smell of jasmine, by the way. The only thing that gives you away."

"What should I smell of, for future reference? Lemons? Rose water?" There was a slight tremble to her words as his body brushed hers. "Lavender?" Did the scent of jasmine bring to mind lust? Sinful thoughts? She'd never really considered it.

"Jasmine doesn't speak of innocence. Far too exotic. But the cloak is a nice touch. And the dress I see beneath. Incredibly modest."

"I thought so." Olivia took a breath, instructing her heart to slow its erratic pace. "Will you be . . . getting on with things?"

Phaedra could return at any moment. Or Olivia might lose her bravado. Perhaps both.

A low sound left him. He was laughing. A melodic rumble which tugged at something inside her. “Do you have a name?” The whisper trailed along the skin of her neck.

Olivia shivered. “No names. It’s a—rule I have.”

“Mmm.” He turned Olivia around until she faced him. A thick wave of hair fell over his cheeks as he stared down at her, eyes narrowed in thoughtful contemplation. “Probably just as well. I’m only visiting London for a short time.” The tip of his finger traced the line of her jaw. “I’d hate for you to form an attachment.”

What arrogance. “From a kiss? Highly doubtful.” She snorted as a wave of relief filled her. Even better. He wasn’t from London. The likelihood of ever seeing him again was remote at best.

A tiny smirk appeared at the corner of his mouth. “You should reserve your opinion until after the kiss. I’m told I’m fairly good at kissing.” His forefinger moved from her jaw to drag along the line of her cheek, brushing back and forth as if testing the softness of her skin.

“Fairly good doesn’t sound particularly inspiring.” Sparks followed the touch of his finger, a stream which trickled down her neck to her breasts.

The look in his eyes, restrained but heated, lingered over her mouth. “I don’t like to boast.”

“I doubt that’s true.”

Another rumble of amusement left him. “You aren’t afraid of me at all, are you?”

“Should I be?” Olivia raised a brow. She was afraid, but not for the reasons he imagined. The attraction to him was so fierce, Olivia worried she’d lose herself in it.

“Oh yes,” he murmured before his arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her up against the muscled length of his body. He was very tall. She had to crane her neck to look at

him. Her gaze fixed on the column of his throat and the scruff of hair along his jaw.

Pine and snow filled her nostrils.

Olivia's knees buckled, enough so that the man tightened his hold on her.

The press of his lips, much softer and more demanding than she anticipated, fell over her mouth, stealing Olivia's breath. The wild racing of her heart suddenly calmed, beating in a steady rhythm at the sensual exploration of her mouth. When the tip of his tongue slid along the seam of her lips, a flutter caught low in her belly, lengthening and stretching between her thighs.

He tasted of scotch.

Olivia's mouth opened with little coaxing, like a rose blooming in the morning sun. A groan left him as their breath mingled, his tongue teasing against her own. Olivia slanted her mouth more firmly over his, swimming in the sensations produced from the press of his lips on hers. This was much more than she'd anticipated. No stolen sloppy kiss from some fop at a ball. No polite peck from a young gentleman smelling of pomade.

A sigh filled her entire body as she relaxed against him.

Olivia's fingers curled into his shirt, feeling the heat of his skin beneath the fine lawn. She clung to him, allowing his mouth to trail and tease at hers. She forgot all about Phaedra. Or proving she could be reckless. Nor did she spare a thought for Mr. Thomlinson. Or how horrified everyone, especially her grandfather, would be to know Olivia Nelson wasn't quite the lady they all thought her to be.

Folding her body into his, Olivia allowed him to half lead, half carry her to the bed.

The first stirrings of alarm rang through her at the press of the mattress against her back, but Olivia pushed them back. Phaedra would knock on the door at any moment. This man and his beautiful mouth would become no more than a memory. One she planned to relive over and over.

“You’re very beautiful.” The light caught along the hair covering his jaw, dusting it with bits of reddish gold. “Like a piece of fine china that I must be careful not to break. My cousin will be surprised I’ve found anything in London I like.”

Olivia breathed him in, intoxicated by his heat and scent. “You don’t care for London.”

“Not really.” One big hand splayed across her waist. “I’ve found very little here to appreciate.”

They lay side by side, so close their noses nearly touched. His eyes, now that she could make out the color, were a strange and lovely combination of green, gold, and deep brown. Just now, the bits of green and gold winked down at her, shining with banked heat. It was like looking into a savage forest, one which would swallow you whole if you weren’t careful.

Without thinking, Olivia leaned in, brushing her lips softly against his, wanting to drown in those eyes. Become lost, stranger or not.

He cupped the side of her face with one palm, not allowing her to move away. His mouth, warm and full of untold promises, drew her closer. His teeth nipped at her bottom lip before moving to graze along the line of her neck. One big hand stroked along the slope of her breast, tracing a circle over the area where her nipple peaked beneath the muslin.

Small, delicious threads of arousal shot down from her breast to settle low in her belly, swirling about to produce the most delicious sensations. A soft moan came from her. The gentle fluttering between her thighs pulsed with each press of his finger along the peak of her nipple.

“More?” he breathed along the curve of her ear.

“Yes.” The broken plea sounded before Olivia could stop herself. Her body refused to allow her mind to consider the absolute impropriety of this moment.

“Look,” he whispered. “Above you. See how beautiful you are.”

Olivia's head fell back, chin tilted toward the ceiling where a mirror hung above the bed. A woman lay sprawled across a crimson coverlet. Skin flushed. Eyes fogged with passion. A large male body curled around her as she twisted sensuously within the confines of his arms.

He looked up, that gaze, a savage forest at the end of the world, pinning her in place.

“Watch.”

Long, masculine fingers, knuckles decorated with the white streaks of scars, toyed at the edge of her skirts before slipping beneath them. The muslin of her dress, along with the thin layer of petticoats she wore, slid up, displaying her silk-clad legs.

Olivia's breathing quickened.

His hand explored the curve of one ankle, sending heat circling up her leg. The hollow of her knee was thoroughly investigated before the hand splayed across her thigh. His other hand moved from beneath her head and slid up the length of her arms. Pulling her wrists together, he held her in place while she flexed her fingers.

She did not try to get away. The same luscious sensation she had felt when she'd looked at all those scarves and cravats earlier grew stronger at the idea of being trapped by him. Held captive. Her hips twisted, legs parting wider.

“Stay still.”

He kissed her again while his hand moved further, one finger tracing circles on the juncture of her hips and thighs. His hand moved over her underthings, the light chafing of the cotton against her skin heightening her arousal. The slit of her underthings was found. Tugged at.

The gentle exploration of his fingers forced a spurt of wetness as the pulse between her thighs became more insistent.

“Open your eyes.”

Olivia looked up at the ceiling, barely able to recognize herself in the mirror. He was watching her, light glancing off the cliff of his cheekbones, set below those mysterious eyes. The dark strands of his hair, like spilt brandy, fell over the sides of his face.

“I’ll stop if you wish it.” His voice was rough. Aroused. “I won’t like it,” he added. “But I will.”

“Not yet.” She deliberately shifted her leg further to the side, her knee brushing up against the large bulge pulling at his trousers.

He sucked in his breath, eyes holding hers in the mirror. There was a predatory tilt to his features. Dark and possessive.

A whimper left her. A mix of fear and sexual arousal. A sound that Olivia Nelson, demure young lady, had never made before. The place between her thighs fluttered and pulsed as she lay prone before him. The woman in the mirror above her arched erotically against the bed.

“Tell me your name,” he growled against her throat.

“No.” The woman above her shook her head in a seductive way, pushing herself more fully into his searching hand.

Fingers tore at the opening of her underthings, the seams splitting to reveal the soft hair covering her sex.

A sound left her, encouragement, perhaps, for what she knew he meant to do. Caress her. Touch her. Ease the lovely hum he’d conjured from her willing body. She twisted and the hand holding her wrists tightened just enough to stop her from moving.

His mouth fell on hers once more, sucking gently on her bottom lip. Intimate. Blatantly sexual. Fingers moved along the damp folds of her slit in a lazy manner. Exploring. Teasing. Every stroke sent another shock between her thighs, driving her in a direction she’d never gone before.

Olivia arched her back, pushing her hips up further. Her legs were spread wide, exposing the pink flesh at the apex of her thighs. She held her breath as a big finger trailed along her

slit once more, watching in fascination as the digit sank inside her.

A cry filled the air. Hers.

The big body curled tighter around Olivia's, twisting like a snake around her prone form. Another finger joined the first as his thumb—

Her hips bucked at the pressure against the small, swollen nub hidden in her folds, eyes fluttering closed at the sensation erupting across her skin. The thumb moved slowly back and forth while his fingers sank deeper, thrusting in and out.

“Open your eyes.”

Olivia gazed up as the woman in the mirror writhed against the restraint of his hand around her wrists, head thrown back, hips lifting to meet every thrust of his fingers, eyes heavy-lidded as she was pleased.

Such pleasure.

His thumb moved, circling the bit of flesh pulsing with need. “Right there.” Turning, he looked up at their reflection. “This excites you.” The hold tightened on her wrists. “So does this.” Teeth grazed the side of her neck. “Not such a lady after all.”

Olivia couldn't answer. She couldn't speak. Couldn't think. The woman in the mirror opened her mouth but no sound came out. His lips trailed along her ear, tongue flicking against the lobe before he took it between his teeth.

There was no looking away, no blush of embarrassment at the erotic reflection above the bed, of the big, dark male caressing her delicate form as she struggled wantonly against the pleasure he gave her.

Hades begging Persephone to stay in the Underworld.

Another cry left her. Words tumbled from her lips. Pleading for what, she wasn't sure, as waves of sensation rushed up her thighs. Her hips bucked against his hand as the most *magnificent*—heart-stopping—dam of bliss broke, rippling with the intensity of a violent storm. She strained

against him, tremors shaking her limbs, ebbing only enough for him to coax them back.

His eyes never left Olivia, watching every twitch of her body, bending to kiss the soft moans erupting from her lips. Soft, whisky-coated words spilled from him. Dark and beautiful. Intimate. As if they had been lovers for a lifetime.

Olivia struggled for breath as the last wave subsided, her body limp.

“*Your name.* I would have it,” he breathed into her skin. Releasing her wrists, he pressed an open-mouthed kiss to each.

“No. I—no.” Her reflection stared back at her, lips swollen, cheeks flushed with satisfaction.

A bemused smile tugged at his lips as his hand left her body, but not without one final caress that left her aching once more for his touch. Brushing his palm down the length of her legs, he put her skirts to rights, kissing her gently. When Olivia’s clothing was once more properly in place, he propped his head up on one elbow to study her.

“You are no courtesan,” he said quietly. “That was apparent from the moment I kissed you.”

Olivia drew in a sharp breath but didn’t answer, unsure as to how one extricated herself from a situation such as this. The overwhelming realization of what she’d done, what she’d allowed, banished the intoxicating fog of desire.

“Nor a wife escaping the boredom of a husband. I’m not sure *who* you are, other than a young lady who decided to court ruination tonight. A virgin.” That bemused, mischievous smile once more made an appearance. “You must be destined for an incredibly dull marriage to court such disaster.”

“You knew I wasn’t—a courtesan.” Olivia’s voice was barely above a whisper.

He nodded, and the smile he wore deepened.

Knuckles rapped at the door.

Olivia turned at the sound, horrified she might be caught here. Was it Phaedra? Or the woman this man had ordered for

tonight? How awkward that might be for all parties.

“I locked the door, but I assume you’ll be leaving. If you have *any* thought to preserving your virtue, fleeing this room is an excellent idea.” His chin tipped to his lower body, eyes gleaming with wickedness.

Olivia blinked. Now that she could see . . . certain things in better light, his male appendage looked abnormally *large* to her untrained eyes. Enormous, actually. The illustrations in the book Amanda had given her—

Good lord, she’d brushed her leg against *it*. Suggestively.

“I’ve never been particularly honorable,” he continued in a casual tone, but Olivia heard the edge of steel. “The mood could fade at any moment.” His eyes fell to the apex of her thighs. “And you are far too tempting. All that lovely, blushing pink—”

“Yes, I should leave.” She interrupted the rest of his vulgar assessment and gave a fleeting look to the mirror above the bed.

Oh dear.

Olivia gracefully rolled herself away from him and stood, clutching the cloak around her as if that would somehow stop the gentle throbbing of her body, which was made worse by simply looking at him. She was both embarrassed and shaken by the desire to leap back into his arms.

“I’ve been very reckless,” she said out loud. Not that he would care. But it felt good to acknowledge her incredible stupidity.

There is something wrong with me that I allowed such familiarity.

“Yes, you have.” The green in his eyes darkened. “Tell me, are you wedding for duty? A match made to preserve,” his eyes ran over her trembling form, “a perfect pedigree? Family obligation and the like? What a waste.”

Olivia flinched. “You know nothing about me or my choices.”

A dark brow lifted. “Have I struck a nerve? Or several?”

He was horrible, mocking her after taking such liberties. “I would ask for your discretion should we be unfortunate enough to cross paths again,” she stammered. What on earth had possessed her to allow such intimacies with a stranger?

Another knock sounded at the door. This one more urgent than the first.

“Discretion?” His broad shoulders rolled. “I can’t give you what I don’t possess. But I can promise that it is doubtful”—his voice lowered to a growl—“that I’ll remain blandly polite if I see you dangling on the arm of some titled twit.”

“But you aren’t going to be staying in London,” she reminded him, sounding more hopeful than she felt.

Please don’t stay in London. Please go far, far away.

“I’ll be here long enough.” His gaze seared her.

“Why is the door locked?” Phaedra said in a hissed whisper. “It’s *me*. We need to leave.”

Olivia’s eyes flew between the bed and the door.

He was toying with one of the silk restraints dangling from the bed, watching her with a suggestive look. “Pity. We never got to use these.”

Pure heat washed up Olivia’s chest and face.

The knocking became more insistent. The doorknob twisted.

He tilted his jaw at the door. “Should I get that? I’d be happy to.”

“No—thank you.” My God. What had she done? What on earth had possessed her to—?

She whipped around and stumbled to the door, nearly bumping her head in the process. Olivia had allowed him to touch her in places that—oh, and it had been wonderful and she—

Olivia swallowed, praying it was too dark for Phaedra to see the flush prickling her cheeks. Turning the lock, she opened the door a crack and forced her body through the small opening, sparing a glance back at the bed.

He waved goodbye, making a shooing motion with his hand.

Shutting the door behind her, Olivia faced Phaedra, lips pursed. Annoyed. “Where have you been?” She smoothed down her skirts, relieved to find nothing appeared to be out of place. Except for her torn underthings. Which Phaedra couldn’t possibly see.

“Why was the door locked?” Phaedra countered. “Was there someone in there with you?”

“What? Of course not. I heard footsteps in the hall and locked the door lest they enter and find me. The knob must have stuck. I had a devil of a time getting it to open.”

Phaedra glanced first at Olivia and then back at the closed door. She leaned in and sniffed. “You smell woodsy.”

“Strange, but there was a wreath inside, made of pine, I think. I’m not sure what the participants planned to use it for.” Olivia took her hand before another question was asked or worse, Phaedra would want to check for herself.

“A pine wreath?” She sent another curious look down the hall. “Interesting. I’d like to—”

“I was quite terrified,” Olivia snapped, “that you had left me to flounder about at Elysium.” Where Phaedra was concerned, it was often best to launch an attack first. “I’ve been sitting in that room, frightened half out of my wits. What if I’d been discovered? What if someone had come in and mistaken me for—a courtesan?”

Or kissed me. Touched me intimately and brought me pleasure.

“I would never leave you here alone, as you well know. And you’re blushing, Olivia. Like the underside of a rose. You turned the same color when Lord Montfell’s son tried to steal a kiss when you were fourteen.”

Ah, Gregory. Sloppy and wet. Like being licked by a puppy. Her recent experience had been nothing like Gregory. Gregory's hands were small, as slender as her own. Not big and—

Calloused. Definitely not a gentleman. Not that it mattered because she had no intention of—

“And your hair is mussed.” Phaedra's eyes narrowed, regarding Olivia with curiosity as they marched back toward Leo's office. “As if you were kissing someone.” She stopped abruptly, glancing back down the hall once more.

Olivia tugged her forward. “Don't be ridiculous. I would *never*.”

“You allowed Montfell's son to kiss you.”

“I was fourteen, Phaedra.” And she'd been curious. “I've never even had a kiss stolen at a ball,” Olivia lied. “Why would I allow a gentleman lingering about Elysium to kiss me? Are you insane? I haven't even kissed Thomlinson.”

“Yes, but I can understand you not wanting to kiss Thomlinson.”

Olivia's hands curled into her skirts to hide the tremble in her fingers. “What took you so long to retrieve me?”

“Peckham,” Phaedra said, returning her attention to Olivia as they approached the wall next to Leo's office. “The man is worse than one of Papa's hunting dogs when they've caught the scent of a rabbit. Though now Apollo and Aphrodite merely lounge about Cherry Hill since Tony doesn't care to hunt.”

Running her hand down a barely discernable crease, a click sounded before the door opened. “Don't worry. He didn't see you. I explained that I'd merely forgotten my gloves in Leo's office, but I fear Mr. Peckham believes me capable of great deceit.”

“Peckham is correct.” Olivia snuck a glance behind her. No one wandered the second floor at present but them.

“He insisted on escorting me to the courtyard. Walked me around the corner and hailed a hack, muttering all the while about how Leo would have his hide if I was found wandering about Elysium. Peckham shoved me inside the hack,” Phaedra said in outrage. “Can you imagine? Being tossed in a hack by Peckham?”

“I cannot.”

“He obviously isn’t concerned that I am the sister of the duke. At any rate, he shut the door so quickly, my skirts were caught.” Phaedra managed to sound put out. “He had the audacity to watch the hack as it drove off. I had to make the driver go around the block and leave me at the entrance to the alley where I told him to wait. Which he did, for the remainder of my pin money.” The lamp they’d used earlier was sitting right where she’d left it. “Not nearly as exciting as your evening has been, I’ll warrant.”

Phaedra suspicious was never a good thing. “Honestly, outside of a curious amount of moaning and a man yelling from the room next door ‘This is for Waterloo—’”

Phaedra snorted and burst into laughter. “What in the world does that mean?”

“I’ve no idea. The room had nothing interesting in it, not like the previous one. Certainly, no custard, which is a pity, for I’m quite hungry. I was most concerned I would be discovered. I’m sorry for locking the door.”

She followed closely behind Phaedra as they made their way down the stairs.

“Probably wise you did. There wasn’t a dot on the hook. Anyone could have come barging in. Peckham thinks I was alone.” She held the lamp up. “Even if he’d seen you, Tony and Leo would never believe him.”

“I should think not,” Olivia replied tartly as they reached the bottom step and Phaedra blew out the lamp. “I’ve had quite enough adventure for one night.”

More than enough. Olivia could still feel the stretch of his fingers inside her and his mouth against hers. The hum along

her skin hadn't eased one bit. She lifted the hood of her cloak to hide her face, pulling the garment closer and wondering what sort of devil had possessed her tonight.

They strolled into the courtyard, deserted and silent except for the water spilling out of the fountain where the woman of marble stretched in ecstasy while the cherubs fondled her.

Olivia turned away. The reflection of herself, writhing against the crimson coverlet of the bed inside Elysium, had looked much the same. At least her virtue was still intact. Somewhat. She'd remained fully clothed. As had he.

As she settled in the hack, Olivia said a silent prayer that tonight's experience would stay within the walls of Elysium.

And that she would never see that handsome stranger again.

Olivia smoothed the rose blush silk skirts of her gown before gracefully taking her seat, determinedly ignoring the dramatic eye rolling of Phaedra across the table. To acknowledge Phaedra was tantamount to encouragement.

Mr. Thomlinson, or Peter, as he'd asked her to call him, smiled as he took the chair beside Olivia. She supposed most women would find him attractive with his golden hair and pleasant demeanor. Unfortunately, neither inspired the least bit of tingling nor humming of Olivia's skin. More noticeable now, perhaps, than it had been before visiting Elysium.

Olivia's thighs immediately pulled together at the sudden flutter between them.

After the *incident* at Elysium, as she referred to her spiral into debauchery and reckless impropriety nearly a fortnight ago, Olivia had pulled the reserve she was known for more tightly around her. She'd woven every ounce of proper decorum in her possession into the finest body armor. Every time grandfather lauded her modesty, extolling Olivia's virtues as the very epitome of a well-bred young lady, Olivia wanted to scream she was a fraud, but instead, her response was *more* reserve. Excessive politeness. She'd even given up wearing her old breeches to work in the garden. Childish pranks were a thing of the past.

Which was a pity, for Phaedra certainly deserved some sort of prank for dragging Olivia to Elysium.

But Olivia's course was set. Any hint or suggestion of irresponsible behavior on her part and Olivia might as well pick up a shovel and dig Grandfather's grave herself. She had resolved, after Elysium, to do *nothing* which would cause him undue distress or a possible collapse. Olivia tucked in any evidence of her mildly rebellious nature, locking that part of herself away.

She'd even stopped wearing the scent of jasmine and switched to lavender.

Grandfather expected Olivia to take up the banner of the Hallows as the last remaining member. Wed Thomlinson. Become a countess. Kick away all the Barrington with which she'd been infused over the years. Because the granddaughter of the Earl of Daring was a *lady*. A paragon of virtue. Beyond reproach.

Except I'm not.

Duty to one's family is paramount, Olivia. Those were Grandfather's words as he'd held her hand while she read to him in the parlor after tea one rainy afternoon. He'd pressed a kiss to her fingers, eyes filled with affection, and reminded her of the suitability of Thomlinson as a husband. It was his fondest wish to see them wed.

Olivia glanced at the man beside her. Peter Thomlinson *was* lovely. Well-mannered. Unfailingly polite. Intelligent. Attractive. A suitable, logical match for her. A man she might well have chosen for herself.

A large male body, curled around hers as she writhed on a crimson coverlet.

Olivia had to shut her eyes against the image.

"Miss Nelson," Peter inquired from beside her. "Are you well?"

"Yes, of course." Her eyes opened to see him watching her with a curious look on his pleasant features. She tried to focus on Peter, ignoring the buttery, heated feeling inching up the insides of her legs at the thought of what had transpired at Elysium.

“I’m merely making a mental note about the seedlings I have in my greenhouse,” she said blandly, giving Peter a smile. “I’m attempting tomatoes.”

“Ah.” Peter nodded politely. “How interesting.”

He didn’t question her further, which was just as well. Both the tomatoes and the seedlings were non-existent.

“I would enjoy visiting your greenhouse one day, should you care to show it to me.” His gloved fingers brushed lightly against the back of her hand.

“I’d be delighted.”

“Perhaps the dowager duchess would join us.”

Olivia nodded absently. In all the time she’d known Peter, he’d never once tried to be alone with her or steal a kiss. She tried to imagine Peter restraining her against a bed while pleasuring her and couldn’t.

“I smell something wonderful.” Peter leaned in. “Pheasant, I believe.”

A strangled noise came from across the table.

Phaedra.

Last night, Phaedra had equated Mr. Peter Thomlinson to a bowl of boiled parsnips. Not terrible for you, certainly, but unappealing and not worth your time.

Her unflattering opinion was likely shared by the remainder of those at the Duke of Averell’s table this evening, though not one Barrington treated Peter with anything other than respect. He didn’t suffer the overt dislike the duke had for say . . . the Marquess of Haven, Theodosia’s husband. The role of detested and barely tolerated family relation was solely his. Another strong contender for the role was The Duke of Granby, husband to Romy. Granby was only *slightly* less disliked than Haven, primarily because he *wasn’t* Haven.

Leo had made a point to become acquainted with both the men since his return from America. If anything, his opinion reinforced Tony’s. Haven, he barely deigned to notice, preferring to pretend Theo’s husband didn’t exist. Something

to do with a debt at Elysium. On the other hand, Leo had made an effort to converse with Granby. *Once*. Afterward, he'd asked Romy why on earth she wished to spend the rest of her life with a block of ice.

Olivia happened to like both Haven and Granby. The Duke of Granby because she shared a love of plants with him. He often wrote to her on various grafting and fertilization tactics, sometimes sending her unique flowering shrubs or seeds. And Haven? Well, everyone liked to blame him for suggesting to Phaedra that she take up fencing; however, the family was secretly pleased that fencing had led Phaedra to give up the violin.

Even Pith was grateful.

The Earl of Torrington, husband of the Barringtons' cousin, Rosalind, might be the only relation not greeted with open hostility. To say that Tony, the duke, *liked* Torrington would be an overstatement. Far more important was that Tony didn't *dislike* the earl. Nor did Leo. Possibly it was due to the lack of scandal involved in the courtship of Torrington and Rosalind. Or perhaps it was that Torrington, wise in ways Haven and Granby were not, *always* brought a chocolate toffee cake when he and Rosalind came to dine. Tony's favorite.

A burst of laughter came from the chairs closest to Tony's end of the table.

Georgina, Leo's wife, struggled to get as close to the table as possible given the mound of her stomach, which the voluminous folds of her gown couldn't hide. She had stopped going out in public weeks ago, but since this was merely a family dinner and Leo's house only blocks away, Georgina had demanded she be allowed to attend.

Peter watched Georgina as Leo moved to help her, mouth pursing ever so slightly in disapproval at her rounded form. "Is Mrs. Murphy well?"

"She is," Olivia answered, unaccountably irritated by Peter's question and the way he stared at Georgina. She was simply carrying a child, not leprosy or the pox.

Leo helped move Georgina's chair as close as he dared to the table, checking to make sure she was comfortable. Bending, he whispered something to her, shoulders shaking with laughter.

Murderous intent flashed in Georgina's eyes. "Enough, Leo. I can't get any nearer. Perhaps Pith can help me balance my plate here." She pointed to the mountain of her stomach. "The footmen will need to be careful as they serve."

The table erupted into gales of laughter as Leo pressed a kiss to his wife's temple and took his own seat.

The duke took the opportunity to address Haven with a glare. "Try not to attack your plate like a starving animal."

Haven did have a rather robust appetite.

Maggie, the Duchess of Averell and Tony's wife, gently tapped the edge of her spoon on the wine glass sitting before her, inclining her head toward the other end of the table.

Tony made a grumbling sound but turned his attention from Haven.

"Isn't that how one trains a dog or perhaps a cat?" Phaedra asked, all innocence and wide eyes.

Torrington choked on his wine. Theodosia made a snorting sound into her napkin.

Maggie bestowed a knowing smile on Phaedra "And dukes, I suppose."

Amanda and Romy, closest to Maggie, burst into laughter.

Olivia placed a hand over her mouth, giggling behind her fingers.

"Do not shatter the glass, madam." Tony looked down the table at his wife, managing to look outraged and splendid at the same time.

"Don't force me to do so, Your Grace." Maggie set down her spoon.

Peter, clearly flummoxed at seeing the Duke of Averell mocked at his own dinner table, leaned over to Olivia. "I don't

understand what has just transpired.”

“A family joke,” she replied, not wanting to explain to Peter because it would be a wasted effort. Even if he understood, Peter would likely be offended. Maggie’s reminder to Tony was to be kind to Haven, or to anyone else who faced the duke’s undeserved displeasure. It had become something of a wager amongst them all to see how many times Maggie would be forced to tap her glass in a reprimand during any given meal.

This evening, the number would likely be quite high because both Haven *and* Granby were present.

Peter’s gaze shifted down the table and settled on Leo, eyes filled with curiosity. Whenever Olivia mentioned Leo, which was often since she adored him, Peter always appeared surprised. Perhaps taken aback by her affection for the illegitimate Barrington. Peter shared Grandfather’s view of the Duke of Averell’s half-brother, as did most of London. Society found it unseemly that Leo was not only accepted by the Barringtons but *embraced*. Olivia didn’t fault Peter or her grandfather for their prejudice. Very few titles in London asked either bastard relations or owners of notorious gambling hells to dinner. Leo happened to be both.

She understood, but it didn’t mean Olivia liked Leo having to endure such censure.

“There is a great deal of familiarity among all the Barringtons, is there not?” Peter said. “I mean no disrespect, Miss Nelson. The ease with which you all speak to each other is refreshing. Lord Daring is much more reserved, as you know.”

Grandfather was incredibly stringent in some of his beliefs but in that regard, he was no different than most of his peers. He would likely hate everything about dining with the Barringtons. He would never be comfortable poking fun at a woman carrying a child or even acknowledging her condition at all. Mocking a duke would be abhorrent to him, especially during dinner.

“Indeed, he is,” Olivia agreed.

“Is there another guest expected?” Peter nodded toward the empty chair and place setting directly across from Olivia. “Seems odd one would arrive so late.”

Olivia found it strange as well, though formality for a family dinner wasn't a priority. There had been one or two instances when Cousin Winnie had arrived in the middle of the main course, having gotten time or date mixed up, but she wasn't expected this evening. A nasty cold was keeping her home.

“My cousin,” Georgina said, noticing Olivia's attention on the empty chair. “Late, as usual.” Georgina gave a careless shrug. “I've mentioned him to you, haven't I, Olivia?”

“Mr. Cooke.” Olivia nodded. “Of course.” She'd nearly forgotten Georgina's cousin was in London. Truthfully, with all the—*concern*—over the incident at Elysium, Olivia had completely forgotten he'd come to England for the birth of Georgina's child. The pair were inordinately close. More like brother and sister, really, than cousins. Mr. Cooke had an interesting past. Georgina, over tea months ago and filled with excitement at her cousin's impending visit, had imparted the tale of how Benjamin Cooke had arrived at her father's house on Lafayette Square.

“Cold. Shivering. Nearly starved to death. He spoke only enough to announce he was Benjamin Cooke and point to the note pinned to his coat. He'd been abandoned by my aunt, Alice Rutherford, to find his own way to us.”

“Mr. Cooke is a man of business,” Olivia informed Peter.

A rather ruthless one, according to Georgina.

“How interesting,” Peter said.

“My father is Jacob Rutherford, of Rutherford Shipping. Ben works with him.” Georgina took a small sip of wine, peering at Peter from across the rim of her goblet. “You wouldn't like him, Mr. Thomlinson. My father, I mean,” Georgina said in her usual blunt way before turning her head in Leo's direction.

“Mrs. Murphy is rather pointed in her opinions,” Peter observed.

“She doesn’t care for her father.” Olivia shrugged. “But I do pity poor Mr. Cooke.”

“How so?” Peter asked. “Even I have heard of Rutherford Shipping.”

He had? Olivia didn’t think Peter dabbled in trade of any sort. Grandfather said no gentleman worth his title would do so.

Olivia smiled brightly. “Because Mr. Cooke will have to endure Phaedra for the entirety of the meal.” She said the words loud enough for Phaedra to hear.

Thankfully, nothing that could be used as a projectile was yet on the table.

Maggie nodded to Pith to begin serving, unconcerned about the lateness of Mr. Cooke.

The soup course came out, some sort of rich broth with a dollop of cream in the center, the scent of herbs, onions, and mushrooms rising in the air.

Oh dear, Olivia mused, looking at her soup. *The new chef has veered from the menu.*

Theodosia immediately declined her bowl, waving it away before the footman could even place it before her. “There is an infestation of mushrooms, Pith,” she said to the butler.

After this, the new chef would be lucky not to lose their position with the Duke of Averell. A tongue lashing from Pith was certainly in order. Mushrooms were not welcome at the duke’s table.

At least four different conversations settled in the air as the soup was served, Olivia tilting her head as she decided which one to listen to.

Haven had finished his soup and was waving at Pith for another serving, which earned him a reprimand from Theo.

Amanda and Maggie were attempting to engage Granby in conversation, a near impossible task. He rarely showed any animation at all unless Romy was speaking to him.

Romy, however, was conversing with Rosalind, their heads bent together as they spoke in low voices to each other.

Phaedra, viewing the empty seat between her and Torrington as some sort of challenge, was speaking with great excitement on some unknown topic, dramatically punctuating each word with her soup spoon.

Olivia watched as Torrington, resigned to his fate, waved at a passing footman for more wine. Then her eyes shifted to Tony and Leo, who were both glaring at Haven while he consumed a second bowl of soup.

“Difficult to hear one’s thoughts, is it not?” Peter said from beside her.

Poor Peter. He’d probably hoped that dinner at the Duke of Averell’s would be a grand affair, full of pomp and circumstance with well-mannered guests who did not disparage the mushroom soup. The conversations at Lord Daring’s table, when Olivia dined with her grandfather and Peter, were often limited to the weather, horses, and stories of Lady Millicent and Olivia’s grandmother, Lady Daring. The compliments and inevitable comparisons to Millicent had at first pleased Olivia, but now, months later, she longed for more laughter. Even a well-timed insult. No one at Grandfather’s table would dare switch out the salt for sugar—something Olivia may or may not have done a time or two. And Grandfather’s staff all looked straight ahead, expressions blank as they stepped forward to serve the next course.

“I suppose I’m used to it.” She took a small sip of the soup.

Olivia glanced at Pith who was sharing a laugh with Maggie at the other end of the table. It was unheard of for a duchess to joke with her butler. Daring would fire Pith on the spot for being overfamiliar.

“Quite . . . boisterous,” Peter added.

“There is always so much to say to each other.” She gave a tiny shrug. “Granby and Romy don’t often visit London.” They were unlikely to do so much more in the future, now that Romy was with child. “And Leo has only been home a short time. He has been missed.”

“Does Mr. Murphy often dine with the duke?”

Leo laughed at the other end of the table, brilliant and beautiful, a jewel of a man even if he’d been born on the wrong side of the blanket. He and Tony looked so alike, they were often mistaken, at least from a distance, for each other.

“More often than not. They are usually found in each other’s company.” She frowned down at her soup. The mushrooms felt slimy against her lips.

“The dowager duchess does not object?” Peter asked.

“Why should she?” Olivia’s brow lifted, almost daring him to make his bloody point.

Cursing. Again.

“It is only that—” Peter cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. “Is Mr. Murphy not a reminder of—past unpleasantness? Again, I mean no offense.”

Because Leo was a *bastard*. The product of Marcus Barrington and his mistress. Owning Elysium probably didn’t help his standing in society. And marrying the scandalous widow of Lord Masterson had only made him and Georgina more notorious.

“Have I mentioned,” Olivia said, deliberately ignoring what she considered to be a completely ludicrous question, “Leo’s grand hotel in America? In New York? He has nearly finished. There’s to be a garden on the roof.” Olivia dreamt of that rooftop garden. She’d made Leo give her the exact dimensions of the space, envisioning in her mind what sort of design could be implemented. “Luxurious furnishings. A restaurant on the first floor will be open to the public and a more exclusive, private club for members only will reside one level below. The Barrington will be the most splendid hotel in all of New York.”

The entire family, save Romy and Granby, would be traveling to New York to see Leo's achievement firsthand once Georgina gave birth and the infant grew old enough to travel.

"His Grace approves of the name?" Thomlinson looked mildly shocked.

The words pricked at her, the soup settling uncomfortably in her stomach. "Leo *is* a Barrington. Regardless of whatever he chooses to call himself."

The same could be true of Olivia, except she was no blood relation to the Barringtons. Guilt pierced her at the disloyalty to her grandfather. He'd be so hurt if he knew she considered, even for a moment, that she was something other than a Halloway.

Or a Nelson. Olivia's lips pulled together. Grandfather rarely spoke of her father's family; when he did, it was only to say they were gone.

Phaedra, giving Torrington a break from her chattering, turned her attention to Olivia and Peter. It was clear by the look on her face that she'd overheard Peter's comments about Leo.

"How can you *possibly* consider him?" she mouthed to Olivia.

Olivia looked down into the abyss of her soup bowl, noting the unappetizing bits of mushroom floating about. Theo was right. Mushrooms did resemble worms. Olivia couldn't believe she hadn't seen it before now.

"Torrington." Leo's voice boomed from the other end of the table. "What must I do to induce you to share some of those dessert recipes Rosalind is always going on about? For The Barrington."

"A decadent custard. Made once a year." Tony snorted and rolled his eyes. "I thought Ros had gotten into my sideboard and was taking nips of brandy."

Rosalind chuckled at the other end of the table. "I vow I never did, Your Grace. I suspect the culprit was my mother."

“Rosalind.” Amanda pretended to be outraged. “To disparage Cousin Winnie when she isn’t here to defend herself. I always thought she preferred sherry.”

Laughter sounded again.

“She has an affinity for brandy as you well know, Your Grace,” Rosalind said. “And the custard *is* real. Incredibly decadent.” An intimate look passed between Rosalind and Torrington.

So that’s what got her in trouble with Torrington. Custard. How fitting.

“Good lord.” Leo sat back in his chair. “Look at the two of you. Who knew a custard would be so enjoyable? I don’t suppose you can teach Georgie to make it. I’ll give you the best suite at The Barrington. Pay you whatever sum you wish.”

The entire table, including Georgina, burst into gales of laughter. Torrington’s mouth curled into a half-smile as he took in his wife. Rosalind didn’t even blush. She blew a kiss to her husband.

The only one blushing at Rosalind’s antics was poor Peter, who clearly didn’t know what to make of such a blatant display of affection.

A footman entered and quietly made his way to Pith, murmuring to him in a low tone.

Pith nodded and went to Maggie’s side, bowing and then leaning over to speak to her.

“Splendid, Pith.” Maggie smiled down the table. “Georgina, Mr. Cooke has finally arrived.” She looked at her husband. “I win that wager, Your Grace.”

“As do I.” Georgina shot a pointed look at Leo. “I told you he would only be delayed.”

A gentleman stood at the entrance to the dining room, a roguish smile gracing one corner of his mouth dressed in dark, impeccably tailored clothing. The light picked out the bits of

red in his hair, sparkling like copper hidden in the dark strands.

Bollocks.

Olivia tried to take a breath and couldn't. She didn't even pause to chastise herself for cursing. Her heart seemed to have stopped beating. A dizzy feeling assailed her. Possibly she was going to faint, for the first time in her life. Instead, she dropped the soup spoon, spraying poor Peter with bits of mushroom.

Dark, forested eyes swiveled around the table, halting abruptly on Olivia.

The beautiful man whom Olivia had allowed intimate liberties. The source of her tortured dreams from which she awoke with her heart racing, her thighs trembling, her body wet and aroused. The man whom she'd *hoped* never to see again.

“Mr. Cooke,” Pith intoned.

Benjamin Cooke smoothed down the edges of his coat and stepped into the beautifully appointed dining room of the Duke of Averell. He silently cursed Georgina, his cousin, for demanding his attendance. Formal dinner parties, especially those hosted by a duke, were not the sort of thing Ben appreciated, though he'd met Averell and his lovely duchess several times as the pair visited Georgina frequently. On one of those occasions, he'd taught the petite duchess, a lovely thing named Maggie, to play poker. The card game was unknown in England but was just beginning to be played widely in America, mostly by riverboat gamblers.

Riverboat gamblers. Their sort didn't last long in New York. And usually came to a bad end.

Ben took in the expensive plate and silver, the stoic butler with his minions of footmen, the smell of food that had his stomach growling in response.

Not unusual. Ben was *always* hungry.

Starvation is a difficult state to forget. The hollowness of your stomach. The longing for anything, even dirt, to fill the void. As a child, he'd been thrilled to find a half-gnawed chicken leg in the street. He'd sucked on the broken bone for two days hoping the marrow would sustain him.

Now he was dining with a duke and the duke's family.

A sea of blue eyes, all filled with various amounts of curiosity, greeted Ben as he scanned the table. His gaze halted

abruptly on one young lady.

The soup spoon she held had dropped from her fingers at the sight of him. Plopped into the bowl before her and sprayed her dinner companion and the snowy white linen covering the table with what appeared to be mushrooms. Dragging her gaze from Ben, she immediately composed herself, as the proper young lady he took her to be.

Arousal whipped against his skin as he took in her delicate form.

And to think, all he'd been hoping for tonight was a decent meal at the duke's table. Perhaps the opportunity to annoy Averell by paying far too much attention to his duchess, whom Ben liked very much. She'd played the piano for him, leaving no doubt as to why Averell had wed her.

But this? This was much, *much* better than merely spending the evening annoying both Leo and his pompous ducal brother.

Ben glanced at the slender, dark-haired temptress on the other side of the table. The entire lower half of his body tightened again. He was grateful for the length of his coat.

"Your Grace." He turned and bowed to the duchess. *Maggie*. Averell had nearly lost his mind when she'd asked Ben to address her so informally. "My deepest apologies for my late arrival. Business, I'm afraid, which was unavoidable."

Harper, the gentleman of whose business Ben had just ruthlessly taken ownership, hadn't understood the precariousness of his situation. It had taken more time than Ben had anticipated to convince him of the wisdom in agreeing to Ben's proposition, especially since Harper had been entertaining the thought of selling to Morgan Stewart.

Ben struggled to keep his features impassive. Calm.

Stewart.

An annoyance in New York, one that he should have dealt with before now. He hadn't any idea Stewart was in London. Not until Harper had informed him of the offer Stewart had made for the man's now-defunct exporting company, which

happened to include warehouses Rutherford Shipping desired along with other less important assets. Ben had already bankrupted Harper, only the idiot hadn't known until today. He'd had no choice but to hand everything over to Ben.

A vision of two filthy street urchins, fighting over a coat and a pair of boots, passed before Ben's eyes, momentarily blocking the view of the Duke of Averell's dining room.

Give it over, Twist. I saw it first.

"You are forgiven, Mr. Cooke," the duchess said with a smile, banishing the past and Morgan Stewart from Ben's thoughts. "You did warn me of your late arrival. The flowers you sent were lovely. But I fear you've missed the soup course."

Was Averell growling at him from the other end of the table?

A smile pulled at Ben's lips. He made a note to have another more extravagant bouquet of flowers sent to Her Grace tomorrow. As a thank you, of course.

"I've never cared for soup, Your Grace."

Ben's little fake courtesan, lovely dark eyes stricken in horror at his appearance, wavered atop her chair. She might topple to the floor. He hoped she would faint, then perhaps he could volunteer to carry her to a nearby settee.

The mere thought of touching her again sent another curl of arousal below his hips.

"Pith should have refused you entrance." This came from Leo, who sat next to Averell. The two looked like a pair of overly bred bookends. Except that Leo carried a bit of muck about the edges of his coat, though not nearly as much as Ben. Perhaps that is why he respected Leo and more importantly *trusted* Georgina's husband, at least enough for Ben to have invested in Leo's hotel, The Barrington.

"Mr. Cooke informed me of his late arrival. He sent flowers *and* a note." Maggie looked down the table at Leo. "Must I find a glass for you as well?" She lifted a small spoon and gently tapped the edge.

“Yes, Leo. I sent a note.” Ben strolled toward Georgina, his primary concern other than annoying Leo and the duke. Admittedly, he was overprotective of her, often with good reason. Georgina liked to push the very edges of the society that constrained her and was often in dire need of protection, though she would never say so. She was the first person who’d ever shown Ben an ounce of affection, defending him when he needed it the most. He was merely returning the favor. There wasn’t anything Ben wouldn’t do for her.

Except tell her the truth.

Ben shrugged the words away. He’d had too much time to think on the voyage to England, and now Stewart’s presence made the past even harder to ignore.

Leo made a sound of annoyance as Ben approached Georgina.

Ben wasn’t *only* in London to take Harper’s assets or coordinate a shipment of furnishings he hadn’t yet acquired for The Barrington—a favor he was doing for Leo, who should have been more appreciative. Ben also wanted to be here when Georgina gave birth to her second child. Lilian, Georgina’s sister, couldn’t make the trip.

Ignoring the stick-up-his-bum butler who had introduced himself as Pith and whom Ben secretly decided to refer to as Pitch just to annoy the man, Ben came up to Georgina’s seat, wondering how Leo had managed to even get her in the carriage tonight.

He took the opportunity to cast another glance at his brazen, bold, yet proper young lady, recalling the way her skin had tasted beneath his lips. The sounds she’d made.

The dark velvet of her eyes regarded him warily, as if Ben were a wild animal that had somehow found its way to the Duke of Averell’s table. The tiniest bit of pink stole over her cheeks and across her chest, drawing his attention to her small, perfectly shaped breasts.

A breath left him. Ben forced himself to look away before he was overcome with lust.

Leaning over his cousin, he pressed a kiss to Georgina's cheek. Ben didn't care if it was a breach of etiquette to greet her in such a fashion. He'd been watching her waddle around since his arrival in London and worried for her health. The concern for her had grown much worse since the tragedy with Lilian.

Poor Lilian.

Ben didn't regret many things, but not ridding the world of Lilian's late husband before certain events had transpired was one. Now, she haunted the Rutherford mansion in Manhattan, a pale imitation of the woman she had once been.

"George," he whispered, the small curls around Georgina's ears tickling his nose. "You didn't tell me the whole damn family would be present."

"You might not have come," she said lightly.

"Probably not." He straightened. "I'm surprised *you* did. You can barely reach the dinner table."

"I realize that," she snapped. "No need to remind me."

"You resemble a ripened melon," he added in a low teasing tone, knowing how much she would hate the comparison. There were no signs of distress in Georgina. Or that she might be ill or overtired.

"Yes, but I can still reach my knife. Which is the only thing that should concern you." She smiled sweetly back at him. "Don't hover."

"Stop calling her George," Leo said absently from his seat. "Her name is *Georgina*."

Ben ignored him. Leo liked to posture.

"And she's perfectly fine, Cooke. I wouldn't have allowed her to be here if she wasn't," Leo said quietly. "You *are* hovering. If she can't reach whatever vegetable is being served," he said a bit louder, "I'll just toss tiny chunks into her mouth."

Georgina nudged him, tilting her head in the direction of his seat.

“Cooke.” Averell stared at Ben, not bothering to hide his ducal dislike.

“Your Grace.” Ben bowed. *Pompous prick.*

The butler stood beside the only empty chair, waiting impatiently for Ben to sit so the next course could be brought out. “Mr. Cooke.”

Ben settled himself between the Earl of Torrington, whom he had to pretend not to have met per the earl’s instruction, and a stunning young woman with the same blue eyes Leo possessed.

“Mr. Cooke,” she said. “I am Lady Phaedra.”

The youngest sister. The hellion who had been allowed to accompany Averell to Elysium in Leo’s absence. Leo had been beyond furious. Ben wondered if the duke knew his sister was sneaking into Elysium *without* him, wandering about the sin-filled rooms of the second floor.

“A pleasure, Lady Phaedra.”

Ben had seen Elysium’s Red Book, really more of a ledger, where all sorts of ridiculous wagers were recorded and duly witnessed. There was an entire page devoted to Lady Phaedra Barrington, with half of London wagering on what sort of scandal this young lady would foist upon the Duke of Averell. *Politely*, Phaedra was referred to as eccentric, but he’d heard other, less flattering things said about her. Most in London agreed that Phaedra was destined for disaster. Various scenarios by which this might be accomplished were listed in the Red Book. She possessed an affinity for fencing. Had been caught riding astride.

Oh, the horror.

She also had an interest in watching the boxing matches at Hagerty’s, an establishment in a seedy neighborhood which didn’t exactly attract the titled fops who liked to prance about and slap at each other as exercise. Torrington was certainly no dandy. Ben had seen the earl in the ring. It was how they’d met.

This entire dinner party was rife with all sorts of coincidences. The lovely woman seated across the table from Ben being the biggest one. He had an idea of who she must be, based on the descriptions Georgina had shared with him of the family.

Ben nodded politely to Torrington, who gave him a pointed look, one that clearly asked that he not reveal they knew each other. Something to do with the earl's wife and her disapproval of his visits to Hagerty's. Torrington needn't have worried. Ben wasn't always honorable, and some of his methods of getting what he wanted weren't . . . polite. But Ben *always* kept his word.

He settled back in his seat and took in the view across the table. The object of every one of Ben's fantasies for the last two weeks remained frozen before him. Like a doe not wanting to alert a hunter of its presence.

Too late.

She was so incredibly lovely, his fake courtesan, standing out even among a table filled with a family Georgina called the Beautiful Barringtons. Prim. Proper. So very English. Ben should have sent her away that night upon realizing her innocence but hadn't. There was such an exotic creature lying beneath all that silk and lace, and he had wanted to explore.

Ben shifted in his seat.

Her composure was laudable. Not a hint of recognition showed in the velvet depths of her eyes. She barely lifted her dainty chin in his direction. Perched perfectly straight on her chair. She inclined her neck gracefully as the gentleman seated next to her spoke.

Ben regarded his little courtesan's dinner companion. Overly large head for a gentleman. Like a buttercup with all that golden hair. Spindly body. Reedy neck. Easy to snap.

"Mr. Cooke." Lady Phaedra interrupted Ben's murderous thoughts. "Don't mind Pith." She tilted her head in the direction of the butler who was eyeing Ben with distaste. "He dislikes it when guests are late. It offends his sensibilities. Had

Pith answered the door and not one of the footmen, he might well have sent you packing. But you didn't miss anything at all other than the soup. We have a new cook, a chef, imported from Paris. He used mushrooms in the soup. A blatant deviation from the menu that was planned."

"I see." Ben didn't have an opinion on mushrooms and couldn't care less if they were served. Nor did he care about dinner menus.

"At any rate, in addition to our new chef flouting a direct request, Pith didn't doublecheck for the absence of mushrooms. They are not welcome at the duke's table." Phaedra turned her attention to Lord Large Head and Ben's delicious companion from Elysium.

"Olivia, how did you enjoy your soup?" Phaedra's polite question made its way across the table.

Miss Olivia Nelson.

Ward of the Barringtons. Granddaughter of the Earl of Daring. He'd assumed as much given that she looked nothing like the rest of the family. Curious she'd been raised by the dowager duchess and not her grandparents.

Miss Nelson didn't answer, though she glared at Phaedra.

"Mr. Thomlinson, what did you think of the mushrooms?" Phaedra turned to Miss Nelson's dinner companion.

"Wonderful, Lady Phaedra. Earthy."

Thomlinson, in Ben's opinion, was little more than a twig with a head. A good wind might snap his neck if Ben didn't decide to do so himself. He didn't care for Thomlinson being so close to all that soft, pristine skin of Miss Nelson's.

"Not to my taste," came the crisp reply from Miss Nelson. She studiously tried to address Phaedra without looking at Ben. "I find I am not overly fond of mushrooms."

Ben's cock twitched at the sound of her patrician accent. He imagined her moaning his name in the same clipped manner.

"How do you find London, Mr. Cooke?" Phaedra asked.

Miss Nelson pretended not to listen, but the tilt of her head told Ben she was intent on eavesdropping.

“Different.” Georgina detested London with good reason. She hadn’t been treated kindly here during her marriage to the much older Lord Masterson. Likewise, Ben had found little he cared for, outside of Olivia Nelson. The upper-class society of Manhattan was stifling, but London was nothing short of suffocating. The dirt he could hide so well in New York seemed to seep out of his finely tailored clothing here.

“Have you had a chance to visit Elysium?” Phaedra asked.

“Elysium?” Ben replied. “Isn’t it rather impolite to bring up a pleasure palace at the dinner table?”

“More of a gambling establishment,” Phaedra answered tartly. “I feel certain Elysium is the sort of place you’d enjoy. Do you play cards? Hazard? Or something else?”

Buttercup continued to speak to Miss Nelson, completely unaware she had ceased listening to him and was much more focused on glaring daggers at Phaedra.

“I have visited Elysium, my lady. The experience was my favorite thus far in London.”

The pink of Miss Nelson’s cheeks and chest deepened in color. Her delicate breasts pushed up furiously against her bodice as her breath changed at his words. She stabbed at the pheasant placed before her.

How far did the blush extend beneath the silk of her gown? Ben’s eyes lingered on the rise and fall of her breasts, wishing the neckline was less modest and thinking of the parts of Miss Nelson which were very pink indeed.

The dull throb of his cock followed the thought. He’d be lucky to get through the meal.

“Olivia, is there something wrong with your pheasant?”

“Not in the least,” Miss Nelson snipped back.

“Now, as I was saying, Mr. Cooke. Have you met anyone interesting while in London?” The blue of her eyes sparkled up at Ben as she waited for him to answer.

Phaedra Barrington was highly observant; for instance, she'd already ascertained Ben's interest in Miss Nelson though he'd barely glanced in her direction. Pity the trait wouldn't help her avoid the disaster she was so intent on becoming. She fairly oozed with brazen behavior. He almost felt sorry for Averell.

"I did," he answered, taking a sip of wine.

Miss Nelson made a sound. Frustration, maybe, at his appearance. Possibly some distress, though she looked angry more than anything else.

Gorgeous, naughty creature. Ben winked at her.

She fumbled with her fork, nearly tipping over her plate. The tips of her ears turned red.

Buttercup tilted his enormous head in her direction.

Honestly, how could that thin neck support such a burden?

Miss Nelson eyed Ben warily before taking a deep breath to compose herself. She picked up her fork once more, gripping the silver between her fingers.

Ben wanted her so much, the sensation so overpowering, he nearly leapt across the table. First, he would punch Buttercup in his perfect English nose. Then he would carry her off, drag Miss Nelson out of the dining room and take her somewhere quiet where he could strip all those ladylike layers off her.

Pity he couldn't follow through. Georgina would be so disappointed if he ruined dinner at the Duke of Averell's home. He did, however, nudge the toe of his boot into the arch of Miss Nelson's foot.

The knife and fork she'd only just picked up once more fell from her fingers, clattering against the table. She blinked at Ben, looked down at her plate, then raised her eyes once more.

But Miss Nelson did not move her foot from his.

Ben cut into the tiny slice of roasted pheasant he'd been served with resignation. There was barely enough meat on his

plate to feed a child. Averell's butler, the worst kind of petty tyrant, was making sure Ben knew of his disdain.

"Olivia, I think you might be unwell. I've rarely seen you so clumsy." Phaedra turned to look at Buttercup. "Or have you distressed her, Mr. Thomlinson?"

"No, of course not, my lady." A puff of air escaped him.

Buttercup was far too polite for his own good. And Phaedra was *not*. As much as he was enjoying the blush of Miss Nelson's cheeks and the obliviousness of Buttercup, Ben would need to put a stop to Phaedra's baiting. If anyone was going to torture Miss Nelson, it would be Ben. And she'd do more than drop her fork.

"You would do well among the Mohawk, Lady Phaedra," Ben said in a conversational tone to his dinner companion.

"The Mohawk?" A wrinkle formed between Phaedra's brows. "I believe there is a book in our library which mentions them. The Mohawk were great warriors. My understanding is that—"

"They enjoyed flaying bits of a person's skin off for their own amusement," Ben interrupted before taking a bite of the pheasant. "Cease your torment, my lady." Ben lowered his voice. "Of Miss Nelson. You have made your point." He returned to his plate and took a bite of potato.

Phaedra's mouth parted, lips forming a perfect circle.

Ben doubted she was ever speechless. Or that anyone ever reprimanded her.

"Mr. Cooke—"

"There is no need to belabor the point, my lady. I must *insist*." A polite smile remained on his features even as the timbre of his voice held a hint of ice. He was feeling very protective of Miss Nelson.

Phaedra slowly drew in a breath. Spearling a bit of carrot, she nibbled and swallowed. "I find I like you, Mr. Cooke."

"I'm pleased to hear it."

“More,” she said quietly, “than Mr. Thomlinson.”

“How kind of you to say. However, he is far better bred, my lady.”

“Assuredly. Now that I’ve been put in my place,” she cast him a sideways glance, “I would be a poor dinner companion if I didn’t offer you gossip about everyone at the table. That’s the reason behind most dinner parties. But don’t worry. No one is paying the least attention to our conversation.”

Indeed, they weren’t. Only Miss Nelson, who watched Ben from beneath the inky sweep of her lashes, paid them any mind. The tip of his boot was still lodged in the arch of her foot. Like a cat trapping a mouse by its tail.

“The Duke of Granby and my sister, Andromeda.” Phaedra gave a discreet point of her fork to a big-shouldered, austere-looking gentleman seated next to a beautiful young woman. “We call her Romy, in case you become confused.”

Phaedra’s eldest sister was stunning, with the same brilliant blue eyes all the Barringtons possessed. The duke at her side regarded Romy with a worshipful gaze.

“Granby was supposed to wed someone else but chased Romy about instead. Terrible scandal. I find His Grace to be chilly. But oddly enough, he and Miss Nelson have much in common. Plants. Gardens. Green things. He sent her *manure*. As a gift. Can you imagine, Mr. Cooke?”

“How very generous of the duke.” Miss Nelson liked to garden. Ben filed away the information.

“Over there is my second brother-in-law, the Marquess of Haven, and my sister Theodosia. The Duke of Averell refers to Haven as *the parasite* which is unfortunate. Leo, as you probably know, doesn’t care for Haven either. Which is a pity because I find him quite lovely.”

Ben took in Haven’s rough appearance. The marquess had the look of a man who knew how to use his fists. Leo’s words on his sister’s marriage to Haven had been colorful, to say the least.

“Thankfully, Theo is finally wearing spectacles. Blind without them. Which is probably why Haven ruined her while she was waiting impatiently for the Earl of Blythe to do so. More fodder for the gossips. You can see why my brother”—she gestured to Averell—“is often in a foul mood given the trouble Theo and Romy have gotten into.”

Not to mention Phaedra.

Miss Nelson had not moved her foot. Her head was tilted in Thomlinson’s direction, seemingly engrossed in whatever he was saying, a polite smile pasted on her lips.

The Buttercup couldn’t possibly be that interesting.

“And I believe you know Lord Torrington. My cousin Rosalind’s husband. He ruined her much more discreetly.”

“Why would you think I’m acquainted with Lord Torrington?”

“Torrington enjoys a good boxing match. Fisticuffs and all that.” Shrewd eyes landed on the small knot in Ben’s nose. “I bet you’re rather good at it. Do you visit Hagerty’s?”

Torrington, seated on the other side of Ben, tapped a fingertip on the table. He leaned over just slightly and shot Phaedra a pointed look.

Phaedra sighed and sat back an inch. “I’m not supposed to discuss Torrington’s affinity for boxing because Rosalind doesn’t care for his hobby,” she whispered so only Ben could hear. “She’s constantly worried he’s going to be hurt. Which is ridiculous. His nose is perfect.”

Ben lifted one brow.

“He’s fast on his feet.” She ran a finger down her nose. “Perhaps you aren’t.”

“Or perhaps your assumption is incorrect,” he challenged.

“It isn’t. At any rate, Ros and Torrington like to bake things together, which is strange for an earl and his countess, I agree. But we are the beneficiaries of such bounty. They’ve brought a chocolate toffee cake *and* a lemon torte for dessert.”

She paused, eyes darting across the table. “Rosalind brings the lemon torte for Miss Nelson. It’s her favorite.”

Gardening and lemon tortes. The toe of Ben’s boot was still firmly wedged against the arch of Miss Nelson’s slipper. A sable curl danced at her temple, just above one brow, drawing his eye like a beacon. The dark spiral would feel like silk beneath his fingers. Her slender shoulders dipped gracefully as she cut her pheasant before placing the bit of meat between her lips. Plump. Stained a soft red. Moving with a delicious ripple as she chewed.

Ben forced his attention back to his own plate, shifting once more in his seat, but it was impossible to ease the strain of his trousers.

“The dowager duchess,” Phaedra continued, inclining her head to the older woman seated next to Averell’s duchess, “is my mother, as you may have surmised. We are all grateful Her Grace now wears pewter instead of black. There was an excessive amount of black for a very long time.”

Ben knew of the death of Marcus Barrington and the kindness he’d done Georgina. “I was sorry to hear of your father’s passing. My cousin had a great fondness for him.”

“He had many admirable qualities.” Sadness lingered in Phaedra’s eyes, voice etched with grief. “Not all at once, mind you.” She nodded to the head of the table. “You know my sister-in-law, Margaret, Duchess of Averell. And both my brothers. So, we have finally arrived at Miss Nelson.”

“It seems we have.”

“Miss Nelson is the granddaughter of the Earl of Daring, which you likely know. At the death of her parents, Miss Nelson was given to my mother for safekeeping. Lord Daring has recently rekindled his relationship with his grandchild, as is his right. Miss Nelson is the last of her family, after all. But Lord Daring isn’t welcome to dinner.” Her voice took on a chilliness. “Though Mr. Thomlinson, his heir, *is*.”

Buttercup would inherit Daring’s earldom. Possibly more.

“I quite agree.” Phaedra nodded as if Ben had commented. “It is a splendid match. A logical one. Entirely suitable.” She stabbed at a piece of potato. “Completely acceptable. We expect an announcement any day now.”

Phaedra didn't approve of Buttercup.

Perhaps that was why she'd taken Miss Nelson to Elysium, hoping for scandal or ruination to stave off the match. Or maybe Miss Nelson had wanted a lark. Something exciting to remember before settling into a lifetime of Buttercup.

Ben's fingers drummed lightly against the table.

Why should it matter to him if a proper young miss married a well-bred Buttercup with an overly large head? Ben was attracted to her, yes, but he wasn't in the market for a wife. Marriage to Miss Nelson—or any other woman—wasn't a possibility. Daniel, Georgina's son, would inherit the Rutherford empire. It was the only way Ben could set things right.

But the *promise* of Miss Nelson still shimmered at Ben from across the table, tempting him, though he had nothing to offer in return. Seduction was out of the question. Leo and his snooty brother would toss him in the Thames if either caught wind of Ben's interest in Miss Nelson.

Ben slowly moved his foot from hers, taking the time to trail the tip of his boot along the length of her slipper before removing his toe completely.

Miss Nelson shivered delicately, as if a cool breeze had touched her skin. Their eyes caught for a moment, the attraction between them blazing across the table. Ben felt it roll over his skin in a wave, down the front of his thighs to his toes.

The sensation caused him to stop chewing. His breath halted.

Damn.

Ben shrugged it off, resolutely cutting another piece of pheasant. Forcing it to his mouth, he chewed, keeping his gaze from Miss Nelson for the remainder of the meal.

Good God.

He was Benjamin Cooke. Georgina's cousin, whom she had spoken of with such great excitement anticipating his arrival in London. She'd hoped the family would welcome him.

Well, I certainly have.

If ever there had been a good time for Olivia to swoon, which was far more ladylike than fainting, it was the moment Pith had ushered Mr. Cooke into the dining room. She should have immediately pled a headache caused by an excess of mushrooms in the soup. Her absolute horror at the situation had only grown when Cooke had taken the empty seat directly across from her.

She could barely enjoy the pheasant with Cooke watching her. Filling the air with pine and snow. Winking at her.

Never mind the press of his foot against hers which ignited the hum along her skin.

Now, not only did Olivia have a headache, but she was overly warm, mildly aroused, and terrified Cooke would do something to announce their previous acquaintance. She barely heard a word poor Peter uttered from beside her.

Oh. She pressed a hand to her stomach. The mushrooms were not settling.

Cooke was no gentleman, according to Georgina, though even if he had been, Olivia wasn't sure how that would have improved matters. She tried to recall all the things Georgina had mentioned about Mr. Cooke. He was brilliant in business. Intelligent. Sought-after. And the only man Jacob Rutherford respected.

The last part was not a recommendation of his character.

IN SHORT, EVEN IF OLIVIA HAD MET MR. COOKE AT A BALL OR riding in the park, he *still* wasn't the sort of man with whom a young lady of good breeding should involve herself.

Oh, I did more than involve myself. Liberties were taken. Of an intimate nature.

Olivia looked at her plate, trying to decide if the potatoes looked at all appealing. They did not. Her appetite had long since fled. The only thing which appealed to her at this dinner was, unfortunately, Mr. Cooke.

Bollocks.

Cursing, Olivia.

She closed her eyes and saw Cooke's body curled protectively around hers, the delicious weight of him pressing Olivia down into the coverlet as he pleased her. The warmth of his touch. The low, beautiful rumble that came from him when he kissed her. How breathtaking she found him.

Her thighs pressed together beneath her skirts. The entire lower half of Olivia's body fluttered and pulsed as she thought of Cooke and Elysium, all while Peter sat next to her, relating a visit to Bath to see an elderly aunt.

Olivia nodded and smiled but heard little of what he said.

For the remainder of the meal, Olivia forced herself to look no further than Peter. She didn't dare even glance at Phaedra, afraid her gaze would linger on Cooke instead.

Finally, the excruciating dinner came to an end and the gentlemen excused themselves. Olivia sighed in relief. Usually, the Barringtons didn't bother to separate after dinner

if only family were present. If Tony or Leo wanted a cheroot, they would merely slip away to the terrace with a wave. But with Peter here, some etiquette was being observed. It certainly wasn't for the benefit of Cooke. He'd flouted a half dozen rules tonight the second he'd walked into the dining room.

There was much merriment among the ladies, trying to get Georgina to her feet. In the last month, her stomach seemed to have doubled in size. She waddled, more than walked. Dinner had tired her, though she insisted it wasn't yet time to return home.

Swatting away their hands, Georgina slowly made her way to the drawing room, proclaiming she was not an invalid, though that didn't stop her from throwing a few muttered curses Leo's way. These were followed by another peal of laughter from the other ladies.

Olivia rose from her chair with the others but didn't immediately follow them to the drawing room. A desperate slice of quiet was required to compose herself before facing Mr. Cooke once more. Quell her thoughts, which were in disarray.

It was one thing to acknowledge one's . . . *indiscretions*. Another to have the indiscretion appear, more breathtakingly beautiful than you remembered, and wink at you across the dinner table when Peter was seated—

But I haven't yet decided.

Olivia took a shaky breath. A year ago, she'd thought she knew who she was: ward of the dowager duchess, honorary Barrington, purveyor of manure and childish pranks, and to the rest of London, a most perfect young lady. But then Grandfather had appeared, and she had become the granddaughter of the Earl of Daring. Last of the Halloways. And now, potentially, a future countess who embroidered handkerchiefs poorly.

There had been no need to complicate things with Benjamin Cooke.

Not a gentleman. Not even English. A man who seemed to have some magical ability to turn Olivia into a lustful *bloody* lightskirt.

Cursing, Olivia.

She'd thought of nothing but his hands on her during the entire lengthy dinner. His foot pressed to hers had been a constant *delicious* reminder of their previous encounter. Overly heated before the final course was served, Olivia had nearly resorted to fanning herself with a wave of her hand.

She was still far too warm.

Olivia slid down to the end of the hall just short of entering the drawing room. Romy was insisting they play cards one last time because she was leaving tomorrow for The Barrow, the Duke of Granby's country estate.

Maggie clapped her hands, crowing that she'd surely take everyone's pin money.

Olivia smiled to herself. No tame round of charades for the Barringtons. No gathering around the piano to sing sedate songs. It was only surprising there wasn't a hazard table stuck in the corner of the drawing room. Peter would be more horrified than he already was.

Turning, she took up a spot before the tall windows facing the gardens, the light behind her casting a reflection of the pale oval of her face against the glass. She still looked normal. Not at all *partially* ruined.

She cast her gaze out over the gardens, admiring the row of *Alcea rosea* faintly lit by the torches that lined the garden path. The Averells' head gardener, Kelliworth, had protested the planting of hollyhocks. Just as he had argued that the entire left quadrant of the garden didn't require a redesign. But Olivia had persisted.

Tony had told Kelliworth to do as his *sister* requested.

The memory pleased Olivia, though it brought with it the clash of disloyalty to her grandfather. Referring to Tony as her brother or Phaedra as her sister always brought a pained look to Grandfather's eyes, a deep sadness that pricked at Olivia's

heart before he would turn away with an affectionate pat to her hand. Whenever this occurred, he would then, usually the next time they were together, make a point of reminding Olivia that she *wasn't* a Barrington but had only been left to their keeping for a time. There was no reprimand in the words, only an aching loneliness that stirred the well of guilt inside her. Olivia was *his* granddaughter.

Mr. Cooke's reflection appeared suddenly in the window beside her, interrupting her musings. Big. Tall. So wonderfully male. She staunchly resisted the urge to turn and face him, choosing instead to focus on the cadence of her breath, which had become uneven. The smell of frost and forest teased at her nostrils, cold and slightly savage. Much, she suspected, like Benjamin Cooke.

"Miss Nelson." Cooke kept his gaze forward, as if admiring the string of shrubs and flowers just outside the window, a grin tugging at his lips.

"Mr. Cooke." Goosebumps rippled down both her arms, revealing a startling awareness of his presence. He was a sudden thunderstorm in Olivia's peaceful existence, one in which the lightning caused her skin to prick.

"Phaedra spoke of your love for greenery." He nodded toward the gardens where the shadow of Granby's immense shoulders could be seen over a spray of wax myrtle.

"Did she?" Olivia didn't care for the idea of Cooke gossiping with Phaedra, especially about her.

"An interest I'm told you share with the Duke of Granby. What an interesting hobby for a duke. I wonder how he keeps the plants from freezing at his touch."

Olivia raised a brow. "Gloves?"

Mr. Cooke's grin widened slightly at her response. "Grandmother Rutherford kept a garden, though nothing as extravagant as this. Mostly vegetables, herbs, and the like. She was always cursing the squirrels because they ate her carrots."

"How did she get rid of them? The squirrels?" What a strange conversation. Squirrels and carrots.

“Grandmother was quite a good shot.” Cooke gave her a sideways glance. “The squirrel population was decimated. But outside of her vegetables, what Grandmother really loved were tulips. She planted bulbs in every color imaginable. Waves of them, stretching down the long slope of her property to the Hudson.”

Georgina had mentioned her grandmother more than once and with a great deal of affection. “You visited her often?”

“I did. George and I usually went together. Sometimes Lilian.”

“Georgina’s sister.”

He nodded. “George is an expert at tree climbing, though I don’t suppose she does much of that anymore. She’s much better at it than I am.”

Hard to imagine this big, imposing man as a child. But he had been. One dirty and starving, wearing threadbare clothing, at least when he’d arrived at his uncle’s. Georgina had related that Cooke never spoke about his life before arriving at the Rutherfords’. To this day, none of them knew where he had been, though they had surmised he’d spent time aboard a ship. Alice Rutherford had run off with a ship’s captain named Cooke.

“Why do you insist on referring to her as George?”

“Well, in honor of our first president, of course. George Washington.” At Olivia’s dubious look, he said, “Fine, Miss Nelson. I did so originally to annoy Cordelia, George’s mother, a woman for whom a sense of humor is a foreign concept. Now, it’s mostly because calling her George irritates Leo. He’s so sensitive for a duke’s bastard, don’t you think?”

Olivia allowed a tiny smile. “You like to poke at him. I thought you were friends.”

Something hard and sharp peeked through the forest of his eyes. “If we weren’t, I would do worse than annoy him.” The truth of his words shadowed his handsome features. A flicker of something dark exposing itself for just an instant.

The grin returned. “And I don’t mean it as a slight, Leo’s birth. Some of the wealthiest men in New York started life on the wrong side of the blanket.” Another glint of something unspoken flashed in and out of the light. “The circumstances of a man’s birth are not of his making. Why should he suffer for it?”

“There are many in London who would disagree with you, which I find unfair.”

“Perhaps that is why Leo likes New York so much. He strolls about, tossing around the fact he is the son of the former and brother of the current Duke of Averell. The masses part before him. Ladies clutch their hearts at his visage while their husbands see opportunity. The cream of Manhattan society hear *duke* and immediately become so enamored of Leo, they care little for the circumstances of his birth.”

“I’m sure some of them care.”

“They do. The old Dutch and English families who run things are overly concerned with a man’s lineage. But now Leo is additionally the son-in-law of Jacob Rutherford, one of New York’s wealthiest. Even if they don’t want to receive him, they don’t dare let their feelings show.”

Olivia had a sense the same applied to Mr. Cooke.

“What’s that over there?” He pointed to a structure close to the garden wall.

The sight of his naked fingers had Olivia’s insides twisting pleasurably. Those fingers had—

She choked back the thought.

“My greenhouse,” she managed to answer, despite a rush of twisting honey in her midsection. “Where I keep the most fragile of my plants and seedlings. Granby often sends me small scraps of things in burlap from his own gardens. Or a packet of seeds I must plant in order to see what sprouts. He has a taste for the exotic.”

“A word I would never have used in conjunction with the Duke of Granby.”

Olivia swallowed, looking down at her clasped hands, trying to ignore the feel of him beside her. Impossible with him so close and the sconces along the wall falling on the shimmering brandy of his hair. This was sure to become awkward, but Olivia couldn't continue to stand here discussing gardens and Granby all the while pretending this man had never touched her.

"I'm sure you didn't seek me out merely to discuss my love of horticulture, Mr. Cooke."

"I like to play in the dirt. Didn't my cousin mention that charming facet of my personality?"

What Georgina *had* omitted in her descriptions of Cooke was how he was mildly frightening but in a delicious, tempting way. How he smelled like a stretch of savage forest, the sort you didn't find in England. Or that when Mr. Cooke grinned, as he was doing now, he reminded Olivia of a mischievous boy.

Which made him all the more dangerous.

"Thank you for not announcing to the room we were previously acquainted," she said quietly.

"And have Leo stab me in the eye with a fork? The duchess would be banging a spoon on her wineglass, attempting to bring him to heel, while Averell or your priggish butler tried to carve me up with the knife used on the pheasant. George would probably have joined them. She has a temper. At any rate, it isn't appropriate dinner conversation."

"Would you like to know why I was at Elysium?" If she were in Cooke's overly large boots, Olivia would want to know what a young lady from a good family had been doing on a gambling hell's second floor.

"Actually, no. Having Phaedra as my dinner companion this evening answered the question of why you were at a notorious pleasure palace well enough."

"More of a gambling hell," Olivia responded automatically. It was an important distinction.

“Phaedra induced you to sneak in with her, probably because she delights in tormenting others. *You* ended up in *my* room because someone came upon you.”

“Mr. Peckham,” she murmured.

“I suppose the duke’s tolerance of Phaedra’s antics, which is fairly high, I’m told, doesn’t extend to the two of you roaming about the second floor of Elysium. I know Leo’s doesn’t. But that isn’t the real question, is it? Why did you allow me to think you were my companion for the evening?”

“I allowed you nothing. You assumed. I look nothing like a courtesan. Or a lightskirt.”

“Yes, you do.” His voice lowered to a purr. “The kind I like. Prim. Ladylike. Modest.”

“I am not interested in your preferences, Mr. Cooke,” she replied in a crisp tone. “Nor your further adventures on that particular evening.” The thought of Cooke sprawled across the bed with another woman was disturbing to Olivia.

The side of his mouth twitched. “Don’t be jealous. I sent her away.”

“I’m not jealous in the least.”

“I found her to be nothing more than a pale imitation of you, Miss Nelson.”

“I do not, in any way, have a *thing* in common with a woman of such low morals,” she snapped back.

“I fear your actions say differently.” The bits of gold in the hazel of his eyes sparkled at her. “They were not those of a virtuous young lady, though you reek of decorum and modesty. Reserve clings to your skirts. Granddaughter of an earl *and* ward of a duchess. You are fairly brimming with decency and strong moral turpitude.”

Olivia didn’t care to be mocked.

“Has anyone in London yet informed you that your speaking voice reminds one of the honking of a goose?” she retorted in a cool tone. “I’m shocked you are understood at all. My ears ache hearing you extol my virtues.”

A rumbling sound came from his chest. Far from looking offended, Cooke appeared amused. “I don’t think you’re nearly as polite as you want all of London to believe, Miss Nelson. In fact, I have firsthand knowledge that you are not.”

Olivia turned her gaze back to the garden where Granby was now inspecting the hollyhocks. Elysium had been an . . . aberration of her behavior—a moment of intense madness made possible by the presence of Mr. Cooke. It was not to be repeated.

“Tell me, Miss Nelson.” He had a lovely voice, despite the horrible accent. Deep and full, as he scratched those flattened vowels against her skin. She should have noticed at once that night, but she’d been too intoxicated, too—

“Are you really going to betroth yourself to that Buttercup?”

The question interrupted her stream of thoughts, which was preferable given their direction. It took her a moment to realize he was speaking of Peter.

“Not that it is any of your affair, Mr. Cooke, but Mr. Thomlinson is an excellent match for me. He is in no way a *Ranunculus acris*.”

Cooke’s forested eyes widened at her rebuke. “I prefer Buttercup, though the sound of a flower in Latin coming from you is highly arousing—”

Olivia’s entire body stretched toward him.

“—but you didn’t answer my question,” he finished.

“Because your question was incredibly impolite. Mr. Cooke—” His name came out in a soft gasp at the light touch along her hip.

One big hand splayed open, fingers trailing along the silk folds of her gown. It could have been the breeze spilling in through the open terrace doors, except she could see the reflection of his hand in the window moving gently against her side. She had the distinct impression he wanted to grab her and had to restrain himself from doing so.

The sight of those big, calloused, ungentlemanly fingers, knowing they had been—on her—*inside her*—had her heart beating out of rhythm.

“As I said.” Her mind swam with visions of them on the bed at Elysium. “Whether I wed Mr. Thomlinson is none of your affair.”

“Yet”—Cooke gave a deep sigh of resignation—“I find it is.”

“Our previous encounter,” Olivia sputtered, trying to keep her voice even and belie the erotic images filling her mind. Which was nearly *bloody* impossible—

Cursing, Olivia.

“Was unfortunate. I should have told you immediately that I was not who you believed me to be and promptly exited. I am at fault for such an oversight. My only excuse is that . . . I’ve been suffering from . . .” Olivia searched for a plausible excuse. “*Melancholia.*” She lifted her chin, daring him to dispute her. “I was having an unwelcome attack of melancholia.”

“Melancholia?” His lips pressed together.

“Yes.” Gentlemen always assumed ladies had episodes of melancholia, along with fainting, pain in their temples, and general exhaustion from paying calls. She nodded as if horrified to admit to such a thing. “I am melancholy.”

“Really?” he spouted in disbelief. “You allowed me to touch your quim and make you climax because you felt *sad*? I wish you’d told me. Perhaps I would have used my mouth instead. A much better way to dispel melancholia.”

Olivia’s lips parted, but no sound, certainly no words, left her. The sheer crudity of what he suggested—well she’d heard—*goodness*. Heat, like a roaring fire, swept up her neck and face. The mere thought of his dark head between her legs—doing—*something*—

“Are you going to faint, Miss Nelson?” Cooke gave her a bemused look, fully aware of the effect of his words. “I only want to be prepared to catch you if that is the case.”

“I do not faint,” she snapped, embarrassed he’d noticed her reaction. She summoned every ounce of icy politeness she possessed. “I should slap you for such a remark.”

Leaning closer, he presented his cheek, grinning the entire time.

Mr. Cooke was much worse than she had previously thought. Horrible, in virtually every possible way.

Unfortunately, it did not dampen his appeal.

“May I please depend on your discretion in this matter?” That should have been her paramount concern when Cooke had approached her, instead of discussing gardens, shooting squirrels, and how she resembled the sort of courtesan he obviously preferred.

Not to mention the melancholia.

Bloody hell.

Olivia!

Her heartbeat refused to take up its normal rhythm. The hallway threatened to suffocate her, the air was so heavy. Even the tops of her thighs were heated.

Completely unsettling.

Cooke watched her reflection in the window, a grin pulling at his lips.

“Ah, there you are Miss Nelson.” Footsteps sounded behind her and Cooke. It was Peter, come to find her.

Oh, thank goodness.

Olivia had never thought to be so overjoyed at seeing Peter Thomlinson in her life. She was on the verge of either screaming and running from Mr. Cooke or throwing herself at him. She wasn’t certain which.

“Your sadness approaches, Miss Nelson,” Cooke murmured. “Please inform me should you require a *release* from it once more.”

“Go away,” she hissed. *Please.*

He bowed, silently moving away from her and out through the open terrace doors.

“Admiring the gardens?” Peter asked, looking between her and Cooke’s departing back, a question in his eyes.

“Yes.” Olivia took the arm he offered. “I was about to join His Grace.” She nodded to Granby’s overly large form still lurking about the hollyhocks. “Mr. Cooke is in search of a discreet place to indulge in a cheroot.”

“Did you direct him?” Peter asked.

The innocent question sent her fingers trembling.

“I did. The air has grown quite stale in here.” She smiled at Peter. “Even with the doors to the gardens flung open. I seek a respite. Would you care to see the hollyhocks I’ve planted?”

A stroll among her plants was certain to be restorative after the slightly hostile flirtation with Mr. Cooke.

“I’m not sure—” Peter started to object.

Just now, Olivia didn’t appreciate his adherence to propriety. Tony had remarked earlier that, at the very least, he wouldn’t have to worry about Peter causing a scandal with Olivia.

“We will be in view of the drawing room the entire time,” she assured him.



DAMN.

Ben stood at the edge of the terrace, a silent sentinel to bear witness to the inept courting tactics of the Buttercup. He wasn’t even enjoying the cheroot, too intent on imagining all the ways he could break Buttercup into pieces. Such—possessiveness for a woman he barely knew was troublesome.

Miss Nelson’s large-headed suitor led her properly along the path, pausing only to greet the Duke of Granby who was lurking about the blooms like some monstrous iceberg. If it

had been Ben, he would already have sequestered Miss Nelson on a bench in the darkness. Forced her to name all the flowers in the garden, in Latin, while his lips and teeth traveled along the slope of her graceful neck.

His cock, rigid with want for the last two hours, twitched in her direction.

What am I going to do about Miss Nelson?

That thunderbolt of connection between him and that bold, very proper virgin threatened to undo him. Watching her across a dinner table and touching her foot was one thing, but standing next to her once more, so close he caught the lavender scent of her skin—

Lavender. Like a matron's closet. He preferred the jasmine.

—had dissuaded him of the notion that his attraction to Miss Nelson might fade in time. He had a deep and unsettling certainty that his desire for her was only going to grow.

A beautiful sound filled the air. Miss Nelson's profile was tipped up to the Duke of Granby, laughing at some tidbit he'd imparted.

Granby was as amusing as a piece of stone. Not a hint of humor. He supposed they were chuckling over the rose bushes.

Ben wanted that laughter from Miss Nelson. Craved it. Along with other, more exquisite sexual sounds. He wanted to burrow inside her, search out her secrets, pleasure her until no other man would ever interest her.

The proprietary feelings for Miss Nelson swirled inside Ben like a maelstrom. He rarely—*as in never*—felt possessive over any woman. Pleasuring a virgin until she climaxed for the first time did not, unfortunately, confer rights to her person no matter how erotic the experience had been. The wisest course would be to avoid Miss Nelson in the future. Because it was unnatural, this sense of ownership. He didn't want it.

The Buttercup held on to Miss Nelson's elbow as she stumbled.

Ben's fingers tightened on the cheroot, nearly snapping it in half, willing away all thoughts of Miss Nelson. London was filled with prim, proper young ladies possessing an upper-crust accent. Any number of them would welcome the advances of a vulgar American.

Crushing the cheroot beneath the heel of his boot, Ben turned away from the couple strolling the garden and headed back inside. He'd make his excuses, citing business or something equally appropriate, and leave.

What would he do about Miss Nelson?

Avoid her.

But even as he made his way inside, Ben knew the effort would prove fruitless.

He wouldn't be able to stay away.

Olivia adjusted her gloves, patted aside a stray strand of hair, and hoped Peter would get lost on the way to the refreshment table. She immediately chastised herself for such an unkind thought. It wasn't Peter's fault she found herself at Lord Shipton's ball tonight. They were both here at Grandfather's request, victims of his unrelenting desire to see them wed.

I shouldn't be angry at Grandfather either.

Grandfather merely wished the best for Olivia, and in his mind, that was marriage to Peter Thomlinson. Tonight, however, was about introducing Olivia to his friends and acquaintances, something he'd been denied for years. Show her off, so to speak.

Rather like an expensive doll.

She sighed and moved closer to the edge of the wall so she could have a better view of the dance floor.

In all fairness, Grandfather *was* proud of the young lady Olivia had become. His crippled form had straightened as they had been announced, a smile bursting across his lips. Grandfather led her about the room, barely faltering as he introduced her to a parade of faces and names Olivia couldn't hope to recall later. There were the inevitable comparisons to her mother, Millicent. Even the gown she wore tonight was in a hue requested by Grandfather. Millicent had favored this particular shade of pink. Outside of the comments on her

marked resemblance to her mother, numerous assumptions were made about her future betrothal to Peter Thomlinson.

That didn't seem to matter to Grandfather, who winked when one elderly matron professed her delight at the match. Until Olivia reminded him that she hadn't yet agreed.

Nor had Peter actually professed a wish to wed *her*.

The entire situation filled Olivia with a sort of . . . *melancholia*.

Olivia pressed her thighs together at the rush of images the word conjured inside her. It was a perfectly innocent term which had been corrupted by Mr. Cooke and his *various* suggestions to relieve her sadness.

Disquiet would be a better word for her current state. Especially when recalling the dinner she'd shared with Grandfather. She'd taken to dining with him on a regular basis, something they both looked forward to. But recalling the meal she'd shared with him a few days ago left Olivia with a great deal of unease.

Over the main course, roasted lamb which had been far too bloody for Olivia's taste, Grandfather had mentioned their upcoming departure to Halloway Park, a visit she eagerly anticipated. They spoke of the gardens, which Grandfather assured her would require a great deal of Olivia's attention as his grief had left little time or concern for such things. He admitted, bashfully, that some of the furnishings were outdated, much like himself. Olivia would be free to redecorate as she wished. He had then waved for more wine and instructed Olivia that Peter would collect her from the Barringtons on the day of their departure for Halloway Park with a few of her trunks, while the rest could follow later.

Olivia's fork and knife had faltered over the bloody lamb. The journey to Halloway Park had been discussed a half dozen times. Amanda and Phaedra were returning to Cherry Hill, the duke's estate, and Olivia had voiced her desire to travel with them. At every instance, her grandfather had nodded his head, agreeing to her plans. Amanda would drop her on Grandfather's doorstep before she continued to Cherry Hill.

Olivia couldn't explain why she felt so strongly about traveling to Halloway Park in the company of Amanda. She only knew she wished to remain in the dowager duchess's company for as long as possible. Olivia also chose not to mention that Amanda taking up residence at Cherry Hill, only a few hours away from her grandfather's estate, gave her a great deal of comfort.

Grandfather, without looking up from his lamb, had dismissed Olivia's gentle reminder with a wave of his hand. "You'll go with me and Peter."

Olivia had stubbornly refused. Her arrangements had been made, and she wasn't quite ready to leave London.

Grandfather had turned the color of the blood running out of the much too rare lamb. His lips had trembled, his fingers shaking against his knife and fork. Shocked, one of the footmen had run to summon Grandfather's valet, a man nearly as ancient as he. Lord Daring had been immediately taken upstairs to ease his distress, and Dr. Phipps had been summoned, all while Olivia paced across the rug of Grandfather's drawing room.

Dr. Phipps, after examining Grandfather, had made his way to Olivia, a reprimand spilling from his lips. He'd advised her previously that she was not to upset Lord Daring, and yet, she had. Did she not understand his instructions? Did she wish to send her grandfather to an early grave?

From then on, she was to *refrain* from arguments or challenging opinions. The fragility of Lord Daring's health was apparent, and the slightest agitation could cause an immediate collapse.

Olivia, duly chastised, had nodded in agreement.

She had *not* changed her travel arrangements nor mentioned the conversation to Amanda when she'd returned home. But the entire incident had made for many a sleepless night.

Olivia had spent the time since then feeling guilt and shame for upsetting him. But she was also determined to not

be the obedient, placid animal Phaedra had once accused her of becoming.

It was a tenuous balance.

Thankfully, Grandfather seemed to have allowed the matter to rest, because he hadn't mentioned the journey to Halloway Park again.

That was *really* why Olivia was at Lord Shipton's tonight. She would much rather have gone to the theater with Amanda. But she didn't dare risk upsetting her grandfather by refusing to attend. Olivia *wanted* to please her grandfather, but she also didn't wish for another stern warning from Dr. Phipps. And it seemed a small thing, to attend the ball with him tonight. Doing so had made Grandfather enormously happy.

A resigned sound left her as she leaned closer to the wall, watching the dancers before her. There was a great deal of responsibility in being the last of the Halloways.

A prickling sensation lit across her skin. The touch of an unseen finger trailing down her spine in a lazy fashion while her attention lay focused on the dancing. Lifting her chin, Olivia saw absolutely no one paying the least attention to her. Grandfather had gone off to the card tables some time ago with one of his cronies, placing her in Peter's care. And then Peter, after nodding to someone he recognized in the crush, had deserted her under the auspices of bringing her a lemonade.

A tall, lean form, a head taller than most of the well-dressed gentlemen in attendance, flirted at the corner of one eye, flashing between the gaily dressed couples swirling about the ballroom floor. Dark hair shone with a hint of copper in the light of the chandeliers before winking away.

A rush of anticipation filled her, an unwarranted one. Georgina's cousin couldn't be *here*, at Lord Shipton's ball. How would he have even received an invitation? Shipton was old, nearer her grandfather's age, and Cooke a brash American man of business with a questionable reputation. Olivia couldn't imagine under what circumstances their paths would cross.

She turned her attention back to the dance floor.

The scent of pine and late winter frost floated into her nostrils not a moment later. The press of a fingertip, an actual one this time, trailed gently up the length of her back to the base of her neck. A delicate shiver caressed her skin.

“Miss Nelson.” The flattened vowels, more lovely to her ear than before, teased from just behind her right shoulder. “How wonderful to see you.”

Benjamin Cooke curled his larger form around hers, a protective gesture he’d made before, as if seeking to keep every other gentleman at the Shipton ball from coming near her. Hazel eyes, a perfect mélange of green, brown, and gold, mesmerized her. The forest at sunset. He was absolutely breathtaking in his formal evening clothes, the wild tangle of mahogany hair neatly brushed back and gleaming.

Olivia’s heart pounded softly in his direction.

“Mr. Cooke. What are you doing here among polite society?”

“You wound me, Miss Nelson.” He pressed a hand dramatically to his chest. “Is it because I’ve seen your naughty side? I assure you,” he purred along the curve of her ear, “I haven’t said a word. I like you all the better for it.”

Maintaining composure was a struggle with him looming over her. “I am not unduly concerned, Mr. Cooke. I’m positive our previous acquaintance will stay between the two of us. Compromising a young lady, no matter the circumstances, would result in placing both of us before a vicar.” Logically, Olivia knew that to be the case. Cooke had nothing to gain by admitting he’d taken liberties except an unwanted wife. He merely wished to torment her.

“Disastrous, don’t you think?” she added.

“Undoubtedly.” His broad shoulders rolled carelessly. “Marriage to a prim creature such as yourself, Miss Nelson, is the providence of gentlemen such as Buttercup. I only like corrupting the innocent, not wedding them.”

Olivia didn't care for his answer. On principle. Not disappointment.

"And as to why I am here tonight"—a charming grin lit his features—"I was invited. Not marched in on the arm of an elderly gentleman."

"You were?" she uttered in disbelief, ignoring his slur against her grandfather and the fact he must have been here and watching her for some time. "To Lord Shipton's ball?"

"Don't act so shocked." He waved a finger at her in admonishment. "It is true I'm not overfond of balls and such. Dancing isn't my favorite activity." He gave her a suggestive wink. "Shipton's card tables are mediocre at best, which won't help Lord Daring." The deep forest of his eyes roamed down her form clad in pink silk. "And the punch is *abysmal*. I asked for a glass of scotch from a passing servant and was scoffed at." Mock outrage clouded his handsome features. "Can you imagine?"

Olivia tightened her lips, trying not to laugh at his antics. "If Shipton's ball is so disagreeable," she countered, "why are you here?"

"Perhaps I'm following you about London, Miss Nelson. Which would make me," he said, hovering far too close, breath ruffling the curls around her ear, "slightly nefarious, don't you think?"

Her heart skipped a beat as she inhaled his scent. Olivia *did* think him nefarious. Dangerous. In all the most interesting ways.

"As I said, Lord Daring is playing whist. Badly. I can't believe he hasn't lost his entire fortune yet. Possibly there will be nothing left for Buttercup to inherit. I saw Buttercup, by the way, lingering over the refreshment table, attempting to hold up a lemonade. His spindly wrist was trembling from the weight of the glass."

"Mr. Thomlinson can well hold a lemonade."

"I suppose. A delectable young lady waylaid him before he could leave the safety of the refreshment table. They appeared

quite cozy, she and Buttercup. Don't expect him to arrive too soon. There's quite a crush in that direction."

"Stop referring to him as a wildflower," Olivia said, knowing it would do no good.

"No Latin this time? How disappointing. And he reminds me of a buttercup. Enormous, yellow head. Thin, tiny stem." Cooke flexed his big hands. "It's interesting you aren't concerned about the young lady I mentioned. Very telling. But I suppose you aren't the jealous sort." Cooke's fingers curled around her elbow. "Shall we dance?"

"But you just said you didn't dance."

"I never said I *didn't* dance, Miss Nelson. Only that it wasn't one of my favorite activities. A subtle difference. I'm making an exception for you."

That hum inside her started. "Why?"

"Oh, I think you know." Cooke spun her expertly about, palm splayed over her waist, the heat of him burning so fiercely through the silk, it might leave a print behind. Her hand disappeared into the safety of his larger one. There was an inherent sensuality in the way he moved while spinning her about, casually sliding his leg into her skirts.

"You're a very good dancer," she said, turning her chin up at him. "For someone who claims not to care for it."

"A requirement for events such as these. I'm highly skilled at a variety of things," came his cheeky reply. "Should I name them?"

His answer was merely an excuse for more improper innuendo, and Olivia refused to encourage his bad behavior. Cooke was endlessly charming when he chose to be.

"How *are* you here?" The idea that Shipton had invited Cooke or that they knew each other was too strange to contemplate.

Cooke's brows drew together as if he were confused. "I took a carriage, Miss Nelson. I'm not a heathen." He pulled

her closer, gaze dropping to linger over her modest neckline. “And as I said, I had an invitation.”

Olivia possessed small, less than spectacular, breasts. She was often disappointed in her ability to properly fill out a gown and grew self-conscious the longer his gaze lingered over her bosom.

Cooke’s tongue slid between his lips, deliberately, as if tasting something delicious. When his eyes raised to hers, the green had deepened to near black. His observance of her bosom and the look in his eyes was blatantly, unapologetically sexual.

A shaky breath blew from her lungs. “I never said you were a heathen, Mr. Cooke.” Warmth crept up her cheeks as her breasts tightened under his regard.

“I love the way you blush, Miss Nelson. As if you were reflecting a bed of roses. Or the first misty pink streaks of dawn. Not unlike the color of your gown.” He spun her about, taking the opportunity to whisper, “I deeply regret the lack of light at Elysium. Does the blush extend all the way—”

“Refrain from reminders of our past—*association* or I will leave you on the dance floor.”

“Very well, Miss Nelson. I’ll satisfy your curiosity. You want to know how I, uncouth American who sounds like a goose—” Cooke paused. “Or a gander, I suppose, is more correct. How could I *possibly* know the illustrious Lord Shipton and why I would be invited to this ball?”

“Yes.” It was incredibly difficult to look away from him. Cooke’s savage beauty drew the eye of nearly every woman in attendance.

“What do I receive in return if I tell you?” The green in his eyes deepened further.

“My astonishment, for one. I can’t fathom how you know Lord Shipton.”

“You *are* a snob, Miss Nelson.” His head tilted toward hers for a moment, long enough so that Olivia felt the flick of his tongue against her ear. “I adore that about you.”

A quaking sensation stole up between her thighs. She'd been in his company for less than a quarter-hour and already, Olivia's thoughts were veering in a very unladylike direction.

"You may find this hard to believe, but I *am* received everywhere in New York, though not always with pleasure," he continued.

"Because Jacob Rutherford is your uncle."

He flashed her a smile. "He's not received with pleasure either. Those old Dutch families don't like it when you invade their territory. Helps if you marry into one, as Jacob did. And wealth, an obscene amount of it, is necessary to smooth things over. In that respect, London isn't so different from New York."

"That still doesn't explain how you know Lord Shipton." He was deliberately evading the question.

"Shipton owns an estate which he can, sadly, no longer afford to keep." The words were casual. Measured. "Inherited from a grandmother, I don't recall whether maternal or paternal, though it doesn't matter. Filled to the brim with relics of an earlier, more fruitful time in Lord Shipton's life. The Barrington hotel, Leo's pride and joy, will be a grand destination for those visiting New York. It needs to be furnished in a luxurious, well-appointed manner. Opulent enough to attract titles and the like if they find themselves in my fair city. Those visits, in turn, enhance the reputation of The Barrington. Lord Shipton and I came to a mutual understanding once I reminded him of certain unavoidable facts."

Olivia missed a step, and Mr. Cooke deftly caught her, sending another shock of sensation along her limbs. This entire dance, held in Cooke's arms, had her body aching in the most pleasurable way.

"What sort of unavoidable facts?" she asked.

"His lack of funds, for one." Spinning her sharply, he took the opportunity to brush his thigh into her skirts.

“Lord Shipton is in debt?” Olivia glanced around the room at the lavish display of the Shipton fortune filling the ballroom. Vases dotted the room, filled with freshly cut roses, and garlands hung from every corner. The cost of those alone would be staggering. It meant nothing, of course. Shipton could be a beggar and might still entertain at such a level.

“Not anymore,” Cooke assured her. “I restored his wealth by purchasing furnishings and the like from his grandmother’s estate which he might have otherwise been forced to auction off. Very charitable of me, I should add.”

Olivia doubted charity had anything to do with it.

“We met over a game of cards. He isn’t good at whist. Or vingt-et-un. Come to think of it, Shipton should avoid card games in general.”

Cooke wanted expensive, lavish furnishings, the sort that visitors from England would appreciate if they came to New York. Probably as a favor to Leo. No one would sell the contents of their grandmother’s estate unless it became necessary.

“Shall we take some air?”

Olivia was unsurprised to see he’d danced her to the very edge of the room where the doors to the gardens stood open. “You deliberately beggared him in a card game so that he would be forced to sell you the contents of the estate.”

“You make me sound quite callous, Miss Nelson. I am not. No one forced Shipton to play cards with me, vulgar American that I am. He even boasted to his friends that he would best me. If he misses the writing desk where his grandmother once sat, Shipton can visit it at The Barrington.”

Leo held the same philosophy. Gentlemen were going to gamble and bankrupt themselves, so why shouldn’t they do so at Elysium? He had no sympathy for those whose markers were locked away in his office.

“You don’t even feel a bit of guilt?” she asked.

“Should I?”

Cooke led her across the terrace where a half-dozen couples circled about, escaping the warmth of the ballroom. Down a set of steps, three gentlemen stood at the edge of the gardens enjoying a cheroot. There was no moon, the night cloudy and the stars dim. The lamps placed around the terrace did little to dispel the darkness. It was a perfect evening for stolen kisses.

“I don’t suppose you should,” Olivia answered.

“I’m not a gentleman, Miss Nelson. Don’t make the mistake of thinking I am.”

He paused at a darkened corner some distance from the other guests lingering about the terrace. They were still within sight of the windows and to a casual observer, she and Cooke were merely another couple out taking the air like so many others.

Cooke gazed out over the garden for a moment before finally turning back to her. “I saw you flick a bit of carrot at Lady Phaedra during dinner,” he said. “Your aim was quite impressive.”

Olivia was taken aback by his comment. She’d expected something flirtatious or improper, not a compliment on how far she could toss a vegetable. “I fear you are mistaken,” she replied crisply. “Childish behavior isn’t something in which I indulge.”

The morsel had been a bit of potato, *not* carrot. And her aim had been off. She’d hit Phaedra in the neck instead of the corner of the eye.

“You have me confused, Mr. Cooke, with someone who lacks decorum. Phaedra, perhaps. Surely you noticed her deficits during the lengthy dinner conversation you had with her.”

“We spoke of her bloodthirsty nature.” A featherlight touch traced the curve of Olivia’s cheek and down her jaw. “And I confuse *you*,” he whispered, “with no one else.” The rich sound of him echoed about her ears in the quiet. “It is an impossibility.”

Olivia's toes curled in her slippers from those intimate words. She looked up at his rough, beautiful features, wishing with all her heart the intense attraction she felt for him would disappear. There was a darkness inside Mr. Cooke, a threat one couldn't detect behind the mischievous smile and teasing words. She was certain Lord Shipton had not.

Knuckles brushed along her collarbone, teasing at the blood beneath the delicate skin. "Why do you suppose, Miss Nelson, you allowed me to kiss you at Elysium? Among other things?"

Her pulse fluttered in her throat. "Stupidity. Which I regret more each moment," she lied, looking down at her hands to avoid his eyes.

Olivia didn't regret what had transpired with Cooke. That was the problem. "I—there are expectations of me, Mr. Cooke. And I suppose I needed a moment to be free of them. I doubt you would understand."

Olivia gripped the stone balustrade before her and looked out over the garden.

"I do understand. We are alike in some ways, Miss Nelson."

A quiet snort of disbelief left her. "I find that unlikely."

"I know what it is to be an orphan." His voice was gentle. "Not knowing exactly where you belong because you don't have the anchor of parents or siblings. Lord Daring is your grandfather. Your only blood relation. I think it only natural that you want to please him, even if it includes wedding his heir. Family often brings about obligation, doesn't it?"

"I have the most peculiar conversations with you, Mr. Cooke."

He was intuitive in the way that Phaedra was, she realized. And surprisingly easy to converse with when he wished to be. Olivia had the sense Cooke would take her fears, if she only asked, and make them vanish as if they'd never existed.

"I —always wanted to know my mother. She died soon after my birth. Lady Millicent was quite a proper lady.

Renowned for her beauty and manner.” A smile tilted her lips. “I—I’m the last of her. The last of her family, Mr. Cooke. I suppose I feel a responsibility.” Olivia shook her head, realizing how ridiculous she sounded. “You were raised by your uncle, so you at least have some connection, whereas I have never had one until now. Your mother—”

“She wasn’t well,” Cooke said, stopping her. “Not at all. Raved quite a bit. Mad, I think.” One large hand, warm and comforting, covered Olivia’s. “I didn’t really know the woman who sent me off to Lafayette Square in search of Jacob Rutherford with only a note pinned to my coat.” The side of his mouth tilted. “I imagine George has told you the entire tragic tale. After all, it is no great secret.”

“I’m sorry.” How horrible to have one’s own mother so insane, so mad, that you didn’t recognize her anymore. Without thinking, she slid one of her fingers between his.

“Don’t be. It brought me to Jacob. And here. To you.” His long fingers tightened over hers. “Though I don’t care for London at all. Just some of what it contains.” Leaning over, he brushed his mouth against hers before Olivia could stop him.

It was barely a kiss.

“I thought we agreed,” she whispered, “there would be no further taking of liberties, Mr. Cooke.” The press of his lips throbbed down her body. She had to stifle the inclination to wrap her arms around his neck and pull his mouth to hers.

“I don’t recall the discussion.” The words landed softly. “And I never would have agreed.”

“It was implied,” Olivia bit out, the warmth of his hand still seeping into hers. “You—that is to say, we—” Her lashes lowered to brush her cheeks.

“Closing your eyes won’t make me disappear, Miss Nelson. I doubt anything will, if I’m being honest. A necessity, I fear, with you. Honesty.”

“But you can’t—that is to say you only just told me you understood how—my duty to my family—how it matters,” she stuttered. “You cannot—”

“I find your lack of clarity when you speak to me, Miss Nelson, to be alarming. You can barely finish a sentence. How am I to take proper direction?” he teased.

“You’re quite terrible, Mr. Cooke.” She was on the verge of embarrassing herself. He had disarmed her. *Again*. Muddled her thoughts until only confusion reigned. Olivia took two steps back from Cooke, pulling her fingers from his.

He made a disappointed sound.

“Miss Nelson. Are you out here?”

Olivia jolted at Peter’s voice. As of late, he possessed impeccable timing.

“The Buttercup beckons, Miss Nelson. Don’t worry. I’ll disappear. For now.”

Cooke turned and jogged down the stone steps, melting into the blackness of the garden. She could no longer see him, but Olivia could sense him watching her.

“Miss Nelson,” Peter said from behind her. “Was that Mr. Cooke?”

“Mr. Cooke?” Olivia smoothed her skirts in an attempt to compose herself, the feel of his mouth still tingling on her lips. “Here? You must be mistaken, Peter. I can’t imagine how he would garner an invitation.”

A faint chuckle came from the depths of the garden.

“I grew warm waiting for you to return.” She took Peter’s arm and started in the direction of the ballroom. “It’s dreadfully hot inside. I needed some air.” Olivia took in the worry on his features. “What is it?”

But she knew. *Felt* it.

“It’s Lord Daring, Miss Nelson. He was standing by the windows, perhaps looking for you and he—I fear he has collapsed. We must leave. Immediately.”

No more than a quarter of an hour ago, a stricken Olivia had rushed into the ballroom to find two of Lord Shipton's footmen carrying a barely conscious Lord Daring to his waiting carriage. Her grandfather had firmly refused the offer to be taken upstairs to one of Shipton's guestrooms. Olivia had batted away tears as she'd hurried after the footmen.

Once inside the carriage, Olivia cradled her grandfather against her side for the short ride back to his home. His chest barely rose and fell beneath her hand while his mouth opened and closed with no sound.

"I thought he was playing cards." Olivia stroked her grandfather's cheek. "Or was with you, Peter."

"I—was detained at the refreshment table. While fetching your lemonade. Quite a crush inside." He looked out the window, not meeting her eye.

The Buttercup was waylaid by a delectable young lady.

Olivia heard the lie in Peter's words and found she didn't care if his head had been turned by a pretty girl. She only cared that her grandfather had been alone, probably looking for her.

"I suppose I lost track of the time," he continued. "I had just started back into the ballroom with your lemonade when I noticed Lord Daring at the window, staring out into the gardens. He shook his head and mumbled something, as if he

were agitated, but I wasn't close enough to hear what he said." Peter glanced at her with tired eyes. "Before I'd taken two steps in his direction, Daring dropped his cane and fell to the floor. I called for assistance and had one of Shipton's footmen find Dr. Phipps to meet us at Lord Daring's. That is when I saw you on the terrace."

A tiny wail left her grandfather. There was a grayish cast to his features. His breathing was shallow. Labored.

Panic choked her. *If Grandfather*—pain hit the center of her chest. He must have seen her on the terrace. Watched as Mr. Cooke took her hand. Probably started to feel the first signs of collapse as Cooke pressed his lips to hers.

This is all my fault.

Lady Millicent had perished bringing Olivia into the world. Lady Daring had died soon after from the combined shock of losing Millicent and her granddaughter. If Grandfather died—

A muffled sob escaped her.

I'll be to blame for single-handedly wiping out my entire family.

Possibly overly dramatic of her, but it felt true. Real. Her fingers stroked Grandfather's hair, shifting it away from his forehead. How could she have been so selfish?

"Olivia," Peter said quietly from across the carriage. "I'm sure the excitement of the ball, seeing so many old friends, not to mention playing cards—"

But she knew differently. It had been the sight of Mr. Cooke and Olivia, *together*. Did her grandfather know who Cooke was? Or had he merely seen his granddaughter allowing a nameless gentleman to steal a kiss?

Guilt made her dizzy. Nauseated.

The carriage finally came to a halt just outside Lord Daring's home. Peter jumped out, shouting orders at the butler, Morris, and two footmen, yelling for Dr. Phipps.

“Olivia.” The papery thin voice was so quiet she barely heard him. “I love you dearly.”

“I know.” She wiped away a tear. “I love you too. Don’t try to talk. Dr. Phipps is coming.” She could see her grandfather’s physician marching quickly down the front steps and toward the carriage.

“You were out on the terrace in a gentleman’s company.”

“No,” she lied smoothly. “I merely went out for some air. I may have spoken to a gentleman in passing, but I don’t even know his name. Don’t try to talk.” Olivia pulled forth every bit of reserve she possessed to keep her voice even.

This is my fault.

“You are the *last* of the Halloways. All I have left of my Millicent. I fear I won’t be here to protect you. I—you must wed Peter. *Please*,” he begged, eyes closing once more. “I can’t leave this world without knowing that both you and Halloway Park are in good hands.”

The guilt twisted like a snake in her gut. “Please don’t die.” Tears flowed down her cheeks.

“Promise me, Olivia,” he said, his voice growing flinty and hard despite his condition. “I want you protected. Cared for. I want you at Halloway Park.” Fingers, desperate and claw-like, curled around hers. “*Give me your word.*”

Another sob came from between her lips. She had a responsibility to her family. Her grandfather. Olivia could no longer afford to entertain thoughts of recklessness and a handsome man with eyes like the deepest part of the forest. Not when measured against her duty to ensure the Halloway family didn’t wink out of existence. Cooke, by his own admission tonight, had no desire to wed her. Bed her, yes. But nothing more.

There really was no other decision Olivia could make.

“I will. I’ll wed Peter.” She kissed his forehead. “I promise.”

Olivia picked up a handful of dirt, packing it lightly around the roots of the bougainvillea. A difficult name to pronounce.

Bougainvillea.

She'd had to practice saying it. Granby, ever the horticulture enthusiast, had gifted the bougainvillea to Olivia. Sent to her from his estate, by special messenger. Olivia thought it terribly thoughtful of Granby. Hopefully, she could thank him in person one day soon.

But Olivia doubted she would see Romy or her austere but unfailingly kind duke for some time. Now that Romy was with child, Granby wouldn't allow his wife to venture to London. It was unlikely he would allow her to make the trip to Halloway Park when Olivia wed Peter Thomlinson.

Olivia's trowel hovered in the air above the clay pot. Sunlight streamed through the paned glass of the greenhouse, streaking across the small wooden table where she worked. This greenhouse was a much tinier affair than the structure at Cherry Hill, the Duke of Averell's estate. Nor was it attached to the main house but set back further, almost to the stone fence surrounding the duke's London home. Still, this greenhouse and the duke's gardens were Olivia's sanctuary, her refuge from the world. Here, she potted and planned, designing magnificent gardens on paper before transferring her thoughts to the world outside. She would spend entire days

here, talking to her seedlings or sitting just outside, sketching in her notebook.

Debating her future.

Olivia hadn't yet told anyone that she planned to wed Peter Thomlinson, not even Peter himself. It seemed absurd to inform him of her acceptance when he hadn't, well, *proposed*. But possibly Peter was waiting until she arrived at Halloway Park because the assumption that they would wed was inescapable. And Olivia had promised her grandfather. Sworn to it.

In the week since Grandfather's terrifying collapse at Lord Shipton's ball, Olivia had visited him daily, sometimes staying the night so she could be by his side. He'd recovered rather quickly from his collapse thanks to the excellent care of Dr. Phipps. So well, in fact, he'd left two days ago with Peter for Halloway Park without further insisting Olivia accompany him, something she had been prepared to do. But Grandfather had only patted her hand, kissed her cheek, and stated that his quick recovery was due in no small part to her agreement to wed Peter. The knowledge eased his mind, knowing both she and Halloway Park would be cared for.

She turned the pot before her, observing the bougainvillea from each side to make sure her gift from Granby was properly settled. When Olivia had first expressed an interest in attempting to grow bougainvillea in London, Granby hadn't hesitated in sending her a plant along with a specific set of instructions. He'd fallen in love with bougainvillea during his time in Italy, where the thorny vine with its papery, bright blooms crawled over every stone. The plant, he'd instructed Olivia, must be properly potted and kept inside or in a greenhouse during the colder months. It would never survive outside in the winter or in the constant moisture which dripped out of the sky in London. Bougainvillea required plenty of sunlight. Drier soil.

"Make it thirsty," Granby told her. "Train it on a trellis to grow. Don't be afraid to tie it into the shape you wish."

The dream she'd had last night immediately filled her mind. A hazy blur of silk restraints and Benjamin Cooke.

"Bollocks." Olivia didn't even bother to chastise herself for the curse. She was rapidly losing track of how often she expressed the random vulgarity. But that was the least of her concerns at the moment.

Her dream had had Olivia once more on that blasted bed at Elysium. Tied, like the bougainvillea, except with bits of silk at her wrists. She watched in the mirror above her as a fully clothed Cooke, tangles of mahogany hair shadowing his features, had kissed his way down her naked body, stopping only to stroke his fingers along her sex.

The trowel dropped from her suddenly unsteady fingers. Pulling her gloves tighter, Olivia picked the tool back up.

She'd awoken throbbing and frustrated in the wee hours of the morning. Wet and slick between her thighs.

"I am doing my duty." There was no one to hear her but the neat rows of lavender she had recently planted. The absolute guilt and terror she'd felt when her grandfather had collapsed at Lord Shipton's ball could not be simply waved away. Olivia couldn't be the cause of more tragedy in the Hallaway family. She would not shirk her responsibility. She would live up to the expectations set for her. Marry Peter. Their children would be raised at Hallaway Park. Her eldest son would inherit Grandfather's title.

All of that was far more important than the fleeting passion brought to her by Benjamin Cooke.

Olivia pressed the lower half of her body against the potting bench.

Except her attraction to him was far more complex. She fervently wished the longing for Cooke was merely physical, that her desire for him was stunted by the darker aspects of his character. Instead, Olivia felt a continuous, unrelenting pull in his direction.

Peter would make a wonderful husband. Respectful. Dutiful.

Possibly a trifle dull.

A terribly unkind thought and one Peter didn't deserve.

She brushed the dirt from the pot with one finger, dreading the announcement of her impending marriage. Phaedra was certain to say something terrible. Tony and Leo would be accepting, but not overjoyed. Amanda was probably expecting the betrothal and would greet the news with resignation.

Olivia wiped viciously at the remainder of the dirt along the rim of the pot.

She'd decided not to make an announcement of her plans until the Averell coach was sitting outside Halloway Park. Cowardly, to be sure, but Olivia had no desire to endure the trip to her grandfather's estate while Phaedra listed all the reasons why Olivia shouldn't wed Peter. The Averell coach, though luxuriously appointed, wasn't overly large. There would be no escape. Letters would be sent to the rest of the family written in Olivia's own hand with an apology.

She stared down at her dirt-stained gloves, wishing again that she had never accompanied Phaedra to Elysium that night. There would have been no improper interlude with Cooke, and he wouldn't now be a large pebble tossed into the calm pool of Olivia's life. She had a great deal of anger toward him for that, the disruption of her life.

Wedding Peter would have made her *happy*.

"There." Olivia patted a bit of dirt around the bougainvillea. "You'll be quite content here. I promise. There's a good boy." Olivia had decided, early on, that the plant was male, for some reason, though the blooms it sported were a shocking pink. "You're a bit of a dandy, aren't you? And you require a proper name." She liked to name her plants, at least some of them. Perhaps—

"If I'm a good boy, will you pat me softly as well?" The question, in that rich, whisky-laced voice, sent a shiver against her skin despite the steamy warmth of the greenhouse. "I'd prefer you do so without those filthy gloves. I'm told you're overly fond of manure."

Was there no escape from him? She'd only just resolved to

"Mr. Cooke." Olivia turned to find him standing at the entrance to the greenhouse holding a potted orchid in one hand. The breath in her lungs halted at the sight of him, shining like some *bloody* beacon.

Cursing!

"What an unexpected surprise," she said, somehow mustering a calm tone.

"Isn't it?" He gave her a sideways glance. "I've brought you something, Miss Nelson." He held up the orchid. "I feel as if I might have upset you when we saw each other at Lord Shipton's, and thought I should make an apology." He raked a hand through the thick mass of brandy-colored hair, making the ends stand up. It did nothing but increase his appeal.

"You didn't distress me, Mr. Cooke, with your talk of blackmail and your ruthless pursuit of furniture." Grandfather's collapse and her subsequent promise had done that.

The sunlight brought out the beautiful bits of copper in his hair as he tilted his chin at the orchid. A boyish, mischievous grin was bestowed upon her, making Cooke seem merely charming and nothing else.

A dangerous miscalculation for anyone to make. Even Olivia.

"I was told this was an orchid," he said, still grinning at her.

"I suspect you know very well what it is."

"Do I look the sort of gentleman who can identify flowers?"

Indeed, he did not. He could identify prey like Lord Shipton, perhaps. Weaponry, possibly, though she'd yet to see him brandish so much as a stick at anyone.

"At first," he continued, "I thought I was merely being sold a weed of sorts, native to England. How would I know the

difference, after all? But I am glad I haven't been taken advantage of."

"I doubt that ever happens, Mr. Cooke." Olivia raised a brow. "Someone taking advantage of you." *Goodness* but he was breathtaking, standing before her, impeccably dressed in a coat the color of chocolate, holding out an orchid. Like a prince in a fairy tale.

"Never. Would you care to be the first?" He gave the orchid a little shake, causing the pale white petals to tremble. The plant looked ridiculously small and delicate in his big hands. "Come, take your gift."

Olivia breathed in, feeling that slow, insidious pull in his direction. It was impossible to ignore. Carefully, she reached for the orchid, shivering as the warmth of his fingers brushed against hers.

"I'm not much of a plant person, as I've said." The breadth of his shoulders rippled in a careless shrug. "But you enjoy shrubs and flowers. Worms probably. Butterflies and ladybugs." His gaze lingered over her mouth, the heat dancing in his eyes.

Olivia nearly dropped the orchid. Honestly, the propensity for Mr. Cooke to cause her to toss off every bit of sense she possessed was alarming.

"We barely know each other, Mr. Cooke." She clutched the poor orchid to her chest for protection, every bit of resolve falling away at his calculated onslaught of plant-giving and improper flirtation. "You've no idea what I like."

"I can hazard a guess. Or two." There was a wicked gleam in his eyes. "I know you better than you think."

Olivia declined to answer because he was correct, as distressing as that was to her. "Thank you for the orchid. But this gift—"

"You would normally not accept, especially from me, but since it is a plant, one that would likely die of neglect if you returned it, you'll accept the orchid, Miss Nelson." The green in his eyes darkened sharply, blending in with the rows of

plants behind him, as if he were part of some savage primeval forest and not simply standing in her greenhouse.

“Mr. Cooke—”

“Must we stand on formality? I beg you, call me Ben. I’ve had my fingers inside you. I think that constitutes using our given names, don’t you, Olivia?”

She coughed at his words, nearly dropping the orchid once more. A gentle flutter took up residence between her thighs as he watched her. “Crude talk will not induce me to engage in further conversation.”

“What *will* it induce you to do?” He held up his hands before she could answer. “I feel that’s a fair question.” Again, that flash of a mischievous grin. So disarming on a man like Cooke. Doubtless, he used it to great advantage. He’d probably grinned the entire time he was begging Shipton or any number of gentlemen who’d had the misfortune to do business with him.

“Mr. Cooke—”

“Ben,” he corrected. “I didn’t come here to annoy you, Olivia. Only to bring you the orchid.”

She cocked her head. “How did you come to be here, *Ben*?” It was unlikely Pith or one of the footmen would have guided him into the gardens or allowed him to pay a call on Olivia.

“You are overly concerned with how I arrive at various destinations. I came in through the back gate. The one that opens to the park.”

She narrowed her eyes. “The gate is locked. A footman stands guard to ensure unwanted guests don’t wander into the duke’s garden,” Olivia said pointedly.

“Locked and guarded by a footman?” He gave her a confused look.

Intentionally vague, with a pronounced habit of answering a direct question with another question. An annoying trait, though not as bad as some of the others Cooke probably had.

“I do appreciate the orchid. It’s lovely. Now, if you will excuse me.” She couldn’t have him invading the serenity of her greenhouse with his unsettling presence. Her neat rows of pots and dirt were now filled with innuendo and the scent of pine. And anyone could come upon them. A footman. A maid. God forbid, Phaedra.

She tilted her chin in the direction of the door. “Good day.”

Cooke ignored her polite hint to leave. “I was coming back from a business appointment—”

“I don’t think I asked for a recitation of your day,” Olivia interrupted.

“A meeting, concerning railways. Not usually something I’m overly interested in, since you’re curious.” He looked up at the top of the greenhouse, as if studying the construct before returning to her.

“I’m not. I haven’t expressed a bit of interest in what you were doing prior to appearing here. Uninvited.” The orchid quivered in her hand.

“At any rate, there I was, strolling along,” he continued, ignoring her interruption, “and I found myself in front of a flower vendor. Dozens of blooms, which smelled marvelous, by the way. You would probably know the names of all of them. In Latin. The sight of all those flowers compelled me to lavish some sort of greenery on *you*.”

Another shiver ran along her skin. Pure pleasure at the knowledge that Cooke had been thinking of *her* as he strolled about London, ruthlessly pillaging titled gentlemen of their fortunes and furniture.

“For some reason, I didn’t think you’d appreciate cut flowers as much as an actual living plant. A bouquet fades so quickly, doesn’t it? The orchid . . .” His gaze drew over her lazily, as if relieving Olivia of every scrap of clothing. “It reminded me of you.”

“You said you thought the orchid originally a weed,” she said, trying to remain steady under such heated regard. “So, in essence, *I* remind you of a weed.”

A thick wave of mahogany hair fell over one cheek and he pushed it aside. “No, you are *definitely* an orchid. Slender. Delicate. Fragile.” He paused. “Beautiful.”

Another burst of pleasure shot through her, this one across her chest.

“If I were so fragile, I would have fainted dead away when you strolled into the Duke of Averell’s dining room. Topped right from my chair. Don’t think I didn’t consider doing so.”

“Buttercup wouldn’t have had the strength to catch you. But I would have come to your rescue.” The words held a ring of truth.

Olivia grasped the orchid tighter. It felt as if bits of her were peeling off to float in his direction.

“Are you really going to wed Thomlinson?”

Olivia wobbled slightly at the question, one that he had no right to ask. She wasn’t even sure why it mattered to him. Once Georgina gave birth, Cooke would return to New York and have no reason to venture to London again.

“The gift of an orchid,” she said in a quiet tone, “does not entitle you—”

“No, but holding you in my arms as you climax for the first time does.” Cooke moved closer. “Don’t you think?”

A burst of heat peppered her cheeks. How did one answer such a question? All her studious devotion to manners and decorum hadn’t prepared Olivia for Benjamin Cooke.

“Has he ever brought you an orchid?” His voice grew rough. “Or *any* plant? Buttercup, I mean.”

Peter had never brought her a plant. Only cut flowers, artfully arranged and wrapped in paper. She’d tactfully explained to him there was more enjoyment in creating her own arrangements and she would much prefer a plant she could nurture in her garden.

“He hasn’t, has he?”

No. Peter still brought her cut flowers, which she always accepted without a word of complaint. Cooke, however, had brought her a *living* plant, correctly assuming she would better welcome such a gift. And he was right, *damn* him. He also knew that in tending the orchid, Olivia would be forced to think of him.

“Mr. Cooke—”

“Ben.” He wiggled the fingers of one hand. “Remember?”

Heat crawled up her cheeks once more at the not-so-subtle reminder.

“Fine. *Ben*. I must once more bid you good day.” She gave him her back, set down the orchid on the table, and returned to the recently potted bougainvillea.

“Oliver,” he said softly from behind her. “The orchid’s name.”

Cooke had been watching her work in the greenhouse for some time before he announced himself if he’d heard her speaking to the bougainvillea. A trifle embarrassing to be caught talking to a potted plant.

“Oliver the orchid? Suitable, I suppose.”

“Like your betrothal to Thomlinson.”

“You had no right to invade my privacy without announcing yourself.” Olivia’s fingers tightened on the wood of the table. She thought of tossing the recently planted bougainvillea at his arrogant head but decided the bougainvillea hadn’t done anything to merit such treatment. Composing herself, she turned, surprised to see Cooke strolling around the greenhouse, looking at the neatly planted lavender.

“I have a deep affection for Mr. Thomlinson.”

“No, you don’t. You didn’t even mind him wandering off with Miss Armwood.”

Olivia winced. She hadn’t suffered a moment of jealousy at Peter’s abandonment during Shipton’s ball. Lured out to the

terrace by this man, she hadn't given Peter a second thought. Then Grandfather—

“I fail to see why any of this has a thing to do with you.” Her voice raised an octave.

Cooke glanced up from his examination of one of the lavender plants. “You do.” There was a solemn look in his eyes. “I don't like it either, Olivia.”

“Mr. Cooke, you should go.”

“*Ben*. Can we at least agree that Thomlinson's head is far too large for his body?”

Had she not been so aware of Cooke and all his maleness stalking around her greenhouse, Olivia might have laughed out loud.

“I don't think that has any bearing on a gentleman's suitability. Or whether I hold him in high esteem.” She had never considered Peter's head to be overly large. Now it would be all Olivia looked at the next time she saw him.

“Do you wish to have children with enormous heads, Olivia?” He made his way over to her, his big body curving around hers, as if he would protect her from the rest of the world. The gesture had her heart beating painfully within the confines of her chest.

The knuckles of his hand brushed gently along her jaw.

“I must insist you leave,” she sputtered as her defenses shattered beneath his touch. She raised a finger, alarmed to see her hand trembling. “Now.”

The green of his eyes darkened to emerald, blotting out the brown and gold. He leaned closer, the tip of his nose brushing along the curve of her ear.

“I miss the scent of jasmine. Lavender doesn't suit you, Olivia.”

Her back arched in his direction, her resistance caving to the madness that possessed her whenever he was near.

A sigh of pleasure left her as Cooke's mouth claimed hers.

I had such good intentions.

Ben had promised himself, *repeatedly*, as he picked the lock of the Duke of Averell's gate to enter the gardens, that he would *not* touch Olivia. The only purpose of breaking into the duke's garden was to present Olivia with an orchid and perhaps be in her company. The moment he'd spied the slender, delicate bloom, he'd thought of Olivia.

The lock possessed not the least challenge. Ancient and rusted, it wouldn't keep anyone out, especially Ben. And Averell should sack the footman standing guard. Ben had found him asleep against the wall and decided not to wake him.

The sight of *his* beautiful orchid, covered in bits of dirt, wielding a trowel, and talking to herself had nearly undone him. One of his favorite fantasies about Olivia involved finding her gardening and divesting her of her clothes. Once naked, he would make love to her amid all the greenery.

He knew, somewhere in the space where his heart was rumored to reside, that he couldn't *have* Olivia. But that knowledge didn't stop Ben from wanting her. It was Olivia proclaiming affection for Buttercup and the knowledge that one day Ben would have to live knowing Thomlinson was her husband that had prompted him to behave badly.

A groan left Ben as Olivia's lips parted beneath his without a whimper of protest, her soft form fusing to his, like one half seeking the other, unable to be parted a moment longer. Her

small hands fisted the fabric of Ben's coat, dusting the buttons with dirt and probably bits of manure from her gloves.

He didn't care.

Ben's hand reached down to cup her face before his fingers sunk into the silky depths of her hair as she tilted her chin and kissed him back. Small perfect breasts pushed erotically against his chest as Olivia tugged at his coat, trying to pull him closer. His tongue teased along hers, exploring her mouth. Delicious sounds erupted from inside her. Small teeth nipped at his bottom lip.

His hands moved down her shoulders to the curve of her waist. Grabbing Olivia by the hips, he lifted her, placing her on the wooden table. A pot toppled over, shards spilling across the floor.

Olivia made a small sound of satisfaction when Ben wedged himself between her thighs, moaning softly at the feel of his body pressed against her skirts.

This was more than lust. More than a physical longing that would be satisfied by bedding her. Ben knew that. Felt it. His teeth grazed along the edge of her neck, tasting the sweat and dirt on her skin.

She fell back against the wood of the bench, hips pushed up against his, teasing at the hardness of his cock.

His beautiful, reckless, *carnal* orchid.

"*This,*" Ben rasped against her throat, desperate for her, "is why you can't wed Thomlinson."

Olivia stilled immediately at the mention of Thomlinson. Her hands fell away, the dirt on her gardening gloves sprinkling the front of his coat. "Stop." She took a ragged breath, halting Ben's lips against her skin. "This instant." Kicking out at him with one foot, what sounded like a sob came from her. The gloved hands slapped at him until Ben stepped back.

"My God, what are you doing to me?" There was a stricken look in her eyes, which only moments ago had been

clouded with arousal. All he saw now was disgust. Horror. All directed at him.

“Olivia—” Ben heard the plea in his voice as he reached for her.

Olivia jerked violently away. “This is—not—I *am* wedding Mr. Peter Thomlinson.” She kicked out at him again.

“You *can't*,” he whispered.

“Why, Ben? Do you intend to offer for me?” She kicked him again, and he fell back further. “Don’t bother to answer. I think we both know what you would say.”

He sucked in a breath, dizzy with all the longing he felt for her.

“I suppose I am merely a trifle for you to sample while visiting London,” she hissed. “Another prim young lady you want to debauch because you have a *preference* for such things. You would destroy *my* life without a thought. All so you could bed me.”

Her foot shot out again, coming far too close to his straining cock.

“I was half-drunk on scotch at Elysium. You took advantage of my state. You are nothing more than a disreputable gentleman from New York—”

Ben’s own emotions roiled to the surface, already feeling the loss of her. “So now you allowed me to touch you at Elysium because you were foxed? I thought it was due to melancholia,” he snapped. “Make up your mind.”

Her cheeks turned a brilliant shade of red. “It doesn’t matter why it happened, *Mr. Cooke*. Only that it will not happen again. Mr. Thomlinson, who you take great enjoyment in mocking, would *never* take liberties with a young lady—”

“I doubt he’d even know how,” Ben snarled.

Her chest heaved. “I’m probably not even the only young lady you’ve compromised. Is this always part of the plan? A bit of amusement on the side while you conduct your *business*

of ruining whoever is unlucky enough to have something you want?”

“No, Olivia.”

“Well, you don’t get to have me, *Mr. Cooke*. But Peter Thomlinson does.”

Jesus. Pain sliced through him, the sort to which Ben thought himself immune.

“I’ve *never* regretted anything more in my life than *you*.” Olivia’s eyes fluttered closed as if she couldn’t stand to look at him another second, chest rising and falling in agitation.

Olivia had claws. Sharp ones. Barely visible beneath her gardening gloves. Every word she spoke was true. He was no gentleman. Disreputable was the kindest thing one could say when speaking of his character. Jacob Rutherford couldn’t even be blamed. Ben had been ruined long before he’d made his way to Lafayette Square on that winter day.

“I just wanted to bring you an orchid,” he said quietly, shocked at how quickly their passion for each other had devolved into something so ugly and sordid.

Ben’s nature was single-minded. Determined. Most would call him ruthless in his pursuit of what he wanted. But Olivia wasn’t some titled twit he was going to strip of his fortune. Or a rival shipping company Ben would put out of business so that he could then buy it for below value. She wasn’t the desk upon which Shipton’s grandmother once wrote out her correspondence.

“I’m sorry.” The words came out in a husky, pained whisper. “I didn’t mean—” Ben’s throat had grown too thick to speak.

It is only that I want you so much. And I shouldn’t have you. Can’t have you. And I don’t know what to do about it.

She placed a hand on her forehead, her eyes open. “I am departing London very soon and will be grateful if our paths do not cross again.” The clipped words flew out to cut and slice at him. Olivia looked anything but fragile now, with her

swollen lips and the flush across her ivory skin, as she defiantly dismissed him before he could ruin her life.

“Get out.” There were tears at the edge of her lashes, threatening to fall to her cheeks. “I don’t wish to see you again.” The plea was wrenched out of her.

Ben stepped back further, the heaviness in his chest refusing to abate as he took in the damage he’d wrought. The beautiful orchid he seemed intent on destroying.

“Good day, Miss Nelson,” he said formally, bowing in her direction.

Ben wished the panes of glass above his head would shatter, rain down on him, and pierce his heart. It would have been a blessing. One he didn’t deserve for causing Olivia so much pain.

“I doubt we’ll see each other again. I wish you and Mr. Thomlinson all the best.” The lie came out easily, as skillful as any he’d ever told. Turning sharply, he walked out of the greenhouse, not daring to look at Olivia again. She was correct about him, his intentions, and his character.

If he kept seeking her out, he *would* ruin her. Hurt her.

Making his way to the gate, Ben kicked at the sleeping footman, startling him awake before sliding through the gate and away from Olivia.

“Oh, there you are. I thought I might find you in the greenhouse talking to your plants. Or drifting in the gardens with your skirts floating about your ankles.”

Olivia looked up from the book she held, relieved, for once, to be interrupted. She’d read the same page several times, her mind not on Mrs. Bury’s *A Selection of Hexandrian Plants Belonging to the Natural Orders Amaryllidaceae and Liliaceae*. Her inattention was an insult to Mrs. Bury and lilies everywhere. And there would be no escaping into the refuge of her greenhouse. Not anymore. There was an orchid she couldn’t bear to look at and a bench where she’d nearly been ruined.

The ugliness of her parting with Ben had kept Olivia up most of the night. There was no sense of relief in having banished him from her life, only a gaping hole left by his absence. She berated herself for that, the longing for him. But Ben had nothing to offer Olivia but ruination, and she had a duty to both herself and her family.

“Oh,” Phaedra said, turning sideways to read the spine. “That looks exceedingly dull. You’re probably thrilled I found you.”

Olivia discreetly flicked a piece of the biscuit she was nibbling at into the folds of Phaedra’s skirts. “Just enjoying the quiet,” she said pointedly. “And my book.”

“You’d be better off with *Lord Thurston’s Revenge*.”

Olivia did like romantic novels very much, but not today. “Mrs. Bury has much notable advice on the planting of bulbs.”

Phaedra made a face. “Bulbs? The fencing scene in Lord Thurston is much more interesting.” A wistful sigh escaped her. “There is something about a duel—or brawling in general—I find terribly exciting.”

“You’d do better to study the planting of bulbs.” But Olivia smiled, already missing Phaedra. She was comforted by the fact that Cherry Hill, where Amanda and Phaedra would visit after leaving Olivia at Halloway Park, was fairly close to her grandfather’s estate. She could visit at any time.

Olivia would have her family close by *and* be far from London and Ben.

But it wouldn’t stop him from invading her dreams, which he did with regularity. Last night, Ben had stripped Olivia naked in a room full of orchids, trailing the end of one bloom over her nipples. She’d awoken with his name on her lips, shaken and damp.

“I’ve something to show you,” Phaedra said in a sly tone, disrupting Olivia’s scandalous thoughts.

Olivia really shouldn’t encourage Phaedra’s behavior, but she was in desperate need of something to distract her from thoughts of Benjamin Cooke. Mrs. Bury’s treatise on plant life in England hadn’t soothed her at all. If anything, it left her thinking of wicked uses for lilies.

We were so terribly, awfully, horrible to each other.

There was also her unease over the approaching visit to Halloway Park. Olivia was half-afraid Grandfather would greet her at the door with a vicar and Peter standing beside him.

“We’ve already been to Elysium.” Olivia cautiously set down her book. “I don’t think we should test our luck by returning a second time.”

“Oh, we aren’t going to Elysium. I promise. Though our destination might be perceived as equally scandalous.” Her voice lowered, glancing at Pith who hovered just outside the

door. "Come, Olivia. I've little time before I must surrender you to the dullness of your grandfather. Just look." She gestured at the side table. "You've been embroidering again." Phaedra cocked her head at the handkerchief Olivia had discarded earlier. "Terribly, I might add. I can't imagine even Thomlinson would approve. Is that supposed to be a flower of some sort?"

"It's Peter's initials." The embroidery *was* awful. "And I haven't yet accepted," Olivia said, determined not to admit to her agreement to wed Peter until she arrived at Halloway Park.

"So you keep saying, though I've little hope you'll disappoint Grandpapa," she trilled. "I shall remain hopeful that you'll come to your senses."

Olivia flicked one more bit of biscuit onto Phaedra's skirts. "Just because you don't agree doesn't mean I'm addled."

"I saw that." Phaedra raised a brow and shook out the sprigged muslin of her dress. "You've gotten lax. I never used to see you coming."

"I've no idea what you're speaking of."

Phaedra gave another shake of her skirts. "You once possessed a personality, Olivia. Now look at you. Wait, allow me to fetch a cat to place in your lap."

"Fine." Olivia set down her book. "But only because someone has to keep watch over you lest you create a scandal."

"Of course." Phaedra gave an indelicate snort. "You certainly won't enjoy yourself a whit. You rarely do. We'll have to take a hack," she whispered. "We can't let anyone know we've gone. Especially Pith."

Poor Pith. The butler's duties as of late consisted mainly of keeping tabs on Phaedra. Olivia was sure he hadn't always had so much gray in his hair.

"We'll say," Phaedra mused with a tilt of her head, "that we're going to walk in the park. A lengthy stroll because you must observe some sort of plant that is growing."

“I’ll say I wish to admire the cattails.”

Phaedra waved her hand. “It doesn’t matter. I doubt anyone will ask. Once we leave through the back gate, we’ll go through the park and hail a hack at the corner.”

Olivia’s heart thumped again, a sign of her eagerness to be off and leave her disruptive thoughts aside. “Right.” She stood and made her way to the door.

“If we’re going for a walk, Olivia, make sure and wear your half-boots. There’s some mud around the pond,” Phaedra announced loudly, for the benefit of Pith and anyone else who might be listening.

“I’ll just run upstairs to change,” Olivia said, breezing past the butler who eyed Phaedra with no small amount of suspicion. “I won’t be a moment. Don’t leave without me.”

Olivia looked out the window of the hired hack barely an hour later. The longer they were in the vehicle, the seedier the neighborhood became. She hadn't paid the least attention to the direction the driver had taken, nor had she overheard Phaedra's whispered instructions to him. The street they rolled down now was narrow and pitted. Several of the buildings they passed leaned dangerously to the side, perhaps mere moments from collapse. Most looked uninhabitable. Refuse sat in piles outside an alley. A man, obviously foxed and waving about a bottle in one hand, stumbled into the middle of the street. He stopped in front of the hack and made a rather crude gesture.

The driver cursed, threatening to run the man over.

Olivia drew back from the window.

Dear God, we'll be lucky if we aren't set upon by thieves.

"Exactly where are we going?" she asked Phaedra, who had stayed silent concerning their destination since settling herself inside the hack, the interior of which smelled of horse and something unpleasant. Olivia didn't care to guess what.

"Hagerty's."

"Hagerty's? The boxing establishment? The one Torrington frequents?" Anticipation bubbled up inside Olivia along with a great deal of trepidation. This was *far* worse than sneaking into Elysium where, at the very least, they had some protection in the form of Peckham. Her fingers clutched the

edge of the window as a group of filthy children ran alongside the hack.

I should tell the driver to take us back. Immediately.

“Yes.” Phaedra gave her a smug smile. “And if we see Torrington, don’t tell Rosalind. You know how she worries. I want to explain to her that if he were terrible at fisticuffs, Torrington wouldn’t sport such a perfect nose. He’s very good.”

“You’ve seen Torrington box?” Olivia was aghast.

“Yes. More than once. Did you notice during dinner a few weeks ago that Mr. Cooke’s nose has a bump in it? Barely noticeable, but there, nonetheless.”

“Mr. Cooke? Georgina’s cousin?” Olivia decided the best way to nip any of Phaedra’s suspicions was to pretend ignorance.

“I wasn’t aware there was another,” Phaedra replied. “I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“What does Mr. Cooke have to do with anything?”

Phaedra shrugged. “It was merely an observation, Olivia. Cooke has the appearance of a fighter. Someone who has used his fists. I’m equally certain he’s versed in the use of a knife.”

“You observed all this in the short time you spoke to him? How would you know if he carries a knife?”

“I was seated next to him at dinner. When he adjusted his coat, I saw the hilt of a knife in the pocket. I meant to ask him, but it was rather rude to do so over dinner. I’ve read that one can learn to throw knives. It is a skill I would like to acquire.”

The last thing London or anyone else needed was Phaedra brandishing a knife as she went about her day. “I feel certain the rapier you use to challenge the footmen is sufficient.” Olivia gazed out the window at the utter desolation of their surroundings. “I think we should go back. The neighborhood doesn’t appear safe.”

“Oh, it isn’t. But no one will bother us at Hagerty’s.” She nodded to the dilapidated building outside as the hack rolled to

a stop. “We’re here. Isn’t it marvelous?”

Marvelous wasn’t the word Olivia would have used. She would have said squalid. Perhaps shabby. Hagerty’s looked as if it were being held together with a few nails and some twine. Only two stories, the building which housed the illustrious Hagerty’s was of brick that had once been red but was now washed out and faded. Two windows on the second floor were broken and boarded over. A sign, barely hanging from a post outside what Olivia assumed to be the entrance, proclaimed in crude letters that this was, indeed, Hagerty’s.

Oh dear.

“How many times have you been here, Phaedra? Out of curiosity?” Olivia was certain it was far too often.

“Enough times that I’ve struck up a friendship with Mr. Hagerty who is a lovely man. We’ll be perfectly safe. I promise.”

“We shouldn’t be here without an escort of some sort. A groom. A footman. Perhaps Pith. *Someone.*” Olivia looked up at the sky as the driver opened the door. “And it’s going to rain.” A mass of steel gray thunderclouds inched across the sky in their direction. “Buckets.”

“We are only going to look in. I promise.” Phaedra took Olivia’s hand. “If we’re lucky, a match will already be in progress. We can watch for a bit then come back out and hail another hack.”

Olivia gave a dubious look up and down the street where several rough-looking men were sitting around a barrel playing cards. Smoke swirled above their heads from a small fire next to them as they passed around a bottle and each took a deep swallow.

“Have you ever actually hailed a hack in this neighborhood, Phaedra? Or been here when Torrington wasn’t around to offer protection?”

“Well, *no.*” Her brow wrinkled. “He doesn’t come as often as he used to, because of Rosalind. So I had to wait for the right moment to follow him. He wasn’t pleased to see me. Not

at all. But Torrington and I came to an agreement that he wouldn't tell Tony I followed him if I didn't tell Rosalind that he still frequents Hagerty's."

"And he agreed to accompany you here?"

"Not exactly. I believe Torrington's exact words were that I was never to set foot in Hagerty's again after he caught me the second time. I've had to become more discreet in my visits."

"Oh, Phaedra." Olivia pulled back on her hand. "This is *dangerous*. And I don't mean to our reputations, though those would certainly be ruined. I mean to our *persons*."

"Mr. Hagerty will help us find a hack. I promise. Torrington has known him for years." Phaedra strode confidently toward the door as if she owned Hagerty's, a brilliant smile on her face.

Olivia was certain they were about to be attacked at any moment. If not from the men down the street, then the stray dogs wandering about. She shouldn't be surprised that Phaedra had dragged her to a boxing establishment in a rundown neighborhood that couldn't be but steps away from Cheapside. At least Olivia assumed as much. Her sense of direction was poor. Even so, it wasn't the worst adventure Phaedra had talked Olivia into. Not by half.

She and Phaedra were not even two years apart in age. They'd shared a nursery. A series of nursemaids. An entire collection of governesses. Olivia's level-headed reserve balanced Phaedra's outrageous behavior. She worried what would happen to Phaedra if she weren't around to watch over her.

Phaedra Barrington will bring disaster and scandal to the Duke of Averell's doorstep.

The only disparaging remark she'd heard from her grandfather about any Barrington, including Amanda, after Phaedra had accompanied Olivia to the park one day. Grandfather didn't care for a great many things, as evidenced by their walks. On one stroll, as Olivia had admired a collection of wild daisies near the river, he'd tried to cane a

duck because it blocked the path. He also disliked squirrels. Americans. And Phaedra.

A rough looking sort sat at the entrance to Hagerty's, picking at a scab on his arm. A mop of greasy hair peeked out from beneath a moth-eaten cap. His homely features transformed as he smiled at Phaedra, showing two missing front teeth.

"Lady Phaedra." The man stood and swept off his cap.

"Good day, Boggins."

Olivia pressed a gloved finger to her nose. It was apparent that Mr. Boggins wasn't fond of bathing, pomade, or anything else that would assist in masking his natural musky aroma. He would greatly benefit from a sprig of mint for his breath as well.

"This is Miss Nelson."

Boggins doffed his cap once more.

Olivia didn't know which to be more disturbed about—the fact that Phaedra seemed immune to the odor that Boggins emitted, or that this man and Phaedra knew each other in the first place.

"Is O'Leary boxing today?" Phaedra asked.

"Indeed, my lady. O'Leary's already lost two matches. Begged for a third. Same challenger." Boggins tilted his head. "American. Dressed like a gentleman but fights as if he were born in the rookery."

A curious sensation stirred in Olivia's midsection at the words. It didn't take a great deal of intelligence to ascertain that the American inside was most likely Ben, though there had to be dozens of Americans running about London. But Phaedra's insistence in dragging her here today could not be coincidence.

Olivia nearly turned and ran down the street to catch the departing hack. She'd already decided no good would come of seeing Ben again.

“Is Lord Torrington with you?” Boggins’s brows twitched together, like a pair of furry caterpillars. Dirty ones.

“On his way,” Phaedra lied smoothly. “I expect him at any moment. He’ll join us inside.”

Boggins scratched the end of his nose with one broken nail. “Lord Torrington told me you weren’t to go inside alone.”

“But as you can see, I am not alone.” She pulled Olivia forward. “I have Miss Nelson with me. Thank you, Boggins.” Phaedra swept past the man before he could object. “Please tell Lord Torrington we’ve gone inside.”

“Phaedra,” Olivia whispered.

“Admit it. You’ve always been curious about the inside of a boxing establishment. Just as you were about Elysium.”

Olivia looked over her shoulder at Boggins, who’d gone back to picking at the scab on his arm. “Torrington *isn’t* on his way.”

“Yes, but he *might* be,” Phaedra hissed back in a low voice. “Besides, you’re certain to like what’s inside.” The sunlight immediately faded as Phaedra pulled her into Hagerty’s dim interior. The smell of sawdust filled Olivia’s nostrils, along with something stale. Dull thuds reached her ears. One after another. Cheers followed.

“This way,” Phaedra said quietly, tugging Olivia in her wake. “We’ll be on the other side of the ring. No one will pay the least attention to us. I’ve experimented.”

“That’s what you said at Elysium.”

“And I was correct.” She shrugged. “Well, mostly.”

Olivia came to a halt. “What do you mean, mostly? No one saw you at Elysium excepting Peckham, correct?”

Phaedra didn’t answer as they came around the corner, kicking up dirt and other assorted unpleasant things along the way. A rat scurried along the wall. The toe of Olivia’s half-boot nudged at a rotten apple core in her path.

The inside of Hagerty's consisted of an immense empty space. A narrow bar took up most of the wall on the opposite side from where she and Phaedra stood. Wooden benches were scattered to one side, for spectators, Olivia assumed. Looking up, she could see part of the second floor where two men stood watching the activity below. Bottles were lined up behind the bar.

Gin. Hagerty's reeked of it.

A group of rather coarse looking creatures were clustered around the bar drinking, their attention focused solely on what was happening in a roped off area in the center of the floor. Not one of the dozens of men milling about looked in their direction. Thankfully. None were the sort of gentleman Olivia saw riding on Rotten Row or asking her to dance at balls.

A cheer went up. The stomping of feet filled the air with sawdust.

Olivia forced herself to look inside the roped off area.

Oh. Bollocks.

There was no mistaking the lean, muscled figure flying about his slower, beefier opponent. Her heart leapt in her chest at the sight of Benjamin Cooke, spinning about the other man with the same graceful agility he'd used when dancing with her at Lord Shipton's.

"A broken nose is a dead giveaway," Phaedra murmured from beside her. "Haven's nose has been broken *twice*. Probably explains why he prefers to use a sword."

Ben's shirt, damp from his exertions, stuck to his broad shoulders and the line of his ribs. Defined, sharply cut muscle flashed with each twisting movement. His trousers hung low on his hips, the untucked shirt floating around his narrow waist giving tantalizing glimpses of his stomach.

Olivia swallowed, unable to look away.

All that . . . maleness had been partially draped atop Olivia. *Twice.*

Ben narrowly avoided the massive fist of his opponent, managing to swivel away at the last moment.

“That’s O’Leary. The Irish butcher.”

The massive mountain that was Cooke’s opponent stomped around the ring, trying to determine from which angle to mount his attack. He was bigger but not fast and lacked Cooke’s athletic grace. O’Leary slammed his giant fists together before spitting out a stream of blood into the sawdust at his feet. “You won’t get so lucky again, Cooke.”

“O’Leary really is Irish and a butcher,” Phaedra said, seemingly unfazed by the violence unfolding before them. “That isn’t his fighting name. His shop is just a few blocks over.”

“Oh.” It was all Olivia could say as she watched, a curious feeling simmering in her stomach. The sight of Ben fighting so brutally did something to her insides. A flush made its way up her chest and neck, coating her cheeks.

I should leave. Now. I don’t want to see him.

But Olivia couldn’t look away.

Ben was intentionally wearing out O’Leary, forcing the butcher to work harder by following him about the ring. O’Leary pulled back his fist, but Ben twisted, bending nearly in half, and slammed into the other man, fists moving so fast his arms were nothing but a blur.

A large cheer erupted from the gathered crowd. Glasses clinked. Another wave of gin made its way to Olivia’s nose.

Ben nimbly stepped around O’Leary before punching the other man in the side, twisting once more to deliver the blow. His handsome face was flushed with concentration and chilling determination.

“O’Leary wins most of his matches because he’s built like an ox,” Phaedra said, moving closer to Olivia. “Can you imagine being hit by one of his fists? Look at the size of his hands. Torrington has lost to him any number of times but has managed to avoid a direct punch to the nose.”

O'Leary's next jab glanced off Ben's jaw.

Blood trickled from his lip, but he was smiling.

He's enjoying this.

"You'll regret that, my friend. Or perhaps you've had enough?" There was no mistaking the flat cadence of Ben's speech echoing off the walls.

"Bugger off, Cooke." O'Leary spun about, punching with one meaty fist, catching Ben on his hip.

Ben grunted but didn't stumble. His eyes narrowed savagely as an unpleasant smile tilted his lips.

The flush warmed Olivia's skin once more, coiling lazily between her thighs and stretching out across her limbs. She wanted to press her lips to his chest. Taste the blood and sweat clinging to him. Wind herself around that powerful body.

Dear God. I have lost my mind.

O'Leary went down, blood pouring from his lip as he tried to stagger to his feet. His massive shoulders wobbled before he fell to the floor with a loud thud.

Ben stood over his opponent, grinning, far more brutal than any of the other men swilling gin with Hagerty. A tiny thread of excitement ran through Olivia at the knowledge that those lethal fists had touched her so gently. She should have been appalled at this side of Benjamin Cooke. Repulsed. But instead, Olivia's body tingled and hummed no matter how she begged it to stop.

A small frustrated cry popped from her lips, her gaze never leaving the lean man on the floor below. It seemed she was doomed to want Ben no matter what.

Phaedra slipped her hand into Olivia's, twining their fingers together as she used to when they were children. "I knew the minute he walked into the dining room. My God, I worried he would leap over the table to get to you, murdering Thomlinson in the process."

"We became acquainted at Elysium," Olivia whispered. "But you've gathered that, haven't you?"

“I won’t tell anyone.” Phaedra squeezed her hand. “I promise.”

Olivia swayed a little, pulling Phaedra closer. “I—can’t—”

“Now here is a sight I don’t often see.” The cool, flattened tones abruptly jolted Olivia’s thoughts from Ben. “Two well-bred young ladies watching a fight at Hagerty’s. Tsk, tsk. What *would* Lord Daring say?”

Olivia turned to face the well-dressed gentleman addressing her and Phaedra. He was garbed all in black. Even his waistcoat was devoid of color except for a bit of crimson thread along the edges. He smiled, but it did nothing to dispel the cruelty hinted at in his lips.

“Excuse me?” she regarded him coolly.

The gentleman ignored her, his attention focused solely on Phaedra.

“Lord Daring.” The palest eyes Olivia had ever seen, like the brush of winter frost across a windowpane, lit on Olivia for only a fraction of a moment, before returning to Phaedra. “Did I not speak clearly enough? Or can you not hear me over the fists flying about below.”

Olivia stiffened and took Phaedra’s arm, pulling her closer. “I fear you have us at a disadvantage.”

“How do you do that? Given my height, I would have assumed you’d have trouble looking down your nose at me.” The breadth of his shoulders rolled in a careless shrug before doffing his hat to both her and Phaedra with a sweeping gesture. A spill of close-cropped, golden-brown hair fell over his brow before he straightened. All the while, those pale eyes never left Phaedra.

“Allow me to introduce myself, Miss Nelson. Morgan Stewart.”

The gravel tone was flat. Nasal. *American*. Olivia noted that he didn't introduce himself to Phaedra.

They are already acquainted.

Stewart jerked his chin absently toward the ring. "I do enjoy watching Twist. He's always been deadly with those fists of his. Good to see he hasn't gotten soft."

It took a moment for Olivia to realize he wasn't speaking of O'Leary, but Ben.

He drew one blunt finger absently over the end of a wicked scar where it curled across his chin. "You should see him wield a knife."

Stewart also had a knot in his nose, but even if he hadn't, Olivia sensed him to be a man who was no stranger to fists or knives. There was an innate brutality to Stewart, though he'd tried to disguise it behind his manners and expensively tailored clothes.

Very much like Ben.

Stewart sidled closer to Phaedra, his rough features softening just slightly as he took her in from head to toe. His hand lifted from his side as if to touch her before retreating. "I've put my own bet in Elysium's Red Book, Lady Phaedra Barrington." He enunciated each word in a gentle, raspy tone. "Page seventy-eight."

Phaedra's brows drew up to her hairline, but if his words distressed her, she gave no sign. She leveled a defiant gaze back at him. "I hope you didn't wager a great deal."

A dark sound came from Stewart. "There's my girl," he whispered so quietly, Olivia nearly didn't hear the words.

Phaedra's willowy form arched just slightly in Stewart's direction.

Dear God. What had Phaedra done?

Olivia moved, deftly sliding her body between the two. "You're American, Mr. Stewart. New York would be my guess. Are you acquainted with Lord Daring?"

“You’ve a good ear, Miss Nelson. Unfortunately, I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting Lord Daring. I’m told he doesn’t care for Americans.” His upper lip twitched. “But Mr. Thomlinson is of a different opinion.”

A loud roar went up in the ring. Olivia turned to see Hagerty holding up Ben’s arm while O’Leary struggled to sit. A broadfaced man with an enormous mustache placed his fingers in his mouth, whistling while jumping up and down. She carefully composed her features before turning back to Stewart, refusing to give him the satisfaction of asking how he knew Peter Thomlinson.

“Ah, it looks as if Twist has won. I never had any doubt.” Those pale eyes, with their unnerving stare, pinned Olivia in place, a tiny half-smile lifting his mouth. “We’re old friends. Me and Twist.” Something ugly crept into Stewart’s gravelly voice. “Boyhood chums, one might say.”

Olivia turned back to the roped off area. Ben was wiping the sweat off his face as several men came forward to slap him on the back. The barest glimmer of surprise lit his features as he caught sight of Olivia and Phaedra, his jaw hardening to stone as he took in Stewart.

“I’m not sure Mr. Cooke recalls your friendship with as much fondness as you, Mr. Stewart,” Olivia observed tartly.

“No.” Stewart settled a cold stare on Ben who was making his way toward them, fists clenched at the sides. “I’m quite sure he doesn’t.”

Ben wiped at the blood streaming from his mouth, sliding his tongue along the edge of his teeth to make sure nothing was loose. A fist from O’Leary was nearly the same as being kicked by a horse. The butcher shouldn’t have had the opportunity to even take that punch at Ben let alone make contact.

He helped O’Leary up, no easy task, and shook the other man’s hand.

O’Leary was shaking his head as a dog does when bitten by a flea. One eye was already swelling shut. Ben would have felt bad except that O’Leary had begged for the last match.

“Bloody hell,” Hagerty said, tossing a rag at Ben. “She’s here again. I warned Bobbins about letting her inside. I’ve no desire to piss off a duke or Leo Murphy. Nor be shut down.” Hagerty glared at the other side of the main floor.

Ben let go of O’Leary’s arm, and the poor man fell back to the floor with a groan.

Olivia. Phaedra.

And Morgan fucking Stewart.

The last was enough to set Ben’s blood boiling. The exhaustion from his three matches with O’Leary melted away. He was fairly sure he could throw his knife and hit Stewart’s throat, but Olivia was standing *much too damn close* to Stewart. Also, a knife in the throat would mean a great deal of

blood spilling on the ladies, which would be difficult to explain.

The coat is mine. I saw it first.

Tossing the rag back at Hagerty, Ben casually strolled in the direction of Morgan Stewart. He should have killed him the last time they'd seen each other in New York. Ended this long and terrible game. Most of Manhattan assumed Ben's rivalry with Stewart had begun over a woman. Or a business negotiation gone wrong. But it was neither of those things. Their hatred had been forged over a threadbare coat with a note pinned inside.

"You've gotten slow, Twist." Stewart nodded to the cut on Ben's lip.

"I'm quick enough, when necessary," Ben replied in a silky tone. He reached up and touched the corner of his mouth before staring at the scar he'd given Stewart so long ago.

Stewart grunted, a sneer forming on his lips.

"Don't let us keep you." Ben gently, but firmly, pushed Olivia behind him, satisfied when she pulled Phaedra along. His hand lingered protectively over her waist a second more than it should have.

"Ah, is that how it is then?" Stewart's pale eyes darted to Olivia. "Not to worry. I'm not interested in your sordid affairs. Believe it or not, I've other things on my mind just now."

"I'm thrilled to hear it, after your interference with Harper."

Stewart often went out of his way to insert himself into Rutherford Shipping business even if he had no real interest in the outcome. Stewart's interests were focused primarily on the building of railroads, or railways, as they were called in England. There would be no other reason for him to be in London.

"I needed a little something to amuse myself," Stewart replied.

“Again, don’t allow us to keep you.” Olivia had her fingers twisted in his shirt, her breath soft against his back. He’d gut Stewart in an instant if he so much as sneezed in her direction.

“*Wagers, Twist.*” Stewart fairly snarled at him, all pretense of politeness fading. “That’s why I’m here.” His gaze lingered over Phaedra, eyes touching her in an intimate fashion. His tone softened. “I’m merely reminding someone of a wager.”

A pouch of gold sailed through the air, tossed by Hagerty who had come up behind them.

Stewart deftly caught it without once looking away from Phaedra. “And to collect my winnings. Thank you, Hagerty. I bet a fortune on you, Twist. Doubled my money.”

“Leave,” Ben said in a cool tone. “Boundaries have been established.” He glanced at Olivia and Phaedra.

“You never change, *Benjamin Cooke*. And you are one to speak of boundaries. You only honor them when it suits you.” Dislike flickered in Stewart’s pale eyes. “I’ve been thinking of visiting Rutherford Shipping. Take in the sights on Pearl Street. How *is* Jacob Rutherford these days?”

Coldness settled in Ben’s chest. Stewart was a constant living reminder of the past. One Ben should have rid the world of long ago. “He’s doing much better than the sister of Martin Van Rhys.”

Absolute fury rippled across Stewart’s features. “You know I didn’t—” His lips clamped shut.

“Do I? Mind your boundaries, Stewart.”

Stewart whipped his icy gaze back to Phaedra. Longing transformed his harsh features for the briefest moment as he stared at her.

Ben hadn’t thought Stewart capable of that sort of desire. And it was for Phaedra Barrington.

“Get out,” he said quietly, wondering how Phaedra had managed to garner the attention of Morgan Stewart.

Stewart shot Ben a last mocking glance. “As you wish.” He bowed before turning on his heel and disappearing into the

shadows of Hagerty's. "But we'll see each other again."
Stewart said over his shoulder. "Soon."

Olivia stood directly behind Ben, inhaling the scent of sweat, blood, and sawdust, all mixed with pine and snow. He stood protectively in front of both her and Phaedra, one of his hands sliding into the folds of Olivia's skirts, pulling her closer. The press of his fingers sunk into her thigh as he spoke to Mr. Stewart. A plea for her to be still. Silent.

There was no worry on that count. Olivia felt as if she were watching two feral dogs about to fight over a scrap of meat.

"You know him," she said to Cooke's back because he refused to move until Stewart disappeared.

"Obviously." He didn't elaborate.

"How did you make his acquaintance?" Olivia squeezed Phaedra's hand. "What have you done?"

She wrenched her hand from Olivia's with a tug. "Nothing."

"Phaedra," Olivia said pointedly. "Answer me."

Not a word came from Phaedra. She clasped her hands and treated Olivia to a calm, serene look.

Phaedra was rarely calm. *Never* serene. That worried Olivia more than anything else.

"Don't allow him back here again unless you are comfortable with his blood on your hands," Ben growled at

Hagerty, who was still standing on the other side of Phaedra. “And possibly your own.”

Hagerty backed up a pace, putting up his hands. “How was I to know you and Stewart don’t get on?”

“Now you do,” Ben replied.

“Only the second time I’ve seen Stewart. The first time he came to Hagerty’s, he was more interested in her.” He nodded to Phaedra who colored rather dramatically. “And don’t threaten me in my own place. Go back to your own bloody country. Take Stewart with you.” Hagerty stomped off. “Find somewhere else to box. There’s a tavern two streets over.”

“Just keep him out,” Ben said to Hagerty’s departing back.

His fingers, still hidden in the folds of Olivia’s skirts, grabbed at the fabric and pulled her forward. “Did he hurt you? Say anything which distressed you, Miss Nelson?”

“No, of course not. He knew who I was and mentioned being acquainted with Mr. Thomlinson.” Her brow wrinkled. “But Peter doesn’t involve himself in business. My grandfather absolutely frowns on a gentleman getting his hands dirty in trade.”

“I see you call the Buttercup by his given name.” Ben jerked his chin at her before she could respond. His fingers let go of her skirts, curling into fists at his sides. The knuckles of his left hand were bleeding. “You shouldn’t be here. Either of you.”

“As you know, Phaedra can be persuasive. And there isn’t any need to yell at me. My hearing isn’t the least impaired.” She lowered her voice. “Ben,” she breathed his name. “I’m quite well.”

“If Stewart had hurt you—” he stopped.

“*Ben.*” She said his name again. “He didn’t hurt me. Or Phaedra.”

“How did she meet Stewart?” The worry was gone from his face, but it had been replaced with a chilly blandness Olivia didn’t care for.

“I’ve no idea. Phaedra—” Olivia spun about in a circle, but there was no sign of Phaedra. She’d been so focused on Ben and he on her, Phaedra had slipped away. “I should have kept hold of her hand.” Olivia glanced down to the long narrow bar where Hagerty stood but didn’t see Phaedra. “You don’t think she went after Stewart, do you?” But even as she said the words, Olivia knew that’s exactly what Phaedra had done. There was something between them, Phaedra and Stewart. “I need to find her before she does something foolish. And she will.” Olivia started toward the exit.

Ben cursed. Loudly. “You mean more foolish than bringing you here, to Hagerty’s?” He took her arm, stopping her, and glanced at the men clustered around the bar.

Olivia pulled at her elbow. “Let go. I need to find her.”

Ben gave her a pained look. “I can’t let you near him. Or have you running around outside. It isn’t safe.” He dragged Olivia over to the wall situating her behind a crate. “I’ll find her. But you are not to stray from this spot. Don’t make a sound.” He took in the men clustered around the bar again, clearly conflicted on whether to leave her inside Hagerty’s, but it was nothing compared to the fear she’d glimpsed in his features when he’d seen Stewart.

“I’ll be perfectly fine,” she promised, giving his arm a light touch. “And I will not move from behind this crate. No one is paying the least attention to me, and Mr. Hagerty is right over there.” She pointed. “But Phaedra is out there alone without any protection except for Boggins.”

“I’ll be back in a moment.” Ben cracked his knuckles. “Don’t draw attention to yourself. Nearly everyone, including Hagerty, saw you with me so it’s doubtful you’ll be approached.”

“I can take care of myself, Mr. Cooke.”

He frowned, but nonetheless strode away on his long, muscled legs, shirt untucked and flapping about his waist. Parts of him were covered in blood. He was sweaty. Male. Horribly protective of her. *And Phaedra.*

Clasping a hand to her chest, Olivia's eyes fluttered closed, listening to the way her heart beat in his direction. A defeated sigh escaped her as she slowly opened her eyes once more, taking in Hagerty's. It *was* rather exciting, all things considered. But Phaedra's visits to Hagerty's had to stop.

O'Leary, shaking his head, sat on a stool on the other side of Hagerty's, swallowing down the contents of a bottle. He dabbed a rag at his cheek and eye.

Mr. Hagerty stood between the ropes, waving forward two men while the sound of coins clinking echoed in the air. Another fight. More wagers.

The two men in the ring circled each other. Both were of like height and size. Olivia barely winced when she heard the first punch.

"You like the fights, do you, miss?" The smell of an unwashed body and garlic mixed unpleasantly with the gin filling the air. A terrible combination. She resisted the urge to pinch her nose. Did everyone at Hagerty's eschew any sort of bathing?

"I beg your pardon?" Olivia took in the gap-toothed man before her. Lanky, barely taller than herself. Malodorous, to be sure. His eyes were very close together. Like a pig's and equally as stupid.

"I was asking if you liked the fights." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the ring. "Name's Logan. I can help you make a wager if you like."

"I am merely observing while I wait for a friend, but thank you, Mr. Logan." She glanced toward the door. Phaedra couldn't have gotten far.

"I'd like to be your friend. I've a bottle of gin to share in return." He crept closer.

Bollocks.

Cursing!

For the second time in her life, Olivia was being mistaken for a courtesan. Or she supposed, given the neighborhood, a

prostitute who would sell herself for gin. She glanced down to the fight below. Absolutely no one was looking in her direction.

“How wonderful for you.” Chilly politeness dripped from every word. Hopefully Logan would take the hint and be on his way. “I’m not interested in becoming better acquainted.”

Logan had the audacity to put his hand, with its five dirty nails and what looked like jam between two fingers, on her arm. “Here now. You’re all alone. You think you’re too good for Logan? Is that it?” He reached into his trousers, producing a bottle of gin. “Let’s have a nip, shall we?”

Olivia took two deliberate steps in the opposite direction and tried to shake off his jam-stained fingers. At least she hoped it was jam. There did seem to be a bit of bread stuck to his thumb. “Unfortunately, I prefer scotch.” If he didn’t release her, Olivia planned to do as Leo had always instructed her when faced with an amorous, overly determined suitor. She pulled back her skirts, prepared to launch one knee into his groin.

“Come now, Miss High and Mighty.” Logan gripped her tighter.

“The lady prefers scotch.” Ben stood barely a foot away, a grin on his lips, though it didn’t reach his eyes. He put himself between her and Logan, moving so quickly, so quietly, Olivia wasn’t even sure the sawdust on the floor had been disturbed.

Ben cocked his head at Logan. “And more importantly, *me.*”

Logan opened his mouth to argue, but Ben merely pulled Olivia’s would-be assailant up by his elbow until Logan stood on his tiptoes and walked him a few paces away. Whispering in the man’s ear, Ben’s tone became gentle, as if he were explaining something of importance to a wayward child.

The smell of urine suddenly assailed Olivia’s nostrils. Shocked, she peered at Logan, who seemed to have lost control of his bodily functions. A large wet stain spread across

his tattered trousers. The gin dropped from his fingers, the bottle making a dull thud as it hit the sawdust.

“*Jesus.*” Logan sobbed. “I promise.”

“Good.” Ben winked and dropped her would-be assailant’s arm. “I knew if I only explained things to you, we’d reach an understanding. I trust you’ll inform your friends.”

Logan nodded as the wet patch spread down one leg. “I will. Just please—”

“Thank you.” Ben cut him off. “Come, Miss Nelson. Time to go.” His fingers curled tightly around her arm before he led her down the dim hallway to the entrance of Hagerty’s. The chilly emotionless mask was firmly back in place, and he wouldn’t look at her.

“Where is Phaedra?” She panted to keep up with his much longer stride. “What did you say to Mr. Logan?”

“I merely reminded him of certain pertinent facts.”

“The situation was under control. Leo was very clear in the instructions he gave me on how to dissuade an overly determined suitor. I’m not suggesting Mr. Logan was a suitor, of course. He mistook me for a prostitute, which is highly insulting. I’m beginning to reconsider my taste in clothing.”

A grunt came from Ben. “Phaedra is outside. Sitting in the hack I hailed.” He marched, nearly dragging her with him. “Hagerty would never have heard you over the crowd.”

“I had the matter well in hand.”

Another grunt sounded from Ben as he practically pulled her down the hall. “You did not.”

“Stop.” Olivia dug in her heels. “*Benjamin.* Please. You’re bleeding.”

“It’s only a little blood.” But he halted, still refusing to look at her.

Olivia pulled a handkerchief out of the pocket of her dress. So useful, pockets. Romy made sure all the dresses she designed contained them.

Standing on tiptoe, she dabbed at Ben's lip, hearing the soft inhale of his breath when she touched him. Her fingertips trailed over the reddish-brown hair lining his jaw. She found him breathtaking, even now, covered in sweat and blood.

"You are like my greenhouse; did you know that?" she whispered, struck by a sudden realization. "I feel safe there, inside those walls of glass with plants surrounding me. Just as I do with you. I don't know how that happened."

"Don't say that."

She gently rubbed her thumb over the small split in his bottom lip, tracing the outline of his mouth. Olivia couldn't seem to stop the bend of her body into his, like one of her plants arching to seek out the sun. She wished she had the courage to kiss him.

His fingers curled around her wrist, stopping the exploration of his lips.

"I am no one's safe place, Olivia. Of all the things you need protecting from, I am perhaps the worst."

It had taken Ben a good quarter hour after leaving Olivia inside Hagerty's to find Phaedra, pacing back and forth outside an empty alley filled with trash. She was unharmed and in no apparent danger from the creatures that haunted this part of London. Perhaps they thought Phaedra mad because she was muttering and gesturing wildly as she walked. When Ben took her arm, she allowed herself to be led away, a mulish tilt to her chin, refusing to tell him anything about Morgan Stewart.

He hailed a hack and put Phaedra inside it, threatening the driver not to move an inch until he returned. Ben may have threatened Phaedra to stay put as well. Rarely did he allow his emotions to get the better of him, but seeing Stewart today, mere inches from Olivia, had unsettled him more than he'd ever thought possible. Stewart was a constant, nagging reminder of what Ben really was, or rather, who he wasn't. A perpetual harbinger of doom that Ben should have slit open with one of his knives nearly twenty years ago.

Ben had stood blinking in the sunlight for a moment, the truth weighing on him as it never had before. Perhaps Stewart was right. He had grown soft.

Or maybe he only wanted to deserve the woman who waited for him inside.

That cold stillness, the ice that had formed when he was a child, filled him at finding Olivia, *his* beautiful orchid, being accosted by the inept thief better known as Logan.

Incompetent at picking pockets—and Ben would know since he was not unskilled himself—Logan lingered about Hagerty’s attempting to relieve the patrons of their coin. Ben thought of him as a gnat and not worth notice.

Until Logan had decided to make the unwise decision to touch Olivia.

Ben had never wanted her to see the sort of man he really was. Knowing she’d watched him box with O’Leary and growl at Morgan Stewart was bad enough, especially with Stewart referring to him as Twist. But Logan, soiling Olivia with his touch—

He hadn’t been able to resist describing to the wretch exactly how a man’s windpipe could be cut from his body while still alive. How Ben was so skilled with a blade, Logan would whistle instead of scream as he was dying.

Logan had pissed himself.

Now Olivia was intent on dabbing the blood from his lip with a poorly embroidered handkerchief. Stroking his jaw because she obviously possessed not an ounce of self-preservation. If she even guessed that Ben had recently spent the night with a bottle of bourbon, contemplating on how to kidnap her from Averell’s home, Olivia would be horrified.

Now she was claiming he was her sanctuary, comparing Ben to her damned greenhouse.

“I am no one’s safe place, Olivia. Of all the things you need protecting from, I am perhaps the worst.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

Ben pretended not to hear her and dragged Olivia out to the waiting hack, ignoring her squeak of outrage at his rough handling. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, as much as he fought against the idea, Olivia *belonged* with Peter Thomlinson, not him. She was hellbent on doing her duty to that snob the Earl of Daring, and all Ben had done was cause her pain.

His chest constricted as he pulled her to the hack.

“Ben.”

He wasn't her *greenhouse*. Couldn't possibly be.

Keeping his gaze averted from hers, he didn't answer. Ben opened the door and practically tossed her in.

An angry sound left Olivia.

Ben shut the door on her.

“Mr. Cooke.” Phaedra looked at him through the window, an arrogant tilt to her chin. One he'd seen on Leo dozens of times.

Honestly, Ben liked Phaedra, but just now, he was in no mood to soothe her entitled sensibilities. He didn't care that she was the sister of a duke because Ben wasn't afraid of Averell. Or Leo. She'd put Olivia in danger. Allowed Olivia to see—

“You are not to come to Hagerty's again,” he bit out in an icy tone.

Two red spots stood out on Phaedra's cheeks. Probably shock. “I don't think you have the authority, Mr. Cooke to—”

“*Ever*, Lady Phaedra,” he snapped, cutting her off. “Hagerty will not admit you, and if you sneak in, he *will* tell me. I know you imagine you two have some sort of a cozy friendship, but that isn't the case. I assure you, Hagerty's fear of me is greater than any tender affection he may have for you.”

He was *furious* with Phaedra for bringing Olivia here. Angry at being reminded of Stewart and the past. Pissed that Olivia had seen him behave like an animal.

All of it reminded Ben that he couldn't have what he wanted.

“Do not ever put Olivia in such a situation again. Do you understand? *Ever*. And stay away from Morgan Stewart. You aren't nearly clever enough to get the better of him.”

At the sound of Phaedra's gasp, Ben stomped over to the driver.

“Take them directly to the home of the Duke of Averell. Big house. Backs up to the park. You can’t miss it. Straight to the front steps. And if you don’t,” Ben warned the driver, “I’ll know, and I’ll find you.”

The hack jerked forward, and Ben turned back to Hagerty’s, unwilling to see Olivia watching him from the hack’s window.

The hack swayed slowly back and forth as it took Olivia and Phaedra back to the Averell residence. The streets were terribly crowded at this time of day, and the rain that had threatened earlier had started. Streams of water slid down the windows prompting Olivia to trace them with one finger, still shaken over today's events.

There were many things to consider. Most had to do with Benjamin Cooke.

We don't know where Ben spent the first years of his life.

Georgina's words, when relating the tale of the starving, filthy boy who'd arrived on the steps of the Rutherford mansion in New York. A ship was the natural assumption because Alice Rutherford's husband had been a ship's captain. But after today, Olivia had an inkling Ben had spent his early years *surviving*. That time of his life was etched into his very soul. Wealth and status had done nothing to dispel it. Ben *was* the sort of man who went to Hagerty's. Carried knives on his person. Had no qualms about threatening Logan so badly, the man had pissed himself.

And yet, none of this frightened Olivia. Ben felt safer to her than anyone else.

Olivia's heart, already deeply compromised, ached in her chest. She was filled with lingering sadness for a small boy in threadbare clothing, hungry and thin, climbing the steps to a great mansion in the dead of winter with only a note pinned to

his chest. That boy had survived to be the man who treated her so gently, but not without scars.

Scars Olivia wanted to soothe and comfort. She longed to be *his* safe place. His sanctuary. All of which made her incredibly angry. Because Olivia could not be any of those things for Benjamin Cooke.

“Why did you insist on bringing me today?”

Phaedra, in dragging her to Hagerty’s, had made things that much worse. The day after tomorrow, Olivia was leaving for Halloway Park, and it was unlikely she would ever see Ben again. And if she did, she would already be wed to Peter.

The weight of the promise to her grandfather pressed at her stomach.

“I wanted you to see Hagerty’s.”

“And Mr. Cooke. You wanted me to see him as well.”

“Yes,” Phaedra said with no apology. “But I promise you, I didn’t realize he and Stewart knew each other. Or have any inkling of the animosity between them. Business of some sort. That would make sense.”

“I don’t think that’s it at all, Phaedra. I don’t think it has anything to do with business.” Olivia noticed Phaedra didn’t offer up how she had met Stewart, which was very telling. It meant she’d done something so reckless, so improper, that she was afraid to admit to it.

“I barely—” Phaedra started.

“I don’t care how you came to know Mr. Stewart just now. Nor do I wish to hear the multitude of half-truths you plan to tell me.” The anger bubbling up inside Olivia, the blatant *unfairness* of having her heart—“I’m more concerned with what you thought you might accomplish in bringing *me* today.”

If it hadn’t been for Phaedra and her scheming, Olivia might have been happy with Peter Thomlinson. If she hadn’t been brought to Hagerty’s, there was a possibility Olivia could have put Benjamin Cooke behind her, but now, when she

closed her eyes, all she saw was his savage beauty moving about the ring. She had forgotten, at least for a time, her duty as the last Halloway. The promise to her grandfather. Her responsibility to her family.

Now, Olivia would wed Peter and *always* long for Benjamin Cooke.

Another wave of anger struck her. This was *all* Phaedra's doing.

"Accomplish?" Phaedra stuttered. "I—only meant for you to see that you couldn't wed Thomlinson. Not when Mr. Cooke—"

"Cooke isn't interested in marriage, Phaedra. Not to me or anyone else." It hurt Olivia to say the words. Whatever wonderful, exquisite feeling lay between them, it wasn't enough for him to wed her. "Wanting to bed a woman doesn't equate to an offer of marriage. Surely even you, living in your tiny bubble, secure in your belief that being the favorite sister of the duke of Averell will always keep you safe, knows that much. Oh, and one of Hagerty's lovely patrons tried to assault me today while you were running around the streets looking for Mr. Stewart."

Phaedra paled. "I wasn't—"

"Don't worry. Mr. Cooke whispered something in the man's ear which must have terrified him because he soiled himself."

"Olivia."

"But back to what you hoped to accomplish today." Olivia warmed to the topic. "Ruination, I assume. *That* would certainly destroy all chances of my wedding Peter, wouldn't it? And put Lord Daring into an early grave as well. If Mr. Cooke compromised me. Of course, I'd become a pariah in the eyes of all of London, but at least *you*, Phaedra, wouldn't have to tolerate Peter at the dinner table again. Or watch me become exceedingly dull as the Earl of Daring's granddaughter."

"You make me sound quite awful. That isn't—"

“Since you are intent on becoming an utter disaster, probably with Morgan Stewart, you thought to distract everyone with *my* scandal.” Olivia didn’t lose her temper very often. But just now, she wanted to shake Phaedra senseless.

“I only wanted you to see Mr. Cooke. I didn’t think—”

“That is the problem. You *don’t* think.” Olivia’s voice grew louder. “About *anyone* other than yourself, especially not me.”

“No, that isn’t true. I did this for you.” Phaedra’s eyes filled with tears.

“No, you didn’t. Phaedra Barrington, outrageous and brazen, must have her way. It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. You are a selfish, spoiled *child*. How dare you mock me for wedding Peter when you know *nothing* of duty to one’s family.”

“Lord Daring—”

“Is my *grandfather*.” Olivia shook her head. “All the family I have left in the world. I would do anything for him. I am the last Halloway. I have already told him I will wed Peter, that I am happy to do my duty.”

“No.” Phaedra shook her head. “You said you hadn’t agreed.”

Another wave of nausea hit Olivia. If not for Phaedra, she would never have known Ben. Never have felt this horrible pain in her heart.

“I am thankful I will be at Halloway Park. Thankful it is far enough from London that I won’t be ensnarled in the scandal that is soon to erupt around *you*. Flounder about, Phaedra, for I will not be coming to your rescue.”

A sob left Phaedra. “You don’t mean that.”

“But I do. I *care* if scandal drags from my skirts. I don’t prance about, embarrassing my family by trailing behind my brother at Elysium and challenging my bloody butler to fencing matches. I am going to have a peaceful, contented life at Halloway Park. Knowing I have done my duty to my family.

Maybe I am boring by your standards, but at least I am not a wager in the damned Red Book at Elysium.”

Phaedra fell back against the seat. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you aren’t. You are only put out because I am angry.”

“You won’t be happy with Thomlinson.” Phaedra sniffed. “You know it as well as I do. You shouldn’t wed him. And you are blind to Daring’s manipulations. He doesn’t have your best interests at heart.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “I know it. In here.”

“You have no idea what you’re saying.” Olivia sat back, exhausted with Phaedra and this entire situation. “You don’t know what it is to be responsible. Well, *I* do. I’ve been taking care of you since I could barely walk.” Olivia’s throat was raw. “There’s been little room for anything else. Not with you around.”

Tears ran down Phaedra’s cheeks. “I’m right, Olivia. About Daring and Cooke.” She turned her face to the window. “One day, you’ll tell me so.”

Olivia walked across her grandfather's gardens, as she had nearly every day for the last two weeks since arriving at Halloway Park, carefully measuring out her steps. Tapping a finger against one temple, she tried to picture how the new flower beds she was considering would look against the setting sun. The colors needed to glow as the light hit the flowers at the end of the day. The view from the terrace would be magnificent.

Sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen.

A fortnight at Halloway Park, and Olivia felt as if she were going mad.

Pacing once more along the stone path, she kicked at a pebble and looked out across the lawn of her grandfather's estate, feeling lonely for the first time in her life. That wasn't to say that Olivia had never been alone. She didn't mind her own company. Solitude wasn't something Olivia avoided. She liked calm. Mainly because there was generally so little of it with the Barringtons.

Now, however, there was far too much.

Silence lay over Halloway Park. Even the bird song was muted as if the finches and nuthatches were afraid to offend Grandfather with their noise. Olivia had never resided in such a quiet place. The staff spoke in hushed whispers, heads lowered, as if they were ghosts. Only Grandfather's butler, Morris, showed limited conversation skills. Her attempts to get to know the numerous footmen and maids employed at

Halloway Park had thus far been unsuccessful. Even the young girl designated to assist Olivia until a proper lady's maid could be found refused to speak more than a few words.

"I should have insisted Harry come with me," Olivia said out loud to the breeze.

Harry was Harriet, the maid Phaedra and Olivia had shared for years simply because they had preferred it. She'd abdicated Harry to Phaedra, and both were now ensconced at Cherry Hill.

Where Olivia found herself wishing to be.

Halloway Park, while beautiful, did not *feel* to Olivia as she'd thought it would.

The journey to her grandfather's estate could best be described as unpleasant. It would have been more apt to declare the trip, with a silent Phaedra and an overly concerned Amanda, *excruciating*. Olivia and Phaedra had spoken not one word to each other. Not on the train which deposited them at the small station after leaving London and certainly not in the Averell coach which had brought Olivia to Halloway Park.

Phaedra barely uttered a word even to her mother. Every journey in recent memory had consisted of Olivia attempting to read a book while Phaedra interrupted her with exclamations on the sights outside the window—there was never anything of note—or a game of cards. Once, Phaedra had brandished her small rapier and slashed the roof of the coach.

Tony had threatened to cancel her fencing lessons. She'd had to pay for the tear with her pin money.

Amanda had tried to induce Phaedra to converse but had been met with only curt, one-word responses echoing from the enormous bonnet sitting atop Phaedra's head. The bonnet was hideous and out of fashion, but the brim did hide her face, and that, Olivia assumed, was the whole point. Still, she had caught sight of Phaedra's eyes, reddened from weeping.

Olivia had refused to feel an ounce of guilt. Or sympathy. She would not apologize. At some point, Phaedra had to learn

that her actions had consequences.

Amanda had shot them both chastising looks, then promptly closed her eyes to nap. Which was just as well because Olivia had no desire to discuss Halloway Park or Lord Daring. She had certainly not wanted to bring up Peter Thomlinson or that she had promised to wed him.

When the Averell coach had finally arrived at Halloway Park, Amanda had cast a baleful look at Grandfather's estate, the brackets around her mouth deepening, lips pursing in distaste. She'd said nothing, only clasped her hands tightly in her lap, pulling at the folds of her skirt.

"I love you Olivia, child of my heart," Amanda had whispered to her. "Do not forget. We will be at Cherry Hill."

Nodding, Olivia had blinked to keep tears from rolling down her cheeks. She was no longer a child. Grandfather would be most upset to see her in such a state. He might take her mood as an affront to Olivia's affection for him. Which was not the case.

She'd walked slowly across the drive, looking up at Halloway Park, beautiful in the late afternoon light, while two footmen had rushed to gather her trunks. The coach door shut behind her, the sound of the gravel beneath the wheels echoing loudly in the air as Amanda and Phaedra had departed.

Grandfather stood waiting for her at the door, smiling, but when she came up the steps, his head had turned to the Averell coach, an ugly sneer curling his lips. Or at least it had seemed so to Olivia, but when he'd turned back to her, Grandfather had been all affection. A joyous laugh had come from him as he'd pulled Olivia close to press a kiss to her cheek.

Olivia thought back to that day as she stared across the lawn, watching the breeze ripple through the grass. Perhaps it was the country air, but Grandfather seemed far more well than he ever had in London. As he'd led her inside that day, there had been no leaning against Olivia as he once had when they'd taken their walks in London.

And no cane in sight.

At the time, Olivia had been so overwhelmed by being at Halloway Park and the events leading up to her arrival, she hadn't given his health much thought.

"Yes, but now I am," she murmured to herself.

Morris had shown Olivia to the set of rooms formerly inhabited by her mother, Lady Millicent. The sweeping set of chambers with a private sitting room overlooked a pond filled with ducks. The bed coverings were new, but Morris had assured her that the coverlet was identical to the one Millicent had used, as requested by Lord Daring.

Olivia hadn't found that at all comforting.

A trunk in one corner and an armoire still contained Millicent's gowns, all carefully pressed and packed with tissue. The small walnut vanity beneath one window contained bits of ribbon, pins, and the like. Even a book had been left on the nightstand, the place carefully marked with a bit of lace as if Millicent would return any moment.

After two weeks, Olivia was still afraid to touch anything or even move so much as a porcelain figurine to make room for her own things. It was like living in an exhibit at a museum.

A large portrait of Millicent, painted shortly after her coming out, hung above the fireplace in the drawing room. She was dressed in rivers of pink silk and ribbons, perched on a chair with a vase of roses behind her. Olivia's resemblance to her mother was uncanny. Only Olivia's nose was different, the lone feature she seemed to have received from her father, Bradford Nelson.

Unsurprisingly, there were no portraits of Bradford to be found at Halloway Park. Not even so much as a miniature. It was as if Olivia's father had never existed.

Halloway Park was as lovely as Grandfather promised, but the estate was in no need of renovation or redecoration as he'd told her in London. Some of the furniture *was* antiquated, a rug or two could be replaced, but outside of that, there was little for Olivia to do. Her visions of a moldering estate ruled

over by a sickly, elderly gentleman, too caught up in his own grief at the past to pay his home much attention, was complete rubbish.

As she was beginning to suspect her grandfather's infirmities were.

No cane. No stooped shoulders. No trembling. Not since her arrival.

Olivia stopped before a bed of peonies, admiring the vibrant color as she recalled dinner two nights ago. Peter had visited, arriving from his parents' home no more than a few hours ride from her grandfather's estate.

Olivia had been overjoyed to see him. With only Grandfather's company and a mostly silent staff at Halloway Park, she had been in dire need of conversation.

They'd been enjoying a lovely meal together when Peter had mentioned that he and his younger sister, neither of whom cared for peas, had often had a contest as children, using the poor besmirched vegetable for a game of bowls. Olivia, being good at bowls, as all the Barringtons were, had jokingly plucked a pea off her plate and rolled it to Peter, announcing she wasn't completely certain the green didn't possess an incline.

Grandfather's lip had curled sharply in disapproval.

He'd set his fork and knife down with a clatter beside his plate. Taking a large sip of wine, he'd glared at Olivia, taking his time to swallow loudly before addressing her.

"You are not a child, Olivia, but a *lady*. Millicent would *never* have behaved in such a way."

Olivia had caught the pea before it could roll off the table and onto the floor, surprised over being chastised in such a way. "Grandfather—"

"I apologize, Peter," Daring said with a sniff, dismissing Olivia's response with a wave. "I was not present to oversee my granddaughter's upbringing, as you well know. Olivia was raised by a lady's companion of no consequence, who plays at being a duchess. Reminiscent of a scullery maid teaching my

chef how to make a béchamel sauce.” His flinty gaze bored into Olivia. “I am deeply embarrassed. Horrified, in fact. My dear wife must be turning over in her grave at her granddaughter’s complete lack of decorum. Perhaps some lessons in etiquette are in order.”

Shocked by such an unwarranted rebuke, Olivia had discreetly placed the pea back on her plate. She couldn’t even muster a decent response. He had never taken such a tone with her nor ever disparaged Amanda.

Grandfather continued with dinner, unconcerned at the humiliation he’d dealt let alone the slur he’d cast at the dowager duchess. He neither spoke nor looked at Olivia for the remainder of the meal. Peter, bless him, had shot her an understanding nod and changed the topic to the weather.

Olivia rubbed the petal of the peony between her fingers. She liked *paeonia*, finding them a delightful addition to any garden, however the location of this bed was not one she cared for. Reaching into the pocket of her dress, she pulled forth the tiny notebook in which she sketched out her designs. Plucking a pencil stub from behind her ear, she jotted out a note on peonies.

After that terrible dinner, Peter had asked if Olivia would care for a turn about the gardens. They’d trod this very path. At this very cluster of peonies, Peter had very politely pressed his lips to hers.

Olivia didn’t quite consider it a kiss. There had been little movement of the lips.

She had willed herself to relax in his arms—difficult, since he was barely touching her. Desperate to prove that she could be as swept away by Peter’s kiss as she had by Benjamin Cooke’s, Olivia had enthusiastically kissed him back.

Peter had made a sound of surprise.

Nothing had happened. *Less* than nothing. No muddled brain. No intoxication. Certainly no hint of arousal.

Boldly, Olivia had touched her tongue to the crease of his mouth.

Peter had made another noise and jumped away from Olivia, nearly stumbling into the peonies where she now stood.

Perhaps that is why I am so intent on moving this stupid flower bed.

Peter had stared at her, an incredulous look on his pleasant features, and pulled down the edges of his coat. And *that's* when Olivia had seen it.

His head is too large for the rest of him. And with his gold hair haloed by the setting sun, Peter, unfortunately, *did* resemble a buttercup.

The evening stroll through the gardens had become incredibly awkward after that. Peter had practically dragged her back to the house before bidding Olivia good night and retiring.

Olivia had watched his form retreat and found she didn't care.

"I still don't care." She snapped her notebook shut after marking down her thoughts on the peonies.

Peter had left the following morning, promising to see her soon. His pleasant, understated manner toward her had been no different than before. But now Olivia knew she'd be wedding a man for whom she held no physical attraction. Nor, did she think, was Peter the least attracted to her. The most she could hope for was friendship and respect.

No scent of a savage pine forest in winter or having her ears assaulted by a flat, nasal accent. No exquisite throbbing between her thighs from just a look.

Not for Olivia. No, she'd have duty to fill her days and nights.

She kicked at a pebble, watching it roll ahead of her down the path.

The gardens didn't even need redesigning, just as the house didn't require renovations. And now, every time she looked at Peter, Olivia would only see that his head was too large for his body. Even more alarming, while Olivia loved her

grandfather, she was beginning to realize she wasn't sure she liked him.

Those first remarks about Amanda were not the last such comments. This morning at breakfast, he'd disparaged Leo for being a bastard, instructing Olivia she must distance herself from, 'Murphy and that questionable woman Masterson had the bad sense to wed and make a countess.'

The knowledge that the Earl of Daring didn't need a cane—or the constant attention of a physician—was growing ever more apparent. Olivia didn't want to believe that the kind, sweet grandfather she'd grown to love had manipulated her into agreeing to wed Peter or was capable of such deceit. But she also couldn't forget Amanda's stricken look after Olivia had confessed to meeting Lord Daring nor how hard the dowager duchess had tried to rein in her dislike of him.

At the time, Olivia had accepted Amanda's explanation that she'd done 'as Millie asked me to do' and put the matter of her guardianship aside. She'd been so happy to have a grandfather, a blood relation. To find her place in the world as a Halloway. She'd become so obsessed with honoring her mother's memory through duty to her family that Olivia hadn't bothered to delve further into the events surrounding her birth.

Now that certain aspects of her grandfather's character were surfacing, Olivia wanted the remainder of the story. The part she hadn't been told.

Phaedra *knew*. Something of it, at least. Her dislike of Daring was not unfounded. Nor Tony's. Leo's. Romy's. Not one of them had expressed the least delight that Olivia had reconciled with Daring, but neither did they disparage him to her. Not even Amanda. Protecting her, she supposed. And allowing Olivia to make her own choices.

Olivia strolled to the edge of the lawn where a massive oak tree stood, gnarled branches straining up toward the sky. *The* oak tree. It might be the only piece of Halloway Park Amanda considered with any fondness. Smiling to herself, Olivia walked over and plopped down in the grass.

“Good afternoon, old friend.” What sort of stories would the tree tell Olivia if it could? Possibly the tale of a lady’s companion reading the Iliad when a handsome rake found her.

Olivia fell back into the soft grass, looking up into the sky through the branches of the oak tree. The roots of the oak were thick and tangled, erupting out of the ground in multiple places. They made a lovely place to lay one’s head. Marcus and Amanda *had* loved each other, no matter how they’d begun. Romy, Theo, Rosalind, even Tony and Leo. All of them had wed for love.

And yet, Olivia would marry out of duty.

How *unBarrington* of her.

But then, Olivia was a Halloway, wasn’t she?

A pang, the painful snap of a broken violin string, stung her chest.

Olivia did not regret reconciling with the Earl of Daring. She had wanted to know him and see Halloway Park. That Grandfather loved her wasn’t a question. He did. Olivia often saw affection for her lighting his face. Last night, he’d been smiling as she’d read to him from his favorite book.

Then he’d looked up at the portrait of Millicent and bemoaned the fact that her duke had been stolen away by his wife’s poor relation. A woman of obscure beginnings and no pedigree. Amanda Weatherly.

Olivia had gently reminded Grandfather that had Millicent and the Duke of Averell wed, she would not be in the drawing room, reading to him from his favorite book.

No, you would be the daughter of a duke. And Millicent would not be dead.

Plucking at a blade of grass, Olivia listened to the breeze ruffle the leaves above her head.

Olivia had then reminded Grandfather that Millicent had been in love with Bradford Nelson.

Love? What has that to do with anything? Duty, Olivia, is what matters.

Sighing, Olivia picked up her notebook and sketched out a design for the east side of the house, noting specific flowers and their colors. She envisioned strolling along the beds, appreciating the palette she'd chosen, her hand tucked securely in the arm of the gentleman next to her. Olivia would stop to admire the design and turn to her companion, craning her neck back because he was so very tall. Eyes a mélange of forest color, all browns, greens, and golds, would look back at her. There was darkness in their depths, but also light. The most magnificent kind.

Ben was no gentleman. American. Given to vulgar innuendo and unsavory actions. Used orchids for seduction. Quite possibly *he* was of questionable origin.

Is that what Olivia truly wanted? Did she want to peer beneath Ben's expensively tailored clothing to see what lay beneath?

Yes. More than anything.

Olivia laid her pencil down.

"Damn it."

The cursing, something she'd once been quite opposed to, was happening with increasing regularity, though rarely out loud and certainly not in front of others.

Another breeze blew beneath the tree, tugging at the loose strands of hair dangling near her cheek. The day was warm, but not overly so. Still, the shade provided by the ancient oak was welcome. Lying down, Olivia situated her head on one of the roots poking through the earth and closed her eyes. She imagined herself at Elysium, watching in the mirror above the bed as Benjamin Cooke pleased her. It was becoming somewhat of a favorite pastime.

A twig snapped behind her. A light step shifted through the grass.

Olivia rolled over carefully and opened her eyes. The other day, when she'd stayed quiet, a deer had come within a few feet of her. Maybe today it would be a rabbit, perhaps the one intent on destroying the kitchen garden. Or a fox.

Instead, a large, breathtakingly beautiful wolf approached, carrying what appeared to be a half-dead shrub partially wrapped in burlap.

A slow, delicious tingle of awareness settled over her skin. This was much better than her imagination. Olivia wasn't even that surprised to see him.

“Mr. Cooke.”

“**G**ood day, Olivia.”

The beauty lying in the grass beneath the gnarled oak struck him with a jolt to his chest, as she had that night at Elysium and every time since. Ben hadn't meant to be at Holloway Park, but he'd been drawn to this spot, lured by the knowledge that Olivia was here. If Daring saw him wandering about the lawn, the old prick would probably shoot him or advance on Ben with some ancient sword he kept in his study.

I have missed you, my lovely orchid.

At first, Ben had welcomed Olivia's departure from London. No more temptation. No more visualizing the multitude of ways he could snap Buttercup's neck. The longing for her would eventually fade. Given enough time, she was sure to view the events at Hagerty's with disgust.

View Ben with disgust.

He took to boxing nearly every day, ignoring Hagerty's admonition to return to New York and leave him in peace. Beating numerous men, those foolish enough to get into the ring with him, hadn't helped. Thinking to distract himself in cards, spirits, and possibly a random woman's arms, Ben had ventured to Elysium. He'd attempted to drown his obsession for Olivia in hazard, which he'd won, much to Leo's surprise. Drank scotch until he was nearly blind and stumbling about. And refused, *yes, refused*, the invitation of one stunning Lady Hyde-Jones to amuse her in one of the second-floor rooms.

Children playing in the park had him thinking of Olivia's children, who would all have large heads because she would wed Buttercup. He'd wheedled his way into one of London's finer gentlemen's clubs by using the name of the Duke of Averell, a bit of coin, and possibly threatening behavior—

Whits? Bits? Whites?

It didn't matter. The place had been a complete bore. Full of overly privileged gentlemen sipping drinks and pretending they ran the entire world with their soft hands and rounded bellies. Ben had played cards with a young, pampered lord, whose title he still couldn't recall, and won a decent sized house, two horses from Tattersall's, the attentions of the lord's mistress, and a pair of ruby-studded cufflinks. Ben had taken everything but the mistress.

The following day, Ben had purchased a dozen shares in a sheep farm and a small publishing company to lift his mood. He knew absolutely nothing about either and didn't care for lamb. Or radical pamphlets and printing presses.

Nothing helped forget Olivia.

After reviewing the assets he'd acquired from Harper, Ben had methodically set about divesting himself of everything but the warehouses he wanted for Rutherford Shipping until there was only one property left. A mill. Abandoned for years. The land held no real value for farming or anything else. As he jotted down directions for his London solicitor to sell the mill, Leo happened to walk past, peering over his shoulder.

Leo was always so damned noseey.

"Harper owned the mill in Foxearth?" Leo made an amused sound. "Olivia used to call it *foxglove* after one of her plants. Bought her one once. A foxglove. She was blissful."

Ben's heart caught at the sound of her name. "You are familiar with the area?"

Leo shrugged. "It's just an hour or so north of Cherry Hill. The duke's estate. I grew up there." Then he wandered out of the parlor Ben was using as a study.

Cherry Hill. The dowager duchess and Phaedra were in residence at the ducal estate. And he really shouldn't sell off a property before assessing its potential. Tearing up the letter to his London solicitor, Ben decided to visit the mill himself. There might be a brilliant business opportunity nestled in Foxground.

He frowned.

Foxearth.

The name of some tiny, forgettable village wasn't important. The fact that Cherry Hill was a short distance from Halloway Park *was*. Before Ben could change his mind and revisit the sheer stupidity of venturing out into the English countryside, he was traveling to Cherry Hill, where he had begged a room for a night or two under the guise of wanting to view the abandoned mill.

The dowager duchess had been thrilled to have company. Phaedra had greeted him politely but said little else, probably still smarting from their last encounter.

Later that night, a note had been slipped under his door just as he was about to retire. Written in a looping feminine hand. Directions to Halloway Park.

Ben took in Olivia beneath the oak tree, with the breeze ruffling her dark hair, feeling the soft contraction of his heart. If she expressed the least revulsion at the sight of him, he would leave immediately.

In the past, Ben hadn't given a shit who caught a glimpse of the boy raised near Canal Street, mere steps from Five Points. As a man, Ben still frequented those dark, dirty alleys because it suited him. It kept the thieves from the Rutherford Shipping offices on Pearl Street. No pickpockets bothered the Rutherford clerks. Gentlemen who were unwise enough to approach Lilian, Georgina's sister, had been treated to a description of the many uses of a knife.

Honestly, it was no wonder so much of Manhattan society didn't want to receive him.

As a boy, he'd nearly slit the throat of his best friend over a threadbare coat.

Ben was a terrible man. That was the truth of it.

"Good day to you," she answered.

The barest hint of pink touched the slope of her nose and bathed her cheeks, as if she'd been in the sun far more often than not. Digging in the dirt, probably. The thought made Ben smile. He often liked to envision Olivia naked, floating about a moonlit garden like some nymph.

"How unexpected to see you lurking about on my grandfather's lawn."

"Actually, I was lurking about the woods." Ben pointed to the thick trees at his back. "Not Lord Daring's lawn."

"I stand corrected." A smile tugged at her lips. "Shouldn't you be in London?" Olivia didn't seem terribly surprised to see him.

"I'm in the area on business," he said casually, trying to keep the longing for her out of his voice. He shouldn't be anywhere near Olivia Nelson. "The assets I recently acquired included an abandoned mill and the surrounding property. I thought I should take a look before selling the land."

Olivia cocked her head. "A mill?"

Her lips were the same shade as the flowers she'd been admiring earlier.

"In Foxearth," he replied.

"Foxearth?" She came up on her knees to regard him. "Why, that is close to Cherry Hill."

"The dowager duchess has been kind enough to allow me to stay at the duke's estate while I conduct my business in Foxearth."

Ben had little real interest in the mill. He'd awoken this morning after arriving the night before from London and gone straight to Cherry Hill's head gardener, after which he'd ridden for Halloway Park. For nearly an hour, he'd watched Olivia

floating about the gardens, scribbling in a tiny book she'd pulled out of the pocket of her dress. Ben had traced every slender line of her form, watching the way she'd gracefully dipped to touch an unopened rose bud.

“Leo suggested I stay at Cherry Hill. I was riding along—” Ben started.

“Not on your way to Foxearth, surely.” Her dark eyes rippled with amusement. “It’s in the other direction.”

“Is it? The roads in England are not clearly marked.”

“I see.” Olivia brushed a strand of hair from her cheek.

“As I said, I was riding along. And I spied this.” He held up the burlap sack in his hand. “Lying in the road. Abandoned. Imagine my surprise, Olivia.”

“You found a—” She peered at the plant. “Hawthorn bush wrapped in burlap sitting in the road while riding to a mill in Foxearth, which is in the opposite direction?”

Olivia knew damn well why he was here. For her. Always for her.

“I became turned around.” He looked down at the shrub in burlap, disappointed. He'd trusted the gardener at Cherry Hill when he'd asked for a rose bush. “You sound as if you don't believe me, Olivia. The fact remains, this poor thing was tossed out as if it were rubbish and in dire need of care.”

Ben and the hawthorn had a lot in common as it turned out.

“I see.” She cocked her head. “It looks suspiciously as if someone may have dug him up purposefully and wrapped him carefully in burlap before discarding him. Unusual to say the least.”

Plucking at a blade of grass, she watched him from beneath the veil of her lashes. “Well, I suppose I'll have to take the hawthorn in. I can't allow you to carry around a shrub. It might make business negotiations awkward.”

“Terribly.” Ben came forward, gripping the stupid shrub. A plant had been the only valid reason he could think of for

intruding on her at Halloway Park. “I think you’re pleased to see me.”

Her brows drew together. “I haven’t decided.”

Ben set down the shrub in front of her and folded his much larger body down to the grass, waiting for her to run from him. Instead, Olivia’s slender form arched in his direction.

Attraction seemed such an ordinary word for the way the light sparkled between them. The feeling was far too profound to be merely lust. Ben had known it for some time, just as he knew he shouldn’t be here. It was a particular sort of torture.

“Why are you really here, Ben?”

“Because.” His forefinger trailed along the top of her hand. “I can’t stay away.”

Olivia breathed softly at the light touch of his finger before glancing back at the house. The lawn sloped abruptly just before the oak, so they were hidden and well out of sight of the windows. Peter hadn't yet returned to Halloway Park, though he was due to arrive later today. Grandfather's study was on the other side of the house. No one was about.

How Olivia wished she could forget this complicated, brash American who had arrived when she'd least expected, shaking the very foundation of her life. Impossible, now.

"You don't have to say anything, Olivia." His words brushed gently against her skin. Ben wasn't wearing gloves. Olivia could see them sticking out of his pocket, and a slow, delicious tendril of honey settled between her thighs at the sight of those long, calloused fingers. Not a gentleman's hands. Scars sprouted across the top of his knuckles. Dozens.

Olivia traced the line of his knuckles with one finger, feeling the bone and the ridge of scar tissue.

"Not all of those are from Hagerty's," he murmured. "You should know that."

They couldn't possibly be. Some of the scars were faded. Old. He'd been fighting with his fists for years. "I suspected they were not, Benjamin."

He turned his hand, stretching out his fingers to lace with hers.

She took a shaky breath, trying to still the beating of her poor, conflicted heart. So torn between duty and this ruthless, brilliant man who had never once mentioned a future with her. Ben desired her, and there was no denying the heat between them. But Olivia also sensed his restraint, much more apparent now than it had been at Lord Shipton's ball.

It had to do with Hagerty's. Mr. Stewart. A starving boy on the Rutherfords' steps.

"Tell me about New York." She was curious at what his life was across the ocean, and it seemed a safe enough topic, helping to break the tension between them. Georgina often regaled the Barringtons with tales of Manhattan, her sister, Lilian, and of course, Ben. She was often homesick.

"Georgina hasn't told you everything you need to know about Manhattan? Or me?"

She did know quite a bit more about Ben than he probably knew about her, but that version of him was one created by Georgina. Olivia had come to understand, as of late, that there were many versions, many truths depending on who was telling the tale.

"I love the city," he said. "I grew up there." A shadow flitted across his handsome features but vanished just as quickly. "But I prefer the quiet I can find outside Manhattan. Less noise. No nefarious creatures like myself." The mischievous grin Olivia was so fond of crossed his lips.

"Only rabbits and deer, I expect. Trees."

"Thick forest. Miles of it. My favorite place is on the Hudson where there is nothing but those trees and a big, lazy river."

"Your grandmother's house. Where she shot squirrels stealing from her garden and Georgina climbed trees. I remember."

He nodded. "I would spend hours at the edge of the Hudson, watching barges float by, loaded with all manner of goods. Rutherford Shipping was started from one such barge, a pile of furs, and a great deal of rye whiskey. The old Dutch

and English families might rule New York society, but it is men like Jacob Rutherford who have the real power because of the fortunes they've made. Jacob's father was an illiterate barge owner who drank himself to death. New York and London are both savage places, I suppose, but I think New York is much less civilized."

Olivia glanced out across the sweeping lawn. She did imagine New York to be savage. Wild, like Ben. She'd been right to imagine him as part of some thick, mysterious forest. It suited him.

"It's beautiful there. But far from perfect. Expansive. And the accents of those that live there." He rolled his eyes. "An affront to tender English ears."

"Yes, I'm not sure why you feel the need to excise all inflection from your words. I hope to see New York one day. Georgina speaks so fondly of her home. Leo as well." There was a wistful note in her voice, one she couldn't hide. If Olivia wed Peter, as she was meant to, she wouldn't be traveling to New York with the rest of the family.

"Is Mr. Stewart in shipping as well?"

The big fingers laced with hers tensed.

"No. Stewart is making his fortune in railroads. Railways, they are called here. I assume that was why he was in London. He and I are not friends."

"You were though, once." She looked over at him.

"Not any longer. It doesn't matter why."

Olivia thought it did matter, quite a bit.

"And before you ask, I have no idea why he's interested in Phaedra, besides the obvious." His brows wrinkled together. "But I'll find out." He squeezed her hand. "You aren't to worry. I won't let anything happen to her."

Olivia's heart leaned out of her chest toward him. His protection of her and Phaedra spoke volumes about who this man really was, despite the layers of darkness covering him.

“How do you know him?” The question hovered in the air between them. “He called you Twist.”

Ben didn't answer for the longest time. He looked away from her into the thick spray of trees. “A nickname I once had.”

Her thumb ran back and forth over the edge of his palm. Ben had shrugged off the veneer of gentleman so effortlessly at Hagerty's. Threatened Logan with a smile on his face. “You were ten when you came to be in your uncle's care,” she said carefully. “Jacob Rutherford.”

When he caught her eyes this time, his were shadowed. Remote. “Have you considered, Olivia, what sort of person you would be had you not been raised by the Barringtons but instead grew up here, with Lord Daring?”

Olivia shook her head, allowing him to divert her.

“You might not be you. Perhaps you wouldn't adore dirt, worms, and shrubs. Or a good prank.” His fingers tightened. “Don't bother denying it.”

“I won't. I suppose I'm not as discreet as I think.”

“Leo knows you switched Averell's scotch with tea.” He smiled down at her. “Had you not been raised by the dowager duchess, you might never have become the sort of young lady who would venture into Elysium.” Some emotion glinted in the patchwork of his hazel eyes. “You should consider who you might have become. That could be far more helpful in deciding where you belong.”

She pondered that for a moment. If she'd been raised by her grandparents, Olivia's upbringing would have been far more structured. Her life planned out for her. It was Marcus Barrington who had first taken her into a greenhouse when she was merely a child. He'd noticed how she adored weeds, flowers, dirt of all kinds. He'd sat beside her as Cherry Hill's head gardener had taught Olivia how to pot a violet. Olivia's joy in gardening had begun that day.

“I think I would be different. Better at embroidery, to be sure.” A rueful smile crossed her lips. “And I would have

known my grandmother. Possibly my own mother. Grandfather is an extension of her, so being with him is nearly like having Millicent with me.” Her thumb rubbed his once more, feeling the strength in his hand. There was such intimacy in holding a person’s hand. She’d never realized it before.

“Would you have been better off if the Rutherfords hadn’t taken you in?”

“No.” There was absolutely no hesitation.

“But what if your mother suddenly appeared? Wouldn’t you—”

“The answer would still be no.” His fingers closed tighter over hers. “I understand the duty you feel to Lord Daring and the Halloways. There is no need to convince me further.”

“You think my loyalty is misplaced. My duty to wed Peter ridiculous,” she said, voicing her doubts out loud.

“That isn’t up to me to decide,” he said softly.

“Daring is my grandfather. My mother died shortly after my birth, and I was taken away by Amanda. The loss of me caused my grandmother to collapse and die. I’m all Grandfather has left. The last Halloway.”

He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her temple, filling the air around her with pine and clean linen. “It is not your responsibility to replace your mother.”

“I have a duty.”

His eyes shimmered at her beneath the oak, taking on the appearance of the leaves over their heads. Turning his hand, Cooke brought her wrist to his lips. The warmth of his mouth trailed all the way down her arm.

“You don’t need to explain your choices to me, Livy.”

The endearment tugged at her heart. The handsome stranger at Elysium, this disreputable American, the man who’d introduced her to pleasure, who *was* pleasure to Olivia, he was the *only* person who understood her.

A tiny sob burst from her lips. “I gave my word to my grandfather,” she whispered. “Even though I am starting to suspect he may have manipulated me. But I still—I made a promise.” Her fingers slid down the side of his face, catching on the scruff of hair lining his jaw. “And then you—I don’t even know what we are to each other.”

“Everything,” he said. “You are everything.” Sadness lingered in his eyes before his mouth fell over hers.

Olivia closed her eyes. Heat inched up her body, a thousand matches being lit one after another as their breaths mingled. Her hands slid beneath his coat, trailing along the muscles of his ribs, his chest, absorbing all the sharp edges of Benjamin Cooke. Her tongue darted out, tracing along the seam of his lips until his mouth opened.

A groan shook him as he pulled her closer, then down into the grass with him. She sprawled half atop Ben, skirts shamelessly riding up her legs, the warmth of him seeping into her skin as his lips more fully claimed hers.

Olivia’s mind drifted, too absorbed with the feel of him beneath her. Cupping his face between her hands, she looked into his eyes, marveling at the way the green started to darken, blocking out the brown and gold. Her leg brushed across his lower body.

“Cock,” she whispered against his mouth.

“I won’t even bother to ask how you learned the word, proper young lady that you are.” He kissed her again, taking the opportunity to graze her bottom lip with his teeth. “Is it any wonder I mistook you for a woman of questionable morals?”

“I suppose not.” Olivia didn’t feel proper at the moment.

“It is one of the things I adore most about you, Miss Olivia Nelson. The knowledge that inside your prim exterior beats the heart of a courtesan.” One hand trailed down her midsection, palm down in a possessive manner, before pressing the heel of his hand against her mound.

Olivia let out a soft moan, lifting herself more fully into his hand. The slight pressure teased at the promise of more pleasure. He cupped her through her dress, the heel of his palm exactly where the ache continued to build.

“Ben.” Wetness gathered between her thighs at his mere touch, even through her clothing. “I lose my senses around you. It can’t be normal.”

“Unique, Livy. That is the word you are searching for.” He pulled her more fully atop him, pulling up her skirts until the hard length of his cock pressed between her thighs in the area his hand had just vacated.

Glorious.

Taking hold of her waist, he pulled her down as his hips pressed upward.

“Oh.” Her breath hitched, eyes widening as the friction between them stoked her pleasure. Ben grabbed at her hip, controlling her movements atop him. The delicious pressure built inside her, as impossible as that seemed.

“You aren’t even touching me”—warmth crept up her cheeks—“there.”

“Another proper young lady, one who isn’t possessed of your blatantly sexual nature, might not be as receptive.” Ben rolled his hips. “Livy.” He pulled her down to his mouth, kissing her so savagely it took the air from her lungs. “I want to fuck you in a field of wildflowers.” The words lingered with his teeth along her neck.

A panting, breathless sound came from her, the mere vision of being naked with Benjamin Cooke sending a rush of arousal curling around her breasts and between her thighs.

“Miss Nelson!” The sound came from the lawn above them.

Morris. Grandfather’s butler. “I—” The tremors were already beginning to start deep inside her, ready to cascade down her limbs.

“Then don’t scream,” he growled, cupping one hand over her mouth. The forest of his eyes stared intently at her. So many things swirled in their depths. Lust. Longing. Something that looked very much like—

Grinding herself shamelessly against him, Olivia’s body tightened and convulsed, and she screamed his name against his hand. She writhed atop him as her back arched, pleasure rippling over her skin.

“Miss Nelson!” Morris sounded closer. “Are you down there? Lord Daring is asking for you.”

The voice of her grandfather’s butler cooled Olivia’s passion with the force of a bucket of water being tossed over her head. She rolled off of Ben and fell into the grass.

Dear God.

Once more, she’d completely lost herself to Benjamin Cooke. She was *not* supposed to be rubbing herself against a man’s cock, even while fully clothed, to achieve sexual gratification. Olivia hadn’t even known such a thing was possible.

Apparently, it is because I possess the soul of a courtesan.

“Bollocks.”

“Mine are unaccountably tender.” Ben smiled at her, clearly amused by her flustered state, unbothered by the fact that her grandfather’s butler was hovering just above them. Calmly, he sat up and unsuccessfully attempted to adjust his coat over the immense tenting of his trousers.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I—I didn’t even know—we’re fully clothed. You didn’t even—”

Her entire face was flaming.

“Put my fingers inside you?” Ben wiggled his fingers. “Kiss you?” His gaze dropped to the spot between her thighs.

Oh. Goodness.

Another flush rose over her cheeks. Her body was still throbbing from whatever—well, whatever had transpired

between them. “There are times when I sincerely don’t like you.”

“Oh, Livy.” He grinned. “It means that quite a bit of the time, you do.”

Brushing off her skirts, legs wobbling, Olivia sent Ben a pointed look to remain quiet while she jogged up the side of the lawn. “I’m here, Morris. Apologies. I must have fallen asleep under the tree. I’ll be right up. I’ve got to retrieve my notebook. I must have dropped it.”

“Very good, miss.” Morris lumbered back toward the house.

Sleeping under a tree would explain some of the grass stains at the very least.

Bollocks.

Cursing again. She couldn’t seem to help herself. Not in cursing and not in wanting Ben. Olivia had been under a tree on her grandfather’s lawn engaging in activities of an intimate nature. Now she had a general idea of what physical relations would be like with Ben.

Marvelous. That’s what it would be.

I want to fuck you in a field of wildflowers.

Another wave of arousal struck her, curling suddenly between her thighs, nearly causing her to stumble. The crude words, the way his voice deepened when he said such filthy things, never failed to conjure erotic visions before her eyes.

Olivia reminded herself that she’d promised to wed Peter, but no outrage or self-recrimination stirred within her. Her guilt over the attraction to Cooke had faded sometime between seeing him at Hagerty’s and today. It didn’t help that he seemed to be able to divine the nature of her soul.

Very troublesome.

“Mr. Cooke,” she hissed as she came back toward the oak. “Retreat into the forest from whence you came.”

But there was nothing beneath the oak tree but the burlap sack containing the poor, abused hawthorn.

T *hump.*

There was nothing quite like the sound of a knife finding its target.

Thump.

Ben imagined it wasn't a tree but Morgan Stewart he was throwing knives at. He wouldn't waste a knife throw on Buttercup.

Thump.

"Three again." Phaedra's voice echoed in the clearing. Giving him a cheeky smile, she said, "I need four to beat you."

"You do."

Ben hadn't yet overstayed his welcome at Cherry Hill, but his excuses for lingering at the Duke of Averell's estate were beginning to wear thin. Two days had gone by, plenty of time to view an old, abandoned mill and return to London. Enough time so that if Olivia wished to seek him out, she could.

He walked to the tree and pulled the knives from the trunk, his fingertips pressed over his chest, exactly in the location of his heart.

Phaedra held out her hand for the knives. "My turn."

Ben reluctantly placed them in her hand. He should have known there would be a price for the directions to Halloway Park.

There was a price for everything.

Reasoning that it would be a good idea for Phaedra to be able to defend herself, given Morgan Stewart's interest, Ben had given in to her request to learn how to use a knife. He had seen the way Stewart looked at Phaedra, as if he would die of thirst if he didn't touch her. Probably the same way Ben regarded Olivia.

So, he'd taught Phaedra how to properly twist when throwing a knife.

That's where the name had come from. Twist. Long ago, Ben had wished for a name that sounded more powerful. Threatening. Blade, perhaps. Or Edge. But he'd stayed Twist.

"Do not, under any circumstances, tell either Leo or the duke." Leo would probably agree with arming Phaedra if he knew what his sister had gotten herself into. He knew Stewart by reputation. But Averell wouldn't understand. He'd assume being a duke would solve the matter.

It wouldn't.

"I've much more to lose by either of my brothers finding out, Mr. Cooke. Now, I am operating under a disadvantage." She placed her hands on her hips. "I'm in skirts, which challenges my form, and the knives are heavier than those I would normally carry."

"You would never normally carry a knife, Phaedra. It isn't an accessory for a young lady."

She'd begged Ben to help her purchase appropriate knives for a woman to carry. So far, he'd refused. But Phaedra wore a person down. After being in her company the last few days, he could well understand why Averell had just allowed her to accompany him to Elysium. She'd probably driven him mad, pestering him at every opportunity.

"I feel I deserve an extra throw," Phaedra insisted, daring Ben to refuse.

Ben rolled his eyes. "Fine." He didn't really mind indulging her with an extra throw. There wasn't any way she could possibly win. He was exceptionally good with knives.

Phaedra took up her stance, aimed, and took her four throws. Two edged the bullseye in the middle. One went wild. The other sank lower on the trunk.

“One more?” She smiled prettily. “I need to perfect my skills before arriving in America.”

“You aren’t going to be flinging knives at the grand opening of a hotel, Phaedra.” Manhattan was in no way prepared for the arrival of Lady Phaedra Barrington. The very sight of her would give Cordelia fits, duke’s daughter or not.

“I might if there isn’t proper entertainment.”

On Ben’s last visit to Elysium, he’d looked at Elysium’s Red Book. He’d paged through the thick ledger which contained all the outlandish wagers made on the premises, duly witnessed by Leo’s man, Peckham. The entry Ben was looking for hadn’t been with the other wagers on Lady Phaedra Barrington’s potential disaster, but hidden, on a page of its own.

Lady Phaedra Barrington will run off with an American before the year is out. Ten thousand pounds. Wager made by M. Stewart.

Ben had slammed the Red Book shut. The date was two days *before* Ben had met Olivia at Elysium. Which meant Phaedra had known Stewart for some time. Stewart didn’t gamble, so the fact he had been at Elysium at all was a small shock. If he couldn’t control the outcome, Stewart simply didn’t play. Which meant he was sure of one thing—Phaedra.

Ben didn’t bother drawing Leo’s attention to the entry.

Until Phaedra set foot in America, Ben had decided not to tell Leo anything at all. He was already too concerned at the moment, given Georgina’s condition. By then, Ben would have men he trusted watching Phaedra and The Barrington.

In the meantime, Ben taught Phaedra how to throw knives.

At least Stewart was gone from London. He’d returned to New York, to wait like a fucking spider in its web for his fly. Stewart had been kind enough to leave Ben a note before his departure.

I didn't want Harper's warehouses. But I did find something I wanted in London, old friend. I think you have too. Too bad she'll be wed to Peter Thomlinson. I might just pay a visit to Jacob Rutherford and let him know you are thriving across the pond while visiting the lovely Georgina. No need to thank me.

The meaning was clear in every line of Stewart's barely legible writing. The prick never had learned to form his letters properly. You'd think the tutors Gertrude Van Rhys had hired for her little group of orphans would have instructed Stewart better.

Stewart could be merely toying with Ben, as he had for years. Threatening Ben from the shadows out of pure spite. He could rid the world of Stewart, or Ben could simply tell Jacob the truth. Strange, he hadn't realized he had a conscience until he'd met Olivia.

If Ben confessed to Jacob, there was no guarantee the man who raised him wouldn't have Ben shot and dumped in the East River. Jacob didn't tolerate deceit, unless it was his own.

If Ben killed Stewart, the truth would be silenced, but Ben would still have to live with the stain on the conscience he'd only just realized he had.

The weight of his lie seemed to increase every day. Heavy. Monstrous. Pressing down on his chest with increasing force. The urge to tell Jacob, he realized, had been growing over the years in small increments. Since Olivia, it had haunted Ben constantly.

But no matter what he decided to do, it wouldn't keep Olivia from marrying Peter Thomlinson. That was the hard and terrible truth Ben had faced after leaving her beneath the oak tree. Yes, he could ruin her, force Olivia to wed him, but eventually she'd regret having chosen him over Daring. And if he ruined her, Ben would be taking Olivia's choices away. Manipulating her as he suspected Daring had done. Forcing her to marry Ben before knowing what he was.

And Olivia deserved a choice, even if it would never be him.

Ben strolled over to the tree, kicking at the leaves on the ground, trying to find the knife Phaedra had thrown wild. Too bad the blade hadn't struck him in the heart. He'd been knifed in the ribs before. Knew what it felt like. It was the same slicing pain he'd experienced at knowing it was better Olivia wed Thomlinson than him.

"I suppose we can stop," Phaedra said, interrupting his thoughts. "It smells as if it might rain, and I could do with some tea."

"Agreed." Ben didn't care for tea. But he was hungry.

We know what it is to starve, don't we, Twist?

Stewart's first words upon seeing Ben again outside the Rutherford Shipping offices. By that time, he was calling himself Morgan Stewart and he'd looked nothing like the thin, pale boy he'd once been. Only his eyes, like the crust of ice along a pond, were the same. And the scar. The one Ben had given him.

Ben had been handing out bread, cheese, and coin to the hoard of filthy children littering the wharf. He often saw himself in those gaunt faces. One could never escape the past. Not completely.

Stewart carried one hell of a grudge. But it wasn't for the scar. It was for the damned coat.

Five Points, eighteen years ago

“I *t would be a kindness to slit her throat, Twist. I found her. The boots and coat are mine.”*

Nubbs had found her. There were rules. Boundaries that had to be observed. He nodded in agreement.

The woman was filthy, lying on her side, wailing as if she'd been stabbed in the stomach. If she didn't shut up, she'd draw more than him and Nubbs down this alley, and it would go poorly for her. He looked at the boots on her feet. Good leather. Finely made. He could tell by the tiny stitches. The boots would fetch more than a coin or two.

His stomach growled. Loudly. He was hungry. Sister Bridget hadn't fed them today because they hadn't brought her anything decent. No buttons or coin.

Sister Bridget ran the brothel down the street. She let him and Nubbs sleep by the fire at night as long as they brought her whatever they found in the pockets they picked. His first real memory was of her kitchen and the barely dressed women who came down for tea. One of them was probably his mother. He didn't know which.

“Benjamin.” The crazy woman in the alley wept as if her heart was breaking.

A coat was clutched tightly in her hands. It wasn't until he got closer that the odor of a dead body struck him. Wasn't the first time he'd smelled such a thing. Nor unlikely to be the last.

He'd seen plenty of corpses. When you lived as he did, dead bodies were a near daily occurrence.

"Whew." Nubbs made a gagging sound. "Something's dead."

Nubbs had a weak stomach. He didn't. "Body, I expect."

"Ben, is that you?" The woman, hair knotted about her head, looked up at him, hugging the coat. Her eyes gleamed with madness. Or sickness. He wasn't sure. Didn't matter. He was going to take the coat and the boots from her. Slitting her throat would be a kindness.

"Take the fucking coat, Twist. I'll get the boots." Nubbs held his nose, kicking at an enormous rat that had jumped off the pile of rags in the corner.

The woman smelled as if she were spoiled, like meat that had been sitting in the sun too long. Or the sludge on the Collection Pond from the slaughterhouses.

Nubbs reached for her boots, and she kicked out.

"Benjamin," she implored him. "My sweet boy." She extended a trembling hand in his direction, urging him to come closer.

There was something pinned to the inside of the coat. He thought it might be a bit of coin. Or possibly a watch or locket he could pawn. Nubbs hadn't seen it.

"Go on, Nubbs. Keep watch at the end of the alley. She's making so much noise, Bruno and the others might come. I'll get the coat and boots without slitting her throat. Don't want blood over everything." He was hungry and didn't want to share. He'd take that bit of coin, and Nubbs wouldn't know.

"Right." Nubbs shivered and ran to the end of the alley, thin arms clasped around his body.

He approached the woman carefully. She smiled at him, her lips covered in sores. The smell was awful the closer he got.

"Sweetheart," she whispered. "Are you cold? You look cold." Shaking out the coat, she said, "Put it on, my love.

Mama doesn't want you to get sick." She twitched, glancing at the rags behind her.

The rags looked like they were moving, but it was because of all the rats. A child's hand fell out, the fingers gnawed almost to the bone.

Again, not the worst thing he'd ever seen.

She held out the coat, and he slid the nearly threadbare fabric over his shoulders. There wasn't a locket. Or a bit of coin. Just a note, neatly pinned inside.

Her fingers circled his wrist, pulling him close with inhuman strength. Her other hand smoothed the hair sticking up around his ears.

"Jacob Rutherford. Lafayette Square. Show him the note. I pinned it inside so you won't lose it. He's your uncle. Go. Be quick. You don't belong here." She released him with a wheeze, the sound of death rattling in her throat, and slumped back against the wall. "I'm so proud of you, Benjamin. Your father was too." Her voice cracked. "I'm sorry I can't come with you."

"Give over the coat, Twist."

He turned to face Nubbs who'd come back down the alley. His thin features were pinched. Hungry. "And the boots. You were gonna run off. Take the coat. What's inside? Coin?" Nubbs tried to tear the coat from his shoulders, and he lashed out with the knife he carried, catching Nubbs on the chin.

"Fuck off," he screamed at his best friend. "The coat's mine." Then he took off running as far as he could from that filthy alley, only stopping to ask directions to Lafayette Square.



"HOW IS SHE?"

Ben could still smell that rotting body in the alley, though he was standing in the English countryside. But Phaedra's

question pushed aside his memory of those two boys willing to kill each other for a coat and some boots.

You left me behind, Twist. Sister Bridget beat me nearly half to death for losing you.

Stewart had every reason to hate him. Ben would have felt the same.

“Mr. Cooke.” Phaedra tapped lightly on his arm, her lovely features drawn together in concern.

“Who?” He was still thinking of Alice Rutherford. The half-dead woman in the alley, for she couldn’t have been anyone else. Jacob rarely mentioned his sister, but Grandmother Rutherford always wept for her lost daughter. Until the day she died, the woman who’d taught him how to shoot squirrels and baked apple tarts because they were Ben’s favorite, had waited for Alice to come home.

I should have told her.

“Olivia,” Phaedra said, giving him a curious look. “You went to Halloway Park.”

“Don’t you know how she is?”

The thought of the dying Alice Rutherford, rotting away as she thrust a coat at him, would haunt Ben for the rest of his life. He knew there was nothing he could have done for Alice. Her son had been nothing more than a gnawed-on corpse. Ben had been hungry. Cold. A child who’d seen too much. So he’d taken the coat and had become the son Jacob wanted.

“We haven’t spoken. Not since Hagerty’s,” Phaedra admitted. “She lost her temper and said some unkind things to me. All well deserved.”

“You shouldn’t have been there to begin with. Stop blackmailing Torrington and just—stay away from Hagerty’s. And Stewart. He isn’t a gentleman.”

“Neither are you, Mr. Cooke. I don’t mean that as an insult.”

“I didn’t take it as such.”

Ben and Phaedra started toward the main house, a massive edifice of stone surrounded by magnificent gardens. He'd wandered about the path last night, inhaling honeysuckle and enjoying a cheroot, thinking of Olivia. A structure made of glass jutted out from one side of the duke's estate and faced the garden. Ben had walked over, filled with longing as he looked at Olivia's sanctuary at Cherry Hill.

He needed to leave this place. Leave London. Get out of England completely and never return. His presence in Olivia's life had done nothing but hurt her. Sowed confusion. It was his own selfishness that wouldn't allow him to leave her alone. Olivia belonged here. It wasn't as if he had anything to offer her. Certainly not back in New York. He might not be as welcome in the city once he confessed to Jacob. Or he might be dead.

"Her Grace asked me just this morning," Phaedra said, her big, confident stride keeping pace with him, "if I thought you actually meant to visit Foxearth and your abandoned mill."

It would do no good to have the dowager duchess note his interest in Olivia. He'd done enough damage.

"Today, as a matter of fact. I thought I'd go now," he said as they approached the side door leading into the house. "I must return to London tomorrow."

Phaedra looked up at the sky. "We stopped throwing knives because it was going to rain, but you've decided to go to Foxearth? Now? Perhaps you should postpone—"

"It's always raining in England, Phaedra," he interrupted, stalking off in the direction of the stables. "If I wait for it to stop, I'll never leave."

Olivia came down the stairs, careful not to trip over the hem of her skirts. The pale green silk was one of her favorites. The bodice was modest, as were all her gowns, but decorated with splashes of lace with a pattern of vines embroidered across the skirts. Romy had designed it specially for her so that Olivia might always feel as if she were walking in the garden.

Romy had also offered to design Olivia's wedding gown in a letter she'd received only this morning.

Her foot hovered over the step, gripping the banister for support.

In the two days since Mr. Cooke's appearance on the lawn, holding a half-dead shrub, Olivia had thought of little other than him and the intimacies they'd shared. Certainly, Olivia hadn't given a thought to her pending betrothal to Peter, who still had not formally proposed to her. Part of her didn't think he'd bother.

She shook the thought away and stepped down.

Riding to Cherry Hill had been her first inclination, but Olivia wasn't sure what she would do or say to Cooke once she arrived. He hadn't admitted to any depth of feeling for her, which she supposed was wise given Olivia's duty to wed another man. But when she'd asked Ben during his visit what they were to each other, he'd answered, "*Everything.*"

Everything seemed to encompass quite a bit.

She'd still been deciding on a course of action when Peter had ridden up the drive of Halloway Park later that day.

Oh, and Ben wanted to tup her in a field of wildflowers.

Olivia grasped the banister tighter.

The image of her and Cooke, naked in a field, refused to go away, appearing at various inopportune moments to muddle her thoughts. She supposed the idea would keep her entertained and aroused all through dinner while Peter and Grandfather discussed politics and the like.

As far as going to Cherry Hill, Olivia had decided before dressing for dinner she needed to make the trip. Not only because of Cooke, but the need to speak to Amanda had become more and more urgent. The longer Olivia was at Halloway Park, the more suspicious of her grandfather's machinations she became. And Phaedra was owed an apology.

Male voices floated up to her from the direction of the drawing room, her grandfather's ringing with glowering disapproval.

A familiar, whisky-soaked voice with a slight nasal quality gave a mocking response.

What the bloody hell was Benjamin Cooke doing here?

Cursing!

Butterflies suddenly filled her stomach, mixing with the absolute indifference to her cursing. It was as if, in thinking of Cooke, she'd somehow brought him to Halloway Park.

Morris, Grandfather's butler, stood at the bottom of the stairs. "The gentlemen await you in the drawing room. There is a guest for dinner this evening."

Thunder boomed outside, rattling the glass in the windows and splattering water against the panes.

"I've already taken the liberty of having a guest room prepared," Morris said. "The roads might well be impassable if the storm doesn't end soon." He waved her forward.

“Very good. Thank you, Morris.” The very idea that Grandfather would even allow one such as Benjamin Cooke to stay at Halloway Park was ridiculous. Lord Daring had never made any secret of his dislike for Americans or, as he liked to call them, the “mongrels across the ocean.” Ben, in particular, was the very embodiment of everything her grandfather despised.

Olivia recalled the night of the Shipton ball. Her grandfather’s collapse which had resulted in her promise to wed Peter. He’d seen her with Ben. She suspected Peter had as well.

Straightening her spine in the best imitation of Amanda when facing down Romy and Theo’s scandals before a crowd, Olivia waltzed into the drawing room, determined Ben’s presence would not result in even the tiniest crack of her composure.

Grandfather didn’t look at all on the verge of a collapse, but murder wasn’t out of the question. He was regarding Ben as if he were a snake or perhaps a rodent. Thankfully, Grandfather’s cane was nowhere in sight.

Yes, because he doesn’t really need it, Olivia.

If he had, Grandfather would likely swat their guest with it.

Benjamin Cooke stood jovially next to Peter, conversing as if they were old friends. He towered over both Peter and Grandfather, a glass of amber liquid clasped in one big hand. Olivia’s steps faltered, struck by Ben’s presence, as usual. Breathless in the face of this beautiful, slightly brutal man whom she—

Olivia’s mind hiccupped, the word that had nearly spilled out frozen into ice to avoid taking shape. She wasn’t ready to admit such a thing. Not yet.

His hazel eyes lingered over her briefly, long enough to sear Olivia’s skin beneath the silk of her gown, almost as if he were touching her. Or not. It wouldn’t matter. She saw herself

writhing against him beneath the oak tree, climaxing while fully clothed from only the press of his body against hers.

I can't marry Peter. The words shrieked inside her head.

“Ah, there you are, Olivia.” Daring took her hand and drew her forward, placing Olivia between himself and Peter as if to protect her from the nefarious Mr. Cooke.

Too late, she thought hysterically.

This was perhaps the most awkward, horrible moment of her life.

“You’ll remember my granddaughter, Miss Olivia Nelson.” Grandfather sneered as if his guest wasn’t worthy of an introduction.

“Lovely to see you again, Miss Nelson.” Ben bowed and took her fingers, daring to nip one of her knuckles through her gloves before releasing her.

“Mr. Cooke.” Clipped. A polite, chilly greeting. Despite the warmth shooting up her arm and the tingle of her skin.

There was no indication, other than the graze of his teeth, that Ben found her the least interesting. If anything, the look on his face spoke of resignation at having to dine at Halloway Park.

“Peter,” Grandfather snarled, not bothering to hide his displeasure at their unwelcome guest, “has invited Mr. Cooke for dinner, given the weather.” Flinty eyes tore between Olivia and Ben, as if he expected she would be pounced on and carried away at any moment.

Olivia composed her features into blandness. “How lovely.”

“I met Mr. Cooke unexpectedly on the road to Foxearth,” Peter said. “A chance meeting but a fortuitous one. I have long had designs on the plot of land with an abandoned mill. The previous owner, Mr. Harper, has recently sold the property to Mr. Cooke. I had assumed I would have to visit Cherry Hill to discuss the sale when I found Mr. Cooke near Foxearth.”

Olivia wondered *how* Peter had known Ben was at Cherry Hill in the first place. Phaedra came to mind.

“We returned here to discuss the specifics of the sale. And enjoy a drink to seal our bargain. Unfortunately, it started to rain once we arrived. I certainly couldn’t send Mr. Cooke off in such weather, could I?” Peter’s eyes, usually so kind, settled with determination on her grandfather.

Two tiny spots of red stood out on Grandfather’s cheeks. He was furious.

“Harper’s mill and the land are worthless.” His flinty eyes slid over Ben with oily dislike. “A poor investment, I think,” Grandfather said to Peter. “You know *nothing* about operating a mill. Nor should you. A gentleman doesn’t dirty his hands in trade.”

Peter, bless him, didn’t so much as flinch at Grandfather’s rebuke.

“Times are changing, my lord.” His answer was absent the usual deference he showed her grandfather.

Ben listened to their exchange with seemingly little interest, though Olivia doubted that was the case.

“I’m sure Olivia isn’t interested in such boring talk.” Grandfather took her arm. “It is poor manners, at any rate, to engage in such a discussion with a lady present.”

Olivia’s lips tightened. She had grown used to her grandfather’s opinion that she was supposed to merely drift about and be useless without an intelligent thought in her head, but until now, she hadn’t realized how absolutely unwelcome she found it.

“You aren’t planning a restoration of the mill then, Mr. Cooke? Or utilizing the property for something else?” Olivia asked, daring to look up at him.

Grandfather’s irritation at her question was palpable. His fingers tightened on her elbow.

“Mr. Thomlinson made a compelling argument for a quick sale, and I had no plans for the mill myself. At any rate, I’m

returning to New York soon, Miss Nelson. I planned to leave for London possibly tomorrow or the day after. Depending on the weather.”

A terrible, hollow feeling took hold of Olivia as Grandfather led her into the dining room. Ben had to return to New York at some point, of course. He only meant to stay in England until Georgina’s child was born.

Peter slid into the chair beside her, flashing a smile. He seemed incredibly pleased about something. She supposed it was the property he was purchasing from Ben, though she couldn’t fathom why he would want an old mill.

Ben took the seat directly opposite Olivia. The toe of one large, booted foot tapped against the arch of her slipper, but he never even so much as looked in her direction.

Olivia’s hands clasped tightly in her lap as she schooled her features into indifference. Grandfather was watching her and Ben closely, likely searching for the slightest sign of attraction between them. She only hoped he wouldn’t feel compelled to peer beneath the table.

“This seems somewhat familiar, doesn’t it?” Ben nodded at Peter. “Do you recall? When we first became acquainted at the Duke of Averell’s.”

An ugly sound came from Grandfather.

“I admit, I didn’t envy you that evening.” Peter sent an apologetic look at Olivia. “Sitting beside Lady Phaedra.”

“A true disaster,” Grandfather muttered loudly from his place at the head of the table. He waved at Morris to start serving. “I am only happy to know Olivia is no longer being influenced by her. It is only due to Olivia’s fortitude and breeding that she hasn’t been pulled into any of that young lady’s schemes.”

“Undoubtedly,” Ben said, keeping his gaze averted from Olivia’s.

“The entire Barrington line is tainted. Though I’m sure it doesn’t bother *you*, Cooke.” Grandfather sat back, a smug,

tight smile on his lips. “Lineage isn’t often a priority where you are from.”

Ben merely shrugged at the insult.

“The previous duke destroyed his line with his choice of duchess. Though, perhaps I shouldn’t speak so unkindly of your hostess.”

“Nor will I, of my host,” Ben replied, those long, powerful fingers, tracing the line of his fork. A ghost of a smile crossed his lips as he regarded Olivia’s grandfather, clearly angry at the insult done to Amanda. The toe of his boot pushed gently into Olivia’s foot.

“I disagree with your assessment of Her Grace,” Olivia interjected, grateful for Ben’s defense of Amanda.

There would be no more disparagement of the woman who had raised Olivia. Nor any of the Barringtons. So far, in the last few days alone, she’d suffered slurs against Romy—*Like mother like daughter. Stealing Granby from poor Lady Beatrice*—Theodosia—*A tart in the making, she was bound to be ruined at any moment*—and Leo—*A stain which should have been expunged.*

“I would not be myself”—Olivia’s gaze flicked to Ben, remembering their conversation beneath the oak tree—“if not for the care given to me by the Barringtons. There is no one more a *lady* than the dowager duchess.” Her fingers came up from her lap and pressed into the wood of the table. “In my opinion, my lord.”

Grandfather’s lips pursed into a tight rosette. He could not like that she had contradicted him. He opened his mouth, likely to chastise her, but was interrupted.

Peter, bless him, launched into an amusing story concerning himself, his sister, and a horse cart full of apples, easing the tension. The meal progressed in a much less hostile fashion. The conversation centered on Grandfather’s new cook, who was an expert at preparing fish and roasted game.

When the next course was served, Grandfather took a large swallow of his wine.

“I must say,” he intoned, the goblet dangling from one hand—a hand which didn’t tremble in the least, Olivia noted, as it always had in London.

Because he isn’t ill, Olivia. Not at all.

She took a sip of her own wine, allowing it to sit on her tongue while she observed her grandfather. In London, Olivia couldn’t think why Millicent hadn’t wanted her own parents to raise her child. But after two weeks at Halloway Park, she could see it. Especially tonight.

“I’m pleased to see an American with proper table manners.” Grandfather watched the way Ben positioned his fork and knife. “Somewhat.”

Ben leaned back in his chair, not at all put out by her grandfather’s continued insults. “Perhaps you should visit, my lord. We could all benefit, I’m sure, from your direction.”

Peter cleared his throat, adeptly changing the subject once more, to descriptions of Manhattan, Boston, and several other cities Olivia wasn’t familiar with. He was surprisingly well-informed, on New York in particular.

Ben answered all of Peter’s questions, only stumbling when an area of New York, Five Points, was mentioned. Something sharp glittered in Ben’s eyes at the name, like the blade of a knife.

“Worse than the rookery of St. Giles is my understanding.” Peter popped the last bit of turbot into his mouth.

“Not a place you would wish to find yourself, Thomlinson. But having not visited St. Giles, I cannot offer an opinion.” The brackets at the corner of Ben’s mouth deepened.

Olivia noticed Ben *did not* say he hadn’t been to Five Points.

“You seem well informed about New York, Thomlinson. Where did your interest come from?” A warning hovered in Ben’s question to Peter, perhaps even a threat.

“A close friend of mine, Lewis Armwood—”

“The Armwood family is of little note.” Grandfather snorted, sounding slightly foxed. He waved a hand in Peter’s direction. “Armwood’s mother was a great beauty in her day, but I fear that is the only recommendation I can give. I understand the daughter resembles her which, I suppose, is something. They’ll have to rely on her to make an excellent match.”

The side of Peter’s mouth twitched as if he found Grandfather’s statement amusing. “Lewis has introduced me to some of his American friends, who were only too happy to share anecdotes and perceptions of New York. I’ve learned a great deal about the city and those who inhabit it.”

Ben watched him, eyes narrowed, as if he meant to take the knife by his plate and toss it at Peter.

Peter, unaware of the danger he might be in, only nodded to one of the footmen for more wine. “I admire the tenacity it must take to rise above one’s birth and build a fortune. Astor, for instance. Among others.”

“As do I,” Ben murmured. A look passed between him and Peter before Ben returned his attention to his plate.

The booted toe against Olivia’s slipper moved away.

Thunder shook the dining room once more. “I’m sorry to say, Cooke, I doubt you’ll be departing for London tomorrow, nor can you return to Cherry Hill tonight,” Peter said in a cheerful voice. He gestured with his fork out the window at the rain-soaked darkness. “Too dangerous to set out for the duke’s estate in this weather.”

“Nonsense, Peter. I’m sure Mr. Cooke has a schedule he means to keep.” Grandfather’s features wrinkled as if he’d bitten into a rotten plum at the thought of Ben beneath his roof for the night. “I’m sure he’d like to be on his way.”

“I don’t wish to trouble you further, my lord.” Ben sat back.

“Forgive me, but I must *insist*, my lord,” Peter said to Grandfather. “The roads will be impassable in this weather. The streams swollen. Didn’t your own son-in-law perish under

such circumstances? We can't allow Mr. Cooke to suffer a similar fate." Peter glanced at Olivia. "My apologies, Miss Nelson. I meant no disrespect."

Olivia nodded, shocked at the mention of Bradford Nelson.

Grandfather coughed, wine dribbling from his mouth. He took hold of the table for support, gasping and glaring at Peter the entire time. "You—" Another cough shook him.

"My lord." Peter put down his fork as Morris came forward to stand behind her grandfather. "Are you suffering one of your attacks?"

Olivia had *never* heard Peter speak to Grandfather in such a bland, chilly manner. There was dislike buried in those words instead of Peter's usual deference.

Grandfather batted the butler away with one hand. He staggered up from the table. "I find I'm overtired. But I believe I can make it up the stairs with Olivia's assistance. You don't mind, do you, dear one? Perhaps you could read to me from the book we've been enjoying. That should set me to rights."

Ben made a quiet sound of derision.

"Of course." Olivia stood, as did Ben and Peter. "I will say goodnight then, Peter. Mr. Cooke." She took her grandfather's arm, understanding his ploy to keep her far away from their dinner guest. But her need to speak to Ben was taking on a new urgency, in light of the fact he would be leaving for New York soon.

"Good night, Miss Nelson." Peter stood and gave her a kind smile. "My lord."

Ben also came to his feet with a bow as she ushered her grandfather from the dining room.

Olivia felt his eyes on her long after she made her way upstairs.

Rain beat fiercely against the roof and windows, echoing Olivia's mood as she paced back and forth before the fire, her toes digging small grooves into the rug. She clasped the glass of scotch to her chest, careful not to spill a drop. The last thing Olivia needed was the question of why her nightgown smelled of scotch.

She'd filched a bottle from Grandfather's study after Ben visited her beneath the oak tree and took liberties. Although, upon further reflection, given that she had received pleasure from their encounter and he had not, Olivia supposed it was actually *she* who had taken liberties with *him*.

Well, of course. I have the soul of a courtesan.

Not entirely the case. Olivia only behaved in such an improper way with Ben. The very idea of rubbing herself along another man's—*cock*.

Olivia took a healthy swallow of the scotch.

The thought of anyone but him was *repulsive* to her. Courtesans and common prostitutes had to perform such acts—well she supposed they divested themselves of clothing first—with any man who purchased their services. Olivia *only* wished to indulge in such things with one man.

A most unladylike trait, taking liberties with a gentleman. She would add it to her lascivious thoughts, cursing, and propensity for pranks. None of which fit the mold of granddaughter of the Earl of Daring, last of the Hallaways.

Likewise, Peter's behavior tonight had been troubling. Not to Olivia, who often found him pleasant but little else. It was Grandfather who would have a few choice words for his heir in the morning. Peter had never spoken to Grandfather with anything other than deference and careful respect. He rarely contradicted him. Not only had Peter brought an American to dine, something to which he had to have known Lord Daring would be averse, but Peter had invited that American to spend the night. And mentioning Bradford Nelson? If Olivia didn't know better, she'd think Peter didn't care about pleasing the Earl of Daring. Or being his heir.

At least now she understood how Morgan Stewart could possibly have made Peter's acquaintance. Lewis Armwood, brother of the *delectable young lady*, Miss Armwood, whom Olivia suspected didn't mind that Peter resembled a buttercup, had likely made the introduction.

We don't know where Ben spent the first ten years of his life.

Georgina's words echoed in her mind as she paced.

Five Points, or close by, would be Olivia's guess. The look on Ben's face when Peter had so casually mentioned that horrible place and equated it with the rookery of St. Giles had told Olivia a great deal. Morgan Stewart's role in Ben's life was less clear.

I can't marry Peter.

Staring into the flames, the thought once more resurfaced, helped along by the scotch and the knowledge that Ben was in a guestroom on the other side of the house. As far away as possible from Olivia, no doubt. Grandfather would never allow a wolf to be in such proximity to his sheep. The east wing, where Ben had likely been banished, was rarely used. He would have to brush the dust off his bed before crawling inside.

Olivia paused, letting the fire warm her.

She had promised to wed Peter. She was honorable. True to her word and all that. But Grandfather had manipulated her

into agreeing. Olivia was fairly clear on that point.

She swallowed the remainder of the scotch, debating on whether another glass was in order. Ben had strongly objected to her wedding Peter the day he'd brought her an orchid and they'd said such awful things to each other. But in their last discussion beneath the oak tree, he'd seemed to accept Olivia's duty to marry as her grandfather wished. He hadn't tried to dissuade her or offered up his own feelings.

Everything. The word Ben used to describe their relationship.

Vague. Open to interpretation. As usual. She had no idea what that meant.

Her brow wrinkled as she poured herself another finger of scotch. She needed the fortification. Because Olivia, ward of the Dowager Duchess of Averell, was about to do something rather bold.

Ben needed to define *everything* for her. She would demand he do so. Tonight.

He was in the deserted east wing. Not even the servants resided on that side of Halloway Park. It would be easy enough to find the one door with light beneath it. Peter's footsteps had passed Olivia's room barely half an hour ago. It was unlikely Ben would be asleep yet.

"Everything." She held the glass tightly. "I demand to know what that means."

Silently, Olivia exited her room, looking for any servants who might be lingering about, but the house was silent, save for the roar of thunder outside and the flash of lightning glimpsed through the windows. She sped down the hall to the landing, then up the opposite set of stairs to the other side of Halloway Park.

Olivia coughed into her hand, careful not to spill what scotch remained in her glass. The maids hadn't been cleaning this side of the house as frequently as they should, and there was a musty smell in the air.

She saw no light beneath any of the doors she passed. Would Ben already be in bed?

Just the thought of him—without clothing—had the glass wobbling about in her fingers.

This was terribly forward of her. Running about Halloway Park in nothing but her nightgown. She hadn't even bothered with a robe or slippers. An oversight she regretted since her toes were cold.

Finally. Light shown from beneath the door at the far end of the hall. Faint, but visible.

Olivia pressed her ear to the door, listening for any sounds of Ben moving about.

A faint groan sounded from within.

Was Ben ill? In pain? Surely Grandfather wouldn't stoop so low as to poison their guest? No, she assured herself. He'd instruct Morris to do so.

"Ben." She twisted the doorknob, and it turned easily beneath her fingers. "It's Olivia. Are you ill?" She pushed open the door and shut it quietly behind her.

Definitely not ill.

He looked quite marvelous naked. Spectacular. Olivia's imagination hadn't done him justice.

She had caught him in the act of washing himself. Drops of water spilled over the muscled line of his back and down to the curve of his buttocks. Scars decorated his skin. Some faded. Others ridged and puckered. One was perfectly round, edging the corner of his shoulder. Her eyes trailed along every line in a caress, fingers twitching with the need to touch all that scarred, wood-scented skin.

His buttocks clenched, thighs tightening, as his hips moved forward.

Olivia saw a flash of the cloth he was using to wash his—

A rush of warmth hit her square in the chest. A slow, lazy pulse of honey spilled between her thighs. Beneath her

nightgown, her nipples hardened into peaks. The glass of scotch slipped through her fingers, falling to the floor with a dull thud.

Not washing, but *stroking*, while his hips moved in tandem, matching the movement of his hand holding the cloth. His fingers wrapped around his—

Another soft sound left him. It sounded like her name.

All the breath left her body as his buttocks tightened again, the hard ridges of muscle rippling beneath his skin. He thrust his hips forward once more.

A whimper sounded. Hers.

Ben jerked his neck suddenly in her direction, eyes clouded with arousal. Cheeks flushed. Breathing uneven. His hand stopped moving.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

He dropped his hands, the wet cloth hitting the floor with a plop. Turning, he faced her, big hands curled into fists at his sides, the scars across his knuckles shining in the light of the fire. He raised a brow as he took her in, his *cock* jutting out at Olivia.

Unable to drag her eyes away, she stared at his male appendage. His *cock*. The hardened bulge of which she’d rocked against to bring herself pleasure, fully clothed. At the time, she hadn’t considered the size—or the appearance. And now, here she was, that very same cock twitching in her direction.

“It’s so much larger than I expected,” she said stupidly.

“That’s going to stain.” He nodded to the scotch spilling across the rug. “And I’ll take your words as a compliment, though I doubt you’ve anything to compare me to.”

“No.” All of her physical impulses. Her desires. Each bit of sexual pleasure she’d ever experienced belonged to Ben. “Never. You are the only—”

There was such elegance in the graceful line of his torso with the curves and hollows of muscle, the raw strength in his

long, heavy arms and scarred hands. Beauty in the prominent arch of his hipbones and the flat, ridged stomach without an inch of extra flesh. A trail of hair a shade darker than the mahogany locks atop his head stretched from the middle of his chest to his navel.

“Are you finished with your inspection?”

Ben was so breathtaking. So male. A rush of desire for him had her aching in the most glorious way.

I can't marry Peter.

Ben turned in a slow circle before her. “If you’ve looked your fill . . .” His raspy tone held anger. Restraint. “You should run back to your own room.”

Olivia looked up at him, knowing full well that if she stayed, ruination would follow. “And what if I don’t return to my own bed?”

It seems I am a Barrington after all.

“Then . . .” His voice was like a low purr rumbling across her skin, sinking deep into her bones. “You will find yourself in mine.”

Olivia was here. In his room. Barely clothed in a wisp of cotton that would tear beneath his fingers. Staring at his cock with her lips parted.

I should have never come to Holloway Park.

Ben had tried to avoid dining with Lord Pompous Daring and Buttercup. He'd been filled with annoyance when the storm had begun as Buttercup negotiated for the abandoned mill, knowing he'd be invited to dine. Felt the frustration all through dinner as the rain continued to pound, trapping him across the table from Olivia. He'd started wishing Daring would have him thrown out into the rain-soaked darkness to make his way to Cherry Hill. Buttercup, in a rare show of bravery, had mentioned Five Points. That's when Ben knew, beyond any doubt, that it was Morgan Stewart who really wanted the property surrounding the abandoned mill, *not* Buttercup.

Ben didn't care. Let Stewart have it.

He was in love with Olivia, which was vastly more important.

Every strand of hair. The small freckle on the underside of her chin. The way she spoke to plants and insisted on naming them. Even her sense of duty and loyalty to the undeserving Daring. Ben loved all of her.

He mourned that she would never play a prank on *him*.

There would never be anyone else. Not for Ben. Not ever.

He'd made his decision to leave England. Vowed never to see Olivia again. Leave her to be Buttercup's countess. Do her duty. He would stop disrupting her life and causing her such pain. He had resolved to leave Halloway Park at first light.

He wasn't honorable, but he was trying to be. For her. Always for her.

Now Olivia was in his room, sipping a glass of scotch while her nipples drew into tiny points beneath her nightgown at the sight of him pleasuring himself. Was there never to be an end to his torture? Why couldn't Olivia behave as a virgin should at the sight of a naked, aroused male and flee?

No, she'd stared. Most women did. Ben was *generously* endowed.

Olivia licked her lips at the sight.

He only possessed so much restraint. Most of it had been used to keep from knocking Daring, the old prig, out of his chair after the insult-filled meal.

"If you've looked your fill, you should run back to your own room."

"And what if I don't return to my own bed?"

Saucy. Improper. Prim. It was unfair that Olivia was so many of his favorite things.

The small, perfect breasts he'd dreamt of for weeks thrust toward him in challenge. Ben could just make out the dark triangle at the apex of her thighs, visible through the thin fabric of her nightgown. He wanted to press his mouth there.

I won't take her virtue. I can't.

Ben was leaving England with no intention of returning. Her future was here with Buttercup. But he could still taste her. Pleasure her.

Olivia approached him, dark eyes heavy lidded but curious. A slender hand reached out, hovering just above his throbbing cock. "Can I touch you?"

Jesus. Please touch me.

“Yes.”

Her fingers brushed along his cock, tentative, her lips parted. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

Anything. Everything.

“Do I stroke you?” Small fingers wrapped around his girth, gently caressing him.

A groan spilled from his lips.

Olivia gasped, fingers frozen where she gripped him. “Did I hurt you?” she whispered.

“No.” He wanted her naked. Spread before him. Ben imagined a variety of things he could do to her that didn’t require taking her virtue.

Her fingers trailed over him once more. Stroking. Teasing. The sight of her ladylike hand on his cock had Ben dizzy with lust. Her gentle exploration was joined by the touch of her other hand, trailing over his chest. The nail of her forefinger traced the circle of his nipple, sending a bolt of arousal straight to Ben’s cock. The finger moved lower, grazing the scar on his ribs.

At her questioning look he said, “Knife, when I was sixteen.” A thief had tried to take Ben’s pocket watch, the one Jacob had just gifted him, as he’d walked near the Bowery. The knife the thief had wielded slashed at him as Ben had instinctively reached for his own, only to remember he’d stopped going about armed to the teeth. The following day, Ben had ventured back into his old neighborhood, retrieved the watch, and taken the pickpocket’s knife, but not before making use of it. A message had been sent that day, one that could not be misinterpreted.

Ben sucked in a breath as Olivia tentatively cupped his balls.

“Is this right?” She looked up at him, her thumb running over the tip of his cock.

“You know that it is.” He was having trouble breathing with her hands trailing all over him. “You’re awfully bold for a

proper young lady.”

“Someone once told me I have the soul of a courtesan. I’m beginning to think that might be true.” Her fingers slid back and forth over his cock. “And I want to please you.” Another graceful stroke.

“Harder,” he groaned. Ben was rapidly losing control of the situation. The sensation of her hands on him was driving him mad. He reached out and grabbed another cloth by the washbasin, managing to snag the end.

She looked up at him in question.

“I can’t—”

A kiss was pressed to the very tip of his cock. Followed by the light touch of her tongue. She went gracefully to her knees.

“*Jesus, Livy—*” His entire lower body tightened as a tingling sensation started in the base of his spine, all warnings of his impending release.

“Should I not do that?” She stood again, her hand still holding his cock, waiting for direction.

The question, asked in a properly accented innocent tone, undid him.

“I can’t spill myself all over your nightgown,” he finally managed to say. He pulled her up to face him, leaning over to slant his mouth against hers. His lips hard and hungry, as he placed his hand over hers, urging her to continue stroking him.

A whimper left her at the touch of his mouth. Her nipples chafed against his skin through the nightgown, pushing his pleasure forward. His hips pushed into her hand.

Olivia’s lips never left Ben’s as his climax roared through him. She kissed him and held him through every ripple, only stopping when he spilled into the cloth wrapped around their joined hands.

“Livy,” he breathed into her neck.

Ben's face was pressed into her hair, his breathing ragged and strained.

Olivia's hands trailed lightly over his stomach before falling away. She had never felt so aroused in her life. Granted, there hadn't been an excess of such a feeling until she met Ben. But the wetness between her thighs spoke of the need she felt for him.

Only ever Ben.

"You should be naked," he breathed along her ear as he straightened. He took the cloth and tossed it into the fire.

She nodded, wanting his hands on her.

Ben stretched his hand open, cupping the curve of one breast, before reaching for the buttons beneath her throat. Carefully he popped open the small pearls until the cotton parted and slid over her shoulder.

He pressed a kiss to the spot. Another button opened, exposing more of her to him. Ben's mouth teased at every bit of skin as it was revealed, drawing the cotton down her body until it pooled around her ankles.

Olivia closed her eyes. What if he found her wanting? Her breasts were small and not extraordinary. She had a spray of freckles across her stomach. No matter the amount of food she ate, Olivia found herself too thin.

“You’re beautiful, Livy.” There was awe in the timbre of Ben’s voice. “So lovely.” His thumb brushed over one taut nipple. “Open your eyes.”

Olivia gazed up at him. “I find you beautiful too. I meant to tell you. But I got so *involved* in other matters and I—” She bit her lip, realizing how ridiculous she sounded. Olivia thought of the freezing boy in the coat who’d become this magnificent male in front of her. One who she knew would slay dragons for her. “Ben, you’re my greenhouse,” she whispered. “Mine.”

He cocked his head, those forested eyes shining with some undefined emotion. Sadness and something else. “Shh. Livy. I know.”

“I want to be ruined. By you.” She lifted her chin up, meaning to tell him what was in her heart. That she couldn’t possibly wed Peter Thomlinson, but he pinched her nipple and pleasure shot down between her legs. Coherent thoughts became difficult.

They fell into each other, into the bed, his long limbs tangling with hers. He got up on all fours, hovering over her as his hands moved over her body. Heat seared along her thigh, the length of him, thick once more, teasing at the soft hair covering her mound.

She thrust her hips up toward him. “Ruin me.”

The intensity of his gaze, once more laced with sadness, nearly had her begging him once more.

“Not yet.” He came off the bed only to return a moment later with her nightgown.

Did he mean to put it back on her? “Ben—”

Grabbing her wrists together above her head, he wound her nightgown around them, pulling the fabric tight. “Stay still.”

An intense hum swept down her skin at the feel of being restrained. Her breasts ached as she arched her back, begging him to touch her.

He kissed her possessively, the weight of his body and her restrained hands keeping her from touching him. Holding her in place, Ben nipped at her mouth, then the line of her chin and down the slope of her neck.

Olivia quivered in his arms, pulling at her wrists with little real effort. Heat brushed her cheeks at the knowledge he knew this excited her.

His hands slid down her arms as his mouth made its way down her chest to the top of one breast. The warmth of his mouth closed over her nipple, teeth grazing along her skin until Olivia lay moaning and breathless beneath him.

“More,” she panted.

Ben sucked and licked around her breasts, torturing her with every pass of his tongue. Big hands explored every inch of her, brushing along each curve before his mouth and tongue followed. He parted her thighs carefully, before the featherlight touch of his thumb flicked over the swollen bud hidden in her folds and retreated.

“Please. I am melancholy.”

He chuckled softly before sinking a finger deep inside her, while the tip of his tongue lingered along her flesh, teasing at the spot his thumb had just vacated. Lost to sensation, only a low moan escaped her as another long finger joined the first, curling inside her as his mouth drew out the most incredible pleasure. The brush of his beard chafed pleasurably along the tender skin of her thighs, his tongue flattening and licking.

Gently, he sucked that small, aching bud between his lips.

A pained whimper left Olivia, the sensation unlike anything she could have imagined. Her release, which had hovered for what felt like hours, slammed into Olivia before she was prepared. Her knees squeezed together around Ben’s head as her hips rocked against his mouth. She brought her arms down, frustrated at not being able to touch him. The pleasure was blinding, so brilliant, Olivia’s mind went completely blank, writhing at the bliss he so effortlessly forced on her.

When at last Olivia lay exhausted and panting against the bed, Ben slid up the length of her body. Every kiss he placed felt like adoration. Every touch, worshipful. He tugged at the nightgown binding her wrists and Olivia sighed, winding her hands around his neck. Her eyelids drooped, drowsy after her climax.

She waited. But Ben did nothing more than gather Olivia to him, curling his larger body protectively against hers.

“You’re tired.” The first words he’d spoken to her in some time. “Sleep, Livy.”

“But—”

He kissed her tenderly. Long and deep, the sadness Olivia sensed in him reflected in the movement of his lips. She wanted to ask him about that sorrow, a contrast to her own incredible happiness. Ben loved her. He hadn’t said the words out loud, but Olivia felt them with every brush of his fingers against her skin.

Tomorrow, we will sort things out.

Olivia snuggled deeper into his embrace, at peace for the first time in months. She would tell him in the morning that she couldn’t possibly marry Peter. She finally knew where she belonged in this world.

With Ben.



OLIVIA STRUGGLED TO OPEN HER EYES.

She was held against a warm, familiar chest smelling of pine and snow, carried as if she were a small child. Her feet dangled, bobbing up and down as Ben made his way silently down the hall. She wondered how he learned to move so quietly and added it to the list of questions she would later ask. “Ben,” she murmured, “are you kidnapping me?”

She hoped he would. It would certainly be easier than telling Grandfather she wasn’t going to wed Peter.

A low sound of amusement sounded beneath her ear. “No, Livy. I want to.” There was a wealth of regret in his tone. “But I can’t.” He shifted her to free one hand as he opened the door of her room. The light outside the window was still a misty gray, not yet sunrise. The fire had gone out, and the air was chilled.

Carefully, Ben placed her in bed, tucking up the covers beneath her chin. She shivered now that she’d lost his warmth. Her fingers curled into his shirt, holding him tightly. A terrible thought occurred to Olivia in her half-awake state.

“You didn’t ruin me. I thought you wanted me.” Her tongue felt thick. The result of the scotch and an abundance of pleasure.

“I do want you. You’ve proof of that.”

She did. He’d awoken her twice more with his mouth and fingers, coaxing her to do the same to him.

Ben took her hand, pressed a kiss to her palm and placed it over his heart. “I will for all my days. There won’t be anyone else for me.” He paused, the only sound the gentle rasp of his breathing. “But I am only a boy who was *given* a coat.” His lips grazed over her forehead. “Do you understand, Livy? The coat wasn’t *mine*. The woman who gave it to me wasn’t my mother. And the note—” A painful sound left him. “I didn’t even know how to read.”

Olivia struggled to make sense of his words, trying to tie together the meaning of Ben being *given* a coat and what that had to do with her remaining a virgin. It seemed incredibly important that she make the connection, but her mind was far too muddled by sleep and the pleasant exhaustion of her body. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It *will* matter, Livy.” Ben pulled away. “One day.”

“Ben.” She grabbed at him. “I don’t understand. It was just a coat.”

“Shush, Livy.” Fingers stroked her hair. Ben’s lips were gentle as they met hers. “I love you, Olivia Nelson,” he said against her cheek. “Be happy.”

“I am happy.” Her mind drifted off. Ben’s warmth stayed beside her as sleep once more took her, a smile stuck to her lips. “You love me.”

“All my days, Livy.”

Olivia took one last look at herself in the mirror and smoothed down the folds of her dress, admiring the checkered pattern of green and gold. Another design of Romy's. This dress was perfectly suited for the trip to Cherry Hill.

Her fingers stilled across her midsection.

Olivia's mind, in the clear light of day, was still set. Her body hadn't been ruined, not in the conventional sense, but her heart was completely compromised. And she was far from innocent. Not after the previous evening.

At first when she'd woke this morning, alone in her bed, Olivia had thought maybe she'd dreamt all of it. But there was a bite mark on her inner thigh. And one along the slope of her breast. Reddened skin at various locations on her person from a man's unshaven jaw.

Oh, and her nightgown hadn't been buttoned properly.

I love you, Olivia Nelson.

The words made her happy, but Olivia's reflection didn't smile back at her.

I am just a boy who was given a coat. Do you understand?

Had Ben been in front of her, Olivia would have castigated him for confessing such a thing, with no further explanation, when she was half-asleep and beyond comprehending what the words meant. But he was gone from Halloway Park. He'd

probably left after taking her to her room. Gone before the sun could even rise.

She was angry at him for that, among a few other things.

Olivia sipped the tea her maid had brought and munched on a piece of toast drizzled with honey, while methodically piecing together every bit of information she'd learned about Ben since their first meeting, examining what he'd said, as much as what he had not.

Ben wasn't *Ben*. She suspected he'd started life as Twist.

Not that it mattered to her. Olivia was in love with him no matter what he chose to call himself. And she was not, under any circumstances, wedding Peter Thomlinson.

Last night, Ben had been saying goodbye. That was the only explanation for the lingering sadness and his refusal to ruin her properly.

Olivia drank an entire pot of tea, watching the ducks her grandfather detested float atop the pond outside while she decided what she should do. The longer she sat, the angrier Olivia became. She was finished with everyone deciding what was best for her. Amanda, Grandfather, Phaedra, even Peter, who she suspected had brought Ben to Halloway Park on purpose.

Now, Benjamin Cooke.

How *dare* he choose for her. Leaving Olivia to wed Peter so her children would have enormous heads after the things he'd done to her last night? Admittedly, the news of his identity was a bit shocking. But it didn't change how Olivia felt about him. He was still the man she loved.

Her choice was Ben. It always would be. Only, he hadn't stayed long enough for her to tell him so.

Olivia made her way downstairs, carrying a small valise. Her stay at Cherry Hill might become much longer, but Olivia had an entire armoire of dresses tucked away in her rooms at the duke's estate. Because Cherry Hill was her *home*. And she was going there. Today.

“There you are, Olivia.” Grandfather came out of his study, his eyes narrowing at the valise in her hands. “I missed you at breakfast. The rain has passed. I would love a walk in the garden. Perhaps you can share with me the improvements you wish to make.”

“Apologies, Grandfather. But I’m off to Cherry Hill.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Morris,” she said to the butler shadowing Grandfather’s every step. “Please have the carriage brought around.”

“But why?” Grandfather’s eyes turned flinty.

Olivia now knew that calculating look. “Because I’m not good on horseback, as you well know, my lord. The carriage is better suited to me.” Olivia wasn’t much of a rider. Not like Phaedra. “The road to Cherry Hill should be passable enough.”

“It’s far too dangerous, Olivia. You should stay here. Cherry Hill isn’t going anywhere.”

Yes, but Benjamin Cooke is.

“I’m afraid a visit is long overdue. Phaedra and I argued on the journey to Halloway Park, and it has weighed heavily on me. I owe her an apology.”

“Peter should escort you.”

Olivia turned to her grandfather. “My lord, I am going. Even if I have to saddle a mount myself or walk. I would assume you prefer I take the carriage.”

Grandfather’s lips trembled. He frowned and put a hand on his back. “I’m so unsteady these days without my cane.”

Olivia nearly laughed out loud. He didn’t need a cane. He wasn’t the least unsteady.

“Phaedra Barrington is a hoyden.”

“True.”

“A bad influence on you, Olivia. It is in your best interests not to reconcile with that creature or see any of them. I’ve been meaning to discuss your association with the owner of Elysium. As Lady Daring, you must be careful not to allow

such a relationship to continue. Let us walk in the garden.” He reached out and gripped the wall as if he would fall over at any moment.

“I apologize, but I cannot. As I said, I’m headed to Cherry Hill.” Olivia didn’t bother to announce that being a countess wasn’t in her future.

“I wish you to stay at Halloway Park where you belong. *They* have had you for years.” Grandfather gave her a mournful look. “Whereas I have not.”

She pulled on her gloves. Yet another reason for her visit to the duke’s estate. Olivia needed, no *demand*ed, to know why Millicent hadn’t wanted her raised here with Lord and Lady Daring. Looking at her devious grandfather, Olivia thought she might know at least part of the reason.

“Olivia—” Grandfather’s fingers stretched out, possessively curling around her wrist. “I bid you to stay here. I insist.” A cough came from him.

How had she never noticed how staged his illness was? Was Dr. Phipps even a physician?

“Oh dear, I don’t feel well.”

“Yes, you do.” Olivia breezed past him, nodding at a footman to take up her valise. “You are in perfect health. You haven’t used a cane since we came to Halloway Park. I feel certain you’ll survive. If not, summon Dr. Phipps.”

Grandfather straightened, observing her with narrowed eyes. “You *will* stay here. I forbid you to associate yourself any longer with that family. You are my granddaughter, and you will do as I bid you.”

Olivia paused, taking in his rigid form. *This* was what Amanda had been trying to protect her from all these years. Daring. “You can’t forbid me. The dowager duchess is still legally my guardian. She was only kind enough to allow you to be part of my life because I insisted. Do not make me regret my decision.”

Peter appeared, a bemused look on his face and a dusty ledger clasped in one hand.

“Do you require escort to Cherry Hill?” He shot a pointed look full of unspoken challenge at her grandfather.

Bravo, Peter. I applaud your backbone.

“I don’t believe so.” She waved at her grandfather who was glaring at Peter. “I’ll be home in the morning.”

The carriage jolted slightly on the incline of the drive to Cherry Hill, the trip to the duke's estate having taken much longer than anticipated due to the condition of the roads. Her urge to see Ben nearly had her shredding the handkerchief in her hands to bits. She'd placed a terrible bit of stitching in the corner. Olivia couldn't even recall what the threads were meant to resemble.

She tossed it to the seat. No more embroidery.

When her grandfather's carriage finally stopped, Olivia stepped out and immediately felt lighter at seeing the familiar outline of Cherry Hill. Halloway Park was beautiful and filled with memories of her mother, but it had never made her feel as the duke's estate did. She exited the carriage and was greeted with a smile by Craven, Cherry Hill's butler.

"Miss Olivia. May I say what a delight it is to see you?"

"You may." She smiled at him. "Good day to you, Craven. I'll be staying the night, possibly longer. There is a valise in the carriage. Will you have Jones or one of the other footmen fetch it for me?"

Craven nodded and snapped his fingers. Two footmen appeared as if by magic. "I'll have your room prepared, Miss Olivia."

"Thank you. Where is Her Grace? And Lady Phaedra?" Olivia didn't dare ask after Ben. She'd have to be discreet in her inquiries. No one knew of her feelings for Ben, except

Phaedra. Olivia wasn't even sure Ben *understood* that she loved him.

"The duchess is enjoying tea in her parlor, miss. I believe Lady Phaedra is out riding."

"I'll see myself in," Olivia said, glancing about, hoping for any sign that Ben was here. "Did Phaedra go riding alone?"

Craven's brows drew together. "Yes, despite my best efforts to send a groom with her."

So, Ben wasn't with Phaedra. It was unlikely he was with Amanda.

She walked swiftly to Amanda's parlor and took another deep breath, instantly comforted by the scent of beeswax and the vase of roses Amanda had freshly cut each morning.

"Olivia." Amanda took off the spectacles perched on her nose and placed aside the letter she'd been reading with a pleased smile. "What a lovely surprise."

Olivia adored this room. The comfortable furniture, slightly out of fashion with the striped damask worn at the corners. The pillows, designed and sewn by Romy, but now slightly bedraggled and missing tassels. One still bore a large jam stain. A miniature, one of Theodosia's first attempts at art, a poor one, sat on a small gold pedestal near the window. Three small pebbles were arranged artfully in a bowl. A gift from Phaedra, who'd found them pretty though there was little else to recommend them. And beside the duchess on the table holding a lamp, was a dried bouquet containing violets, bluebells, and weeds. Most of the flowers were missing their petals. Olivia's first attempt at floral arrangement.

There were other things, of course. A painting Tony had gifted her of Athena bursting from the skull of Zeus. A leather-bound collection of Greek mythology from Leo. Above the mantel, a portrait of Marcus Barrington, so stunningly beautiful it was hard to believe he'd been real.

This room, like Olivia's greenhouse, was a sanctuary.

Amanda held out her arms to Olivia. "Is Mr. Thomlinson with you?"

Olivia sank into the chair next to Amanda, leaning into her embrace. “I hope you aren’t terribly attached to Peter, Your Grace.”

Amanda pulled back. “I see.” She didn’t sound at all surprised.

Olivia turned toward the window to her left, eyeing the gardens. One of the hedges didn’t look quite right. It was missing a hawthorn at the end. Taking a deep breath she said, “Is Mr. Cooke here?”

“Mr. Cooke? I’m afraid he is not.” Her shrewd, knowing eyes lingered on Olivia’s face. “He returned from Halloway Park before the rest of us were awake and immediately departed for London.”

“He’s gone?” Olivia couldn’t keep the despair from her words.

“A letter arrived for Mr. Cooke after he left yesterday to view the abandoned mill he is selling. One of the footmen gave it to him when he arrived here this morning, having spent the night at Halloway Park. Which I’m sure you are aware of.”

Olivia’s hands curled into her lap.

“There was a letter for me as well.” Amanda held up the piece of paper she’d been reading. “From Leo. I have another grandson. Georgina gave birth a few days ago. And despite her size, there was only one child.” Amanda’s eyes filled with tears as she looked up at the portrait above the fireplace. “They’ve named him Marcus.”

Olivia slumped back further into the overstuffed chair, hearing the springs creak, the news of Marcus’s birth barely registering.

“Olivia, aren’t you the least pleased?”

Ben was gone.

“I am. Truly. I am grateful that both Georgina and Marcus are in good health.”

“Phaedra used to launch herself off that chair and onto the settee. Bouncing about like a cat. I should replace the springs.”

Amanda set down the letter once more. “Would you care to explain to me why you are distressed at the knowledge Georgina’s cousin returned to London, especially after you undoubtedly saw him at dinner last evening?” Amanda gave an unladylike snort. “I’m sure Daring was thrilled to entertain him.”

“Grandfather wasn’t pleased to have an uninvited guest,” Olivia answered. Her grandfather had been absolutely horrid last night.

“So you won’t wed Mr. Thomlinson. I’m vastly relieved.”

“I haven’t yet told Grandfather,” Olivia said. “Or Peter, although I don’t think he’ll be too distressed. I believe he’s in love with Miss Armwood.” She looked at Amanda. “Grandfather will be furious I won’t wed Peter, but he can’t force me because he isn’t my guardian. You are. But if I agreed to wed as he wished of my own free will, you would allow it, wouldn’t you?”

“If that was what you wanted, yes,” Amanda agreed. “Though I had hoped it would not be.”

“My accidental meeting with Daring in the park wasn’t accidental at all, was it?”

“I suspect not.” Amanda gave her a pained look. “I had deep concerns about Daring approaching you but had hoped that losing Millicent would have changed him. Made him realize that you can’t manipulate the world to suit your own schemes. I’d wanted to believe he’d changed. He was in ill health and proved to be so loving to you and not disparaging of me—”

“Rest assured, his manner changed abruptly once I was at Halloway Park.”

A weary sigh left Amanda.

“He—guilted me into promising to wed Peter. And Grandfather isn’t at all frail or ill. I’m not even sure his London physician is real. Going on and on about me being the last of the Halloways and my duty to Lady Millicent. How much of a lady I was, just like her. Which made me—”

“Wish to do whatever you could to please him. He is very good at twisting things about.” Amanda had a faraway look in her eyes. “When I knew him, years ago, he was much the same.”

“I feel so incredibly foolish. I questioned everything about myself.” She glared at Amanda. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have listened that day you admitted to meeting him in the park?” Amanda took her hand. “You were so happy to have met Daring.”

Olivia sat back with a sigh. “I don’t suppose I would have. I was very much in love with the idea of being the last hope of the Halloways and blind to all else. Daring made me feel as if I were special.”

“You are special.” Amanda squeezed her hand. “I believe, dear one, that Daring, for all his disagreeable behavior, loves you, Olivia. In his own way. He has always possessed a controlling nature.”

“He is why Millicent gave me to you,” Olivia said. “Isn’t it?”

“There were accusations she leveled at Daring,” Amanda said carefully. “But keep in mind that Millicent was grief-stricken. Your birth had been difficult. She was dying.” Her breath hitched. “And proof of any ill-conduct on Daring’s part will have long since been destroyed. I’ve worried for twenty years whether I should ever tell you. I’d hoped he would simply stay away. Daring loved Millicent. Doted on her. So I didn’t wish to believe—he would hurt her so.”

Amanda released Olivia’s hand and stood. She started to pace across the room, twisting the rings on her fingers.

“What did he do?” Olivia said.

“Daring *disowned* Millicent for wedding Bradford Nelson, as you know. But that wasn’t enough for him. Bradford took the inheritance left by his father and invested it, wisely, he assumed. But almost overnight, there wasn’t anything left. He was forced to sell his parent’s small estate. Bradford went to the family solicitor in London, only to find the man gone. The

solicitor had disappeared, along with any hope of Bradford finding out what had happened to his inheritance. A year or so later, Millie and Bradford became quite impoverished. Daring dangled a large purse before your father if he would only renounce Millicent. Your parents were still childless at the time, and Millie thought herself barren.”

“Bradford refused.”

Amanda nodded. “He loved her. Deeply. Bradford declined to take anything but a small loan from Marcus to see them through the next few months. His pride, you see.”

Olivia drew in a breath. “You think Grandfather conspired with the solicitor.”

“I do. So did Marcus. Millie didn’t want to believe such a horrible thing, especially of her own father. Then Bradford received a mysterious summons from the very same solicitor, claiming to have had an attack of conscience. Millie had only recently found out she was with child, finally. I don’t think Daring knew.” A ragged sigh came from her. “About you. Given what happened.” Her eyes on Olivia grew concerned. “*Nothing* can be proved, Olivia. I have only Millie’s accusations.”

“Which were enough for her to give me to you. Continue. I would know all of it.” Grandfather had faked his illness to force Olivia to wed Peter. Treated her to sleepless nights and guilt. He was likely capable of more.

Amanda sat back down on the settee with a soft rustle of skirts. A tear trailed down her cheek. “I have never wanted to tell you this tale.” She shook her head. “The day Bradford received the summons from the solicitor started with rain, like many others. But the storm increased in intensity and by nightfall, the roads had become treacherous. Bradford could not delay, he insisted, not if he had any hope of regaining his fortune. Millie begged him to stay with her. But Bradford was adamant.

Nausea roiled in Olivia’s stomach. “He rode out and died.”

“He did,” Amanda’s voice broke. “He and his horse were found on the riverbank two days later. Drowned. The bridge had collapsed during the storm. I—don’t think Daring meant for Bradford to die. His powers are not so great that he can summon a storm.”

“No, he only wrote the letter summoning my father out in poor weather.”

“I don’t know what Daring meant to do to Bradford. As I said, he only wanted him gone from Millie’s life. After Bradford’s death, Millicent returned to Halloway Park, a shell of her former self. I only saw her once before you were born. Daring didn’t allow her to associate with me. The day Millie gave birth, Daring had a houseguest, an acquaintance of Lady Daring. It was *this* houseguest, who, at Millie’s insistence, summoned Marcus and me, requesting we bring a solicitor. Daring tried to refuse us entrance, but Marcus was a duke.” Amanda turned to look at his portrait above the fireplace. “Millie looked right at her father and accused him of murdering Bradford. She bade me take you and love you.” Her words faltered. “Lord Masterson stood as witness.”

“Lord Masterson?” Olivia said in surprise. “The elderly earl whom Georgina wed?”

“One in the same. He had grown to like Millie during his visit at Halloway Park, but he liked having a duke in his debt even more. Had it not been for Masterson, we wouldn’t have known you had even been born. I still remember Lady Daring’s face as Millie lay dying in her arms. The wounded look as she regarded Daring. My poor cousin. She never forgave him. I don’t think she ever spoke to him again.” Amanda pressed a hand to her mouth. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. Millie could have been wrong, Olivia. Grief sometimes makes one see things that aren’t there. She was so terribly distraught over Bradford.”

“I don’t think she was wrong,” Olivia declared. “I’ll never feel the same about Daring again.” The truth was painful. *Horrible*. Poor Millicent. “Thank you for telling me.”

“I don’t think,” Amanda said in a tentative voice, “that you’ll be happy if you cut Daring out of your life, Olivia. No matter how terrible, he *is* your grandfather.” Amanda shot her a worried look. “Perhaps I should have told you sooner, but I wanted to give Daring the benefit of the doubt. Not condemn him in your eyes, which would have been unfair. You deserved to make your own assumptions about him. And there was never any proof. Marcus searched for it. You told me when you first met Daring that you weren’t sure where you belonged, that you might be more a Halloway than a Barrington. I thought you deserved to find out for yourself what your place is in this world.”

“I know now,” Olivia said with determination. “Where I belong. I won’t be returning to live at Halloway Park.” Nor did she want to stay in London. She belonged with Ben.

“I expect you’ll wish to return to London with us. Baby Marcus awaits.” Amanda looked happier than Olivia had seen her since the death of the duke. “Phaedra and I have already made arrangements to leave at the end of the week.”

“I must go sooner,” Olivia insisted. “It is imperative I speak to Mr. Cooke.”

“My child, I cannot allow you to simply take off for London on your own.” Amanda held up a hand. “And you are angry with Mr. Cooke, don’t bother to deny it. I won’t pretend to understand how you could form such an attachment to Georgina’s cousin. You have only seen him twice.”

Olivia bit her lip and felt her cheeks pink.

“Ah. I see. Well, that is information we shall keep from Tony and Leo. At any rate, Mr. Cooke won’t return to New York for some time. Little Marcus has only just been born. He will stay with Georgina and Leo for a while longer. You must be patient.”

Olivia wasn’t patient. Not when it came to Ben. “I have things I must say to him.”

“There are also things you need to say to Lord Daring and Mr. Thomlinson. We’ll leave at the end of the week. But first,

dearest, go find Phaedra. Please. She's been quite miserable without you."



OLIVIA WANDERED OUT TO THE LAWN, FOLLOWING THE PATH TO the stables. Phaedra should have returned by now. Likely she'd ridden to the rise above Cherry Hill where her father had been lain to rest. Not as magnificent a spot as one might imagine for a duke to be buried, but Marcus had insisted.

Phaedra liked to have private conversations there with her father. She would pluck at the wild strawberries growing around his grave and chatter away. Tony did much the same.

Olivia never spoke to Marcus there, although she sometimes accompanied Amanda. Her conversations with the man who had been her father took place in the gardens of Cherry Hill. A place where only the two of them had spent time together, digging in the dirt and tossing worms at each other. Right next to the small statue of a fairy he'd hidden for her beneath a willow tree.

A rush of grief filled her. Marcus wouldn't want them all sobbing endlessly over him.

"Olivia." Phaedra came striding out of the stables, wearing riding breeches and boots instead of one of the several lovely riding habits she owned. Olivia stifled the urge to reprimand her. They were at Cherry Hill. It was unlikely anyone would care.

At least she'd wisely tucked her hair up beneath a hat.

"I'm surprised you're here. I thought Daring would have you under lock and key. Perhaps stashed you in the dungeons of Halloway Park." The blue of her eyes sparkled back at Olivia.

"He doesn't have a dungeon."

She and Phaedra had argued countless times about any number of things. The way of sisters, she supposed. Usually,

disagreements were barely acknowledged, but the argument outside of Hagerty's had felt different.

Side by side, she and Phaedra walked back to the house, both silent, perhaps unsure what to say.

Olivia finally took Phaedra's hand. "I didn't mean it." The path took them by a small pond on the left, the same one Olivia had convinced Phaedra she'd seen one of the grooms sink a treasure chest into. Phaedra had spent days in a small boat, staring into the water, looking for the glitter of gold. She'd fallen in.

"Yes, you did." Phaedra looked away, biting her lower lip. "You made several valid points. I *am* terribly spoiled. I'm a duke's daughter, so it is difficult to not be overindulged. I don't consider myself to be selfish, but I am single-minded in purpose which sometimes causes me to disregard the needs of others." She gave Olivia a sideways glance. "I am going to work on that. And I *have* made you into my nursemaid. Not intentionally, mind you. You excel at such a task. Because you are the older, more responsible, possibly *duller*"—her eyes shone with mischief—"sister. Don't dare say differently."

"I won't," Olivia assured her. "I've learned quite a lot about myself during my visit to Halloway Park."

"Good. I'm glad that's settled. I will be more a model of decorum while you add more reckless behavior into your day."

"I think I've been far more irresponsible than you could possibly imagine, Phaedra."

"Mr. Cooke." Phaedra slowed. "I convinced him to teach me how to throw knives. It was the price he had to pay for directions to Halloway Park. I will assume he is the source of your irresponsible behavior. He looks the sort."

Olivia wondered if Phaedra knew the whole of it. That Ben wasn't *Ben*. Stewart might have told her, but for some reason, Olivia suspected he hadn't.

"Will you be marrying Tedious Thomlinson?" Phaedra put her hands on her hips. "Are you prepared to finally admit I was right? About everything?"

Olivia nudged Phaedra, thinking of Ben whispering he loved her. “No on both counts.”

The Averell coach rolled toward Halloway Park, swaying gently as it came to a stop before the entrance. The other vehicle, containing trunks and maids, had already gone on ahead. They would arrive in London quite late.

Olivia had stayed at Cherry Hill for the remainder of the week, sending word to her grandfather and Peter that she'd tripped while walking with Phaedra. A flimsy excuse, but Olivia needed a few days to allow her anger at Daring to cool while mulling over the conversation with Amanda. Now at least she could face him calm and prepared. Olivia *did* love her grandfather, despite what he'd done. But she would never trust him again.

Grandfather sent a note each day she stayed at Cherry Hill. Sometimes two. All insisted Olivia return to Halloway Park *this instant*.

She'd ignored him. Until today.

Olivia waited patiently for the footman to open the carriage door. Taking a deep breath, she flashed a smile to Amanda. "I'll return momentarily."

"You aren't going in alone." Phaedra jumped out behind her. "You won't face that old dragon without me."

"Be quick, my darlings." Amanda's lips had been compressed into a tight line as they'd approached Halloway Park. "Try to keep Daring from rushing the coach with his cane."

Olivia's gaze drifted in the direction of the massive oak tree at the edge of her grandfather's lawn, thinking of Ben.

I am just a boy who was given a coat.

She hadn't only considered her grandfather and his machinations during her stay at Cherry Hill. Olivia had also thought long and hard about *why* Ben had confessed the truth to her. And possibly who else he meant to tell. Georgina, if she didn't know already, and for some reason, Olivia didn't think she did.

It stung, knowing Ben assumed Olivia didn't care for him enough, thought her such a vapid creature, that she would discard him once she knew the truth. That she would prefer to wed Peter. But Olivia didn't give a bloody damn who Ben might have once been, only who he was *now*. She meant to have him ruin her immediately once she arrived in London so there could be no further question.

Morris swung open the stately front door at her approach, bowing to Olivia in greeting.

"Miss Nelson." He cast a curious glance at the Averell coach and then at Phaedra but merely waved them both inside. "Lord Daring is—"

"Here," her grandfather snapped at his butler, flicking out one wrist in dismissal. "Disappear."

Olivia frowned at his rudeness. He was angry at her and not Morris.

"Good day, Grandfather." She kept her greeting polite and crisp, no matter how badly she wished to rail at him. "I've come to inform you that I am returning to London for a time with the dowager duchess. I wished to bid you goodbye."

Peter came down the stairs, slowing as he saw Olivia and Phaedra standing in the foyer.

Grandfather's features twisted together, dripping venom as he took in Phaedra. "What is she doing here? And you are *not* going to London. Not until after the wedding. I forbid it."

“Unless I’m mistaken, my lord.” Peter stopped at the bottom of the steps, regarding Olivia a bit hopefully. “I don’t believe there will be a wedding.”

“Not between us, Peter. We don’t suit at all.” She turned to her grandfather.

Bright splotches of color spread across his features. Grandfather lowered his gaze from hers and clutched at his chest, knees wobbling, and pressed his back to the wall as if about to collapse. “You promised to wed Peter, Olivia,” he accused her in a trembling breath. “Swore to me after the Shipton’s ball. Vowed to do your duty,” Grandfather panted. “Summon Morris. I need to return upstairs at once. Olivia, we will discuss this when I am well once more.”

Phaedra snorted from her place by the door.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” Olivia replied. “I won’t be here.”

“I agree, Olivia,” Peter said. “I find you a lovely young woman, but my affections are engaged elsewhere.” The smile on his face broadened. “As I believe yours are.”

“I did wonder why you never proposed to me.” Olivia smiled back. Peter was as much a victim of her grandfather’s schemes as Olivia. “Though I do not know her, I suspect Miss Armwood will make a far better countess than myself.”

“Miss Armwood?” Grandfather screeched. “I *forbid* you to wed her. You’ll marry Olivia, or I will disinherit you,” Daring thundered, sounding much further from collapse than he had only moments ago. “Do you hear me, Peter? You will never be an earl. *Never.*”

Olivia raised a brow at Peter. “Oh, dear. He’s forbidden you.”

Peter gave a careless shrug. “Choose another heir. The price you ask of me is far too high. Miss Armwood doesn’t care if I’m titled or not.”

“I’ll beggar you,” Daring hissed.

“You can try, my lord. But thanks to Mr. Cooke and the abandoned mill he sold me,” Peter said, turning back to Olivia, “Miss Armwood and I will live quite comfortably. I’ve been offered an outrageous sum for the land. A railway is being built. I may have neglected to inform Mr. Cooke.”

“I don’t think he’ll mind.” Olivia placed a hand on Peter’s arm and said under her breath, “How did you know? About Mr. Cooke?”

“There is a shortcut through the woods I often use when returning to Halloway Park. A path that takes me by the oak tree at the edge of the lawn. Your affection for each other was quite evident.”

A blush flooded her cheeks. “I see. You brought him to Halloway Park on purpose, after Foxearth, did you not?”

“It was raining. Lord Daring has a fine chef,” Peter said with all innocence. “I approve of Mr. Cooke, by the way. I like him very much.”

Olivia straightened. Peter was far more clever than she’d given him credit for.

“You will have no dowry if you don’t wed Peter,” Daring hissed from behind her like a coiled snake. “Nothing. What gentleman would wed you without a dowry?” He pointed at her. “No one of good family. No one of import.”

“As if a dowry from you matters at all,” Phaedra said, interrupting the earl’s tirade, her voice as cold and cutting as a bit of ice. “She is a *daughter* of the Duke of Averell. I have it on good authority her dowry is obscene.”

Warmth flooded Olivia’s chest. Truthfully, she hadn’t considered a dowry, or lack of one.

“Olivia is my granddaughter. I know what is best for her.” Daring straightened, completely throwing off his pretense of illness. “*She’s* done this. The lady’s companion. The ill-bred daughter of my wife’s cousin. I gave her a position. A home. Without me, Amanda Weatherly would have had to make her living on her back as her mother did before her.” Spittle

formed on his bottom lip. “I should never have allowed her any influence over Millicent.”

Phaedra took a step in his direction, her features murderous.

“I know what you did, Grandfather.” Olivia said firmly, cutting him off from saying anything further. “All of it. I know what you did to Bradford Nelson. To Millicent. How you destroyed your own daughter.”

Daring fell back, cringing at Olivia’s words, guilt flooding his features even as his eyes grew cold and flinty. “Nonsense. It was Nelson. That cur. He despoiled her. He—”

“*Loved* her. Were you going to pack him on a ship bound to India, perhaps, when you had him summoned on that rainy night? Indenture him? Anything to have him gone? His death *devastated* her,” Olivia snapped. “*You* did that, Grandfather. *You.*”

The color leached from Daring’s sharp features, and he sagged against the wall. “I didn’t— ”

“Millicent died hating you. As did my grandmother. And you’ve learned *nothing* since.” Olivia shook her head, wiping a tear that trailed down her cheek. “You are my grandfather. All I have of my mother. Do you have *any* feeling for me at all?”

“I do.” A sob came from Daring’s throat. “I’m sorry. Please don’t leave, Olivia.”

“My lord,” Olivia said gently, taking his hand. “I bear a great deal of affection for the grandfather I came to know in London. I treasure that time with you. The stories of my family. Seeing Halloway Park. But your nature must be curbed if you wish to be part of my life. I will tolerate no more insults hurled at the woman who is my mother as much as Millicent. Or *any* Barrington. And you will be accepting of Benjamin Cooke.”

“Mongrel! I saw him pawing you—”

“Not another word,” Olivia snapped. “I will give you some time to consider all we’ve said today. Should you find that my

relationship with Benjamin Cooke is not to your liking, I'll be certain to keep an ocean between me and you for the rest of your days."

"Olivia. You can't do this," he wailed, reaching for her.

"It seems I can." She leveled a pointed look at him, feeling better than she had in some time. "Is Dr. Phipps even a physician?"

Daring looked away.

"I thought as much. Good day, Grandfather." She nodded politely to Peter. "I wish you every happiness with Miss Armwood, Peter."

Olivia sat down on the luxurious damask sofa in Leo and Georgina's private sitting room, clutching the drawing Daniel had made for his Auntie Ollie, and tried not to weep. Not because Daniel's impression of her was that of a stick with overly large eyes and was incredibly unflattering.

But because Benjamin Cooke was no longer in London.

Olivia cleared her throat as she waited for Georgina to come down.

It had been two weeks since she'd departed Halloway Park with Grandfather standing in the middle of the gravel drive, bleating out her name. They'd arrived at the Duke of Averell's residence to be greeted by a surprised Tony who was sharing a drink with Leo in his study before both were expected at Elysium. After hugs and greetings were exchanged, Phaedra had announced Olivia would not be wedding Peter Thomlinson nor staying further with Lord Daring.

Tony had appeared relieved. As had Leo, who had commented that Peter's head was too large for his body before Olivia received the full attention of those blasted blue eyes.

He went on to explain, though no one, especially Olivia, had asked, that his charming cousin-in-law was no longer in London. Ben had barely paused to kiss his new nephew before declaring business required his immediate return to New York. Georgina had not been pleased. They'd had quite a row behind the doors of her sitting room before Ben's departure yesterday.

One day. She had missed Ben by one day.

Olivia, not wanting to arouse Leo's suspicions further, had changed the subject immediately to manure. The rose bushes, she had declared, looking out the window, looked in need of a good fertilizing.

She'd neatly folded the drawing from Daniel and placed it in her reticule. Neither Daniel nor Freddie, Tony's son, possessed their Aunt Theodosia's talent for drawing, it seemed. Freddie often drew Olivia without a body at all. Just a mop of hair with eyes.

Since her return to London, Olivia had alternated between annoyance at Ben for departing England without even leaving a bloody note for her, and anger at herself for not recognizing sooner that her heart was much more important than any duty to Halloway Park. If she'd told him sooner, perhaps he wouldn't have left.

Olivia spent nearly every day in her greenhouse, speaking to the orchid Ben had gifted her and willing a letter to appear from New York.

It pained her greatly that Ben hadn't trusted Olivia would choose *him*.

The announcement of Peter Thomlinson's impending marriage to Miss Armwood was making the rounds of London. Olivia had sent a note of congratulations to Peter, wishing him the best. It was no longer a mystery why he had never proposed to her. He'd been in love with Miss Armwood the entire time. She was only surprised he hadn't tossed her at Ben sooner.

Grandfather still resisted the reality of the situation he found himself in. She had received two letters from him since her arrival in London, both begging her to return home.

Olivia had written back that she *was* home.

The door to the sitting room opened. "I was wondering when you might visit me."

Georgina glided toward her, a silk dressing gown wrapped around her voluptuous form, blonde curls falling loose around

her shoulders. There was a lovely glow about her as she smiled at Olivia. Motherhood agreed with her.

“I’m sorry if I’ve taken you away from Marcus—”

“Sleeping soundly. Unlike Daniel, who only napped in spurts, Marcus is of a different opinion. Once his hunger has been satisfied, he doesn’t make a peep.” She nodded to Daniel’s drawing. “Not an ounce of artistic talent. Much like his father.”

Olivia looked down at her hands, unsure how to begin.

“Allow me to start.” Georgina sat back against the cushions. “Ben confessed everything to me when he returned from Cherry Hill.” The chocolate of her eyes lingered on Olivia.

“He did?” Olivia replied carefully.

“Leo tells me you aren’t wedding Peter Thomlinson.” Georgina’s tone was nothing short of hostile. She was glaring at Olivia.

A knock sounded at the door. A maid bearing a tea tray. They both stayed silent until the girl closed the door behind her.

“Georgina, I’m not sure—”

“Ben left London assuming you would wed that Buttercup. And you didn’t tell him differently, did you?” Georgina smacked a pillow. “How could you, Olivia?”

“At the time,” Olivia said through gritted teeth, “we were both naked and my mind was on other matters. He was gone before I could—explain—and—” She glared back at Georgina. “Never once did he profess any affection for me. He told me bluntly he didn’t want to marry, especially *me*. I was too prim and proper.”

Georgina snorted. “You are exactly the sort of woman he likes.”

“I’m not sure whether that statement should anger me.” Olivia stood up and began to pace, tense with all the frustrations and wounds of the last several weeks. “I was half-

asleep after—” How could she truly explain what had happened? “Suffice it to say I remain a maid though a much less innocent one.”

Georgina lowered her eyes. “I suspect he was trying to be honorable, given the circumstances.”

“It breaks my heart.” Olivia thumped her chest. “To know he believes me so without character that I wouldn’t—” She choked on the sob rising up her throat. “Wouldn’t *want* him after he told me. I thought he knew how I felt. It isn’t as if I would have allowed just any man to take such liberties with me—”

“Olivia.” Georgina took her hand and pulled her down to the sofa. “Stop. I have a terrible temper, and I’m concerned for Ben. My apologies for charging at you.” She brushed a tear from Olivia’s cheek. “You love him. I can see it.”

“Yes,” Olivia sobbed. “I’m so angry at him, Georgina. He didn’t believe I would love him back. That boy who was only given a coat.” She had to tamp down the sob threatening to erupt. “Ben told me it would matter, but it doesn’t. At least not to me.”

“You aren’t Jacob Rutherford.” Georgina’s voice was quiet. “Most everyone who has ever lied to him ends up floating in the East River. I tried to talk Ben out of confessing to my father because no good could possibly come of it. Better to rid the world of Morgan Stewart. Stewart has been threatening him for years.”

“Because he knew Ben wasn’t Ben. That he was Twist.”

“Yes,” Georgina nodded. “I always wondered why they hated each other so much. Because of the damned coat. Stewart suffered a bit longer in the gutter, but he made his way out of it with the help of Gertrude Van Rhys. At any rate, I convinced Ben he had been a good and loyal son to Jacob Rutherford, a brilliant if overprotective cousin to me and Lilian. A constant thorn in my mother’s side.” A small bark of laughter came from Georgina. “Surely that was atonement enough. But the truth of his deception has weighed heavily on him. I don’t think Ben minds lying to all of Manhattan, but he

can't lie to Jacob. Not any longer. He's gone to tell him the truth."

"What will happen?" Olivia said, her heart hammering in her chest.

"I can't say. My father can be—difficult." She shook her head, golden curls spilling about her face. "I've always known, I think. Here." Georgina pressed a hand to her heart. "When he confessed to me, I wasn't that surprised. Not really. He said that if he had a name before Benjamin Cooke, or parents, he doesn't remember. The other boys called him Twist because of the way he bends when he throws a knife. I suppose that should have given me pause, that my cousin throws knives and goes about armed. Ben has taken care of a great many"—she swallowed—"inconvenient matters. Did you know that Ben feeds the street urchins down at the wharves, near Rutherford Shipping?"

"No." The knowledge came as no great shock. He probably saw himself in every one of those poor children. "Would your father really—harm him?"

"I don't know, Olivia. I begged him not to tell Jacob, which turned into quite a row. I promised I wouldn't tell Leo, though he suspects something. And it's too soon for me to receive word from Ben, even if he chooses to contact me. We may have to wait until we reach New York."

Another fit of tears threatened to erupt from Olivia. A huge gaping fear to add to the hollowness of missing Ben. "I could never wed Peter or anyone else, Georgina."

Georgina pulled her into a hug. She smelled warm. Safe. Like spring. "Don't worry, Olivia. Maybe Ben has come to his senses and decided it would be wiser not to tell my father. We may well hear the news that Morgan Stewart has disappeared."

A wail left Olivia, all the worry and fears she'd had bottled up suddenly bursting forth. "I don't care who Ben is." She sobbed as Georgina held her. "As long as he's mine."



MUCH LATER, AFTER LEAVING GEORGINA, OLIVIA MADE HER way to the greenhouse, her stomach in knots. The ache in her temples, probably from all the crying she'd done on Georgina's shoulder, hadn't abated. Now that she knew what Ben meant to do, Olivia felt more urgency than ever to leave for New York. Arrangements had been made for their journey, but Georgina and little Marcus wouldn't be ready to travel for at least another month.

Olivia nodded at the tiny plant before her. Granby had sent her a small tin of mystery seeds with nothing but a set of instructions. She had no idea what was sprouting in the pot. Granby did have a sense of humor; it was only muted.

A knife flew past her eyes, the blade burying itself in the wood of the table just to her right, neatly slicing a lavender plant in half.

"Phaedra." Olivia gave a sigh. "I've asked you at *least* a dozen times since we returned to London not to throw knives in my greenhouse. Look what you've done." She pointed to the poor lavender plant. "If you unintentionally maim my orchid, I shall be very put out."

"Mr. Cooke will be pleased with my progress when we see him." Phaedra stepped forward and pulled the hilt out of the wood. She raised the side of her skirts to reveal a sheath strapped to one thigh. "My skill has vastly improved."

The mention of Ben pushed a wave of sadness through Olivia. "Don't allow Tony to see you tossing about a blade. Or Leo." Blinking away the moisture gathering in her eyes, she pretended great interest in Oliver the Orchid.

"I won't." Phaedra put a hand on Olivia's arm. "I wish you would tell me why you are so worried about Mr. Cooke. He'll be overjoyed to see you, Olivia. Beyond happy you haven't wed Mr. Thomlinson. He loves you. I know it."

She hadn't told Phaedra the truth. Couldn't. Georgina and Olivia had promised each other that they would tell no one, not even Leo. It was Ben's secret to tell.

“We’ll sort things out in New York. Are you worried about Mr. Stewart? He won’t hurt Mr. Cooke.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Olivia hadn’t questioned Phaedra further on Stewart because she’d been mired in her own thoughts. Perhaps she should have.

“Because I told Morgan he couldn’t.” Phaedra tilted her head. There was a gritty look of determination in her lovely features. One that frightened Olivia nearly as much as Ben telling Jacob Rutherford he wasn’t really his nephew. “Made him promise me, and he did, though he wasn’t happy about it. Now, hurry along. It’s nearly time for tea,” Phaedra said, before strolling nonchalantly out of the greenhouse.

Olivia stared after her. Phaedra had called Stewart by his first name, Morgan.

“Bollocks.”

The Barrington, in a word, was *magnificent*.

Olivia also found Leo's hotel, actually more of a palatial palace in the middle of Manhattan, to be luxurious, lush, and impossibly decadent. The building itself took up an entire block at the corner of Broadway Street, in an ever-increasing important part of the city. Leo had chosen the location well.

The interior reminded Olivia of Cherry Hill, with wood accents and walls painted pale shades of green, yellow, and cream. The furniture was all upholstered in jewel tones. Warm, inviting pieces of furniture that were also expensive and of the highest quality. At present, only the Barringtons, Leo, Georgina, the duke and duchess, Amanda, Phaedra, Rosalind, and Torrington, along with the children, were in residence. Romy couldn't travel since, according to her letters, she was the size of the steamer the family would take to New York.

Theo and Haven had cancelled their visit only last week. After two disappointments and fearing she never would be, Theo was happily with child. Haven refused to allow her to travel, and Amanda had agreed, given the difficulty Theo had had conceiving.

While standing at the railing of their steamer when New York harbor came into view, Olivia had marveled at the expanse of forest she could make out stretching far beyond the city. The sun had been setting, gilding everything with golden light. The scene reminded Olivia of a painting Georgina had in

London, one done by Thomas Cole. Not the specifics of course, but the light felt different here. A hint of something raw filled the air, *and Olivia*, with excitement. It had made sense to her that this was Ben's home.

Yes, but he isn't here.

Olivia's foolish romantic fantasies, of her stepping off the steamer to be greeted by an adoring Benjamin Cooke, were just that. Foolish. Ben wasn't even in New York at present, nor had he written Georgina in the time since he'd departed England. Jacob Rutherford, with Georgina's mother, Cordelia, by his side, had visited The Barrington shortly after the family arrived and advised Georgina that her cousin was in Boston on Rutherford business.

Cordelia Rutherford was a more elegant, regal version of Georgina. She wasn't unduly impressed at making the acquaintance of a duke or duchess but greeted them all warmly if not a bit distantly.

Lilian, Georgina's sister was frail and delicate. Sorrow, the sort one doesn't truly recover from, was etched in every line of her slender shoulders. Leo was especially gentle with her.

Jacob Rutherford, however, was everything Georgina claimed him to be. Worse, actually.

There was little resemblance to Georgina or Lilian in Rutherford's coarse features. He smiled when he shook the hand of the Duke of Averell but did not make a polite bow. Nor did he address Tony as Your Grace, but instead, simply called him Averell. His eyes, the same chocolate brown as Georgina's, held a calculating light, and Olivia had the impression he was assessing how being related to a duke and his family might be of use. There was something threatening about Georgina's father, which detracted from the charming smile he bestowed on them all.

Rutherford greeted Leo last, intentionally, Olivia thought. A grudging look of respect passed between them.

Later, Georgina confided that the fact that Ben was in Boston on Rutherford business was a good sign. Her father

didn't seem agitated in any way. Perhaps Ben had taken her advice and decided not to confess to Jacob. Or maybe he had finally rid the world of Morgan Stewart.

Olivia sat back on her heels and surveyed the enormous square of cleared land adjacent to The Barrington, trying to push away the ever-mounting sense of dread when she thought of Ben.

Because Morgan Stewart was very much alive. Olivia had seen him.

Upon their arrival a week ago, the first thing Leo had done was escort Olivia up to the rooftop of the hotel. She'd tried to stanch her disappointment upon viewing the roof. After all, what Leo had created was rather splendid. The view of the city took one's breath away. There was a folly, complete with a tiny pond. Dozens of potted trees and shrubs lined the path, along with benches where guests could sit and enjoy Manhattan spread out before them. But there were no true garden beds. Leo put one arm around her shoulders and began a lengthy explanation of roof reinforcement, soil weight and the recommendations of the architect who'd built The Barrington. Leo could be incredibly long-winded, and Olivia's attention had wandered to the street below.

A gentleman was walking back and forth in front of the hotel, pausing every so often to study the building, his head cocked in concentration as he gazed at the side of the hotel where Phaedra and Olivia were staying. Even from her place on the roof, she recognized him.

"Leo—" she'd said, thinking to tell him about Stewart and Phaedra, but when Olivia had glanced back to the street, Stewart was gone.

"I know you're disappointed." Leo had stopped what he thought was a condemnation of the roof garden. "But I've something better for you, Olivia." He had taken her down the stairs to a large plot of land adjacent to the hotel. Weed infested, strewn with bits of trash, Leo had spread his arms in a wide flourish and said, "I want a proper English garden. Can you accomplish such a miracle?"

Olivia had promptly forgotten all about Stewart once she'd seen the immense space she'd been given. There was even a team of gardeners under her command. Her thoughts stayed free of Ben for a good three hours as she began to count her steps, designing a spectacular garden in her mind while Leo went to fetch her sketch book. Hollyhocks. Peonies. Roses. Lilacs. A winding path. She'd even include a hawthorn or two. Delighted, Olivia had hurled herself at Leo, in a glorious unladylike display of happiness, and hugged him.

Olivia looked up at the trees which had been trimmed just yesterday. This garden was what had kept her sane in the last few days while Georgina tried to reach Ben in Boston where he had been for nearly a month overseeing the acquisition of Abercrombie Limited. Jacob had told Georgina that much before declaring that Ben's whereabouts weren't any of her business, but he was at the Tremont.

Georgina had gone directly to the sideboard in the family's private apartments to avail herself of a glass of bourbon the moment her father departed. After which, she'd sent a letter to Ben at the Tremont Hotel in Boston.

At least Olivia knew Ben was well. Just not *here*.

She sighed, missing Ben and observed the area before her, seeing her vision finally taking shape. The gardeners followed Olivia's direction and she'd been delighted to see the outline of future flower beds and the path that would wind through the space all neatly outlined. The garden wouldn't be completely ready in time for the grand opening of The Barrington, but it would be lovely when it was finished.

She stretched, taking a handkerchief out of her pocket to wipe the sweat from her brow. Wrinkling her nose at the stains beneath her arms and damp bodice, Olivia determined a bath was in order. One filled with scented soap and steaming water.

As of this morning, Georgina had still not heard from Ben, nor had she any idea when he would return from Boston.

It was just as well. Their estrangement had gone on so long, her anger growing and abating over the course of the two months or so since she'd seen him, Olivia was unsure what she

would say. The sting of him leaving without giving Olivia a chance to decide for herself still hurt, but so did their separation.

Everything. That's what he'd said they were to each other. Yet Ben had assumed she would rather be a countess and marry Peter once Olivia knew the truth.

And confessing such a truth to her while half-asleep after he'd pleased her for hours?

Olivia jerked off her gardening gloves as her anger came rushing back.

Bloody coward.

It was a terrible lie, pretending to be someone else, but Ben had been a *child*. A starving, shivering bit of bones who had been *desperate* for the chance to change his existence. The real Benjamin Cooke had already died. He hadn't stolen his future, only his name. He'd become the son of a man who'd desperately wanted one. Devoted himself to safeguarding both Georgina and Lilian. Protected Jacob Rutherford's interests with single-minded purpose.

Olivia found no fault with Ben's actions. But she understood why he did.

Walking back inside the Barrington, she caught sight of Rosalind and Torrington, arguing in French and English with the chef from Paris whom Leo had hired. Hands gestured and waved in the air as the discussion became increasingly heated.

She waved but continued in the direction of the stairs, anxious to find some solitude in her bath and not be caught up in an argument over the best way to create a flaky pastry. It was good to know that Ros was feeling better. She'd been ill the entire crossing and drunk her fair share of Leo's special ginger tea.

The remainder of the family was out for the day and wouldn't return until dinner. Georgina had whispered that Olivia should stay behind and oversee the work on the garden with the hotel's opening so close, to which she had heartily agreed. Harry, Olivia's lady's maid, had departed a short time

ago to see the sights with the other ducal staff who'd accompanied them.

Olivia was quite on her own.

The best part of The Barrington, as far as Olivia was concerned, was that she didn't have to ask to have a bath sent up. Hot water was available at the twist of a handle through a series of pipes in the walls of the hotel. So much more convenient than waiting on a series of maids and footmen to bring you a bath. The Barrington was the only hotel in New York at present which offered guests such a luxury. Leo even provided his guests fragrant French-milled soaps for their comfort.

The entire fifth floor of The Barrington was a series of apartments for the exclusive use of Leo's family. Olivia and Phaedra shared two bedrooms, a sitting room and their own water closet, complete with a copper lined bathing tub. Leo and Georgina had once resided here, before the rest of the floor had been completed, but now their sprawling set of rooms sat opposite. In between were additional suites for family members, all interconnected and leading to a large main parlor where they could all gather. It was almost like being at Cherry Hill or the London house. Not like a hotel at all.

Olivia moved through the parlor and down the hall to the left, feeling the pinch of her calves from kneeling in the garden for so long.

A hot bath would be most welcome.

Ben walked down Broadway Street, headed in the direction of his cousin-in-law's grand hotel. As The Barrington came into view, he drank in the sheer beauty of the structure. Designed by the same man who had built the Tremont in Boston, Isaiah Rogers, The Barrington was built of the finest stone from a quarry miles away on the Hudson. Six stories tall, held up by immense Grecian columns, Ben could just make out the trees and folly atop the roof.

Pain dug into his chest, and his steps slowed. Any sort of garden never failed to bring Olivia to mind, though he suspected she'd be unhappy with Leo's rooftop version.

Thinking of Olivia also brought regret. Longing. The fiercest sort of arousal. Ben had tried to console himself with the knowledge he'd done what was best for her. But the selfish part of him, the least honorable element, screamed at Ben to return to England and just take her. Bourbon helped blot out the feeling, as did Boston. The first few days of taking over Abercrombie Limited had been anything but smooth, but he had welcomed the challenge. Just as he had encouraged the fights he'd jumped into whenever he'd managed to find one.

Georgina wasn't pleased he hadn't been in New York when the family arrived, at least according to the note which had found him just before he left the Tremont in Boston.

Ben felt bad about not being here. Avoiding Georgina wasn't natural for him. But he hadn't been ready for the

discussion she wished to have about Jacob. Ben certainly didn't want to hear Olivia's name or see the Barringtons.

Walking inside, Ben paused to admire a Chippendale table perfectly placed beneath a window. Lovely bit of furniture. It looked much better at The Barrington than it had in Shipton's grandmother's home.

He made his way to the family's suite of rooms, doffing his hat to one of the dozens of maids wandering about. The girl, cheeks bright red, giggled and scurried out of the way when she saw him. Another note from Georgina had arrived only this morning at Rutherford Shipping, requesting his presence this afternoon and to stop avoiding her. Preparing himself to be chastised, Ben paused, surprised to find the door to the family parlor partially open. He automatically felt for the familiar weight of a knife in his pocket before walking inside.

It always paid to be cautious.

"George?" Ben strode into the large room filled with furniture and books, nearly tripping over a stack of blocks that probably belonged to Daniel. "The damned door is wide open. Anyone could walk in." He turned and shut the door behind him and walked down the hall to the left, where he could hear the sound of running water.

Someone was about.

The air smelled of jasmine, which instantly brought Olivia to mind, though she seemed to have abandoned the scent sometime after he'd met her at Elysium.

He paused at the entrance to what had been Georgina's private parlor, looking toward the doorway that led to one of the bedrooms.

A curious, fluttering sensation took root in his chest at the sight of a pair of muddy half-boots tossed on the floor along with a pair of filthy gardening gloves. Tiny clumps of dirt left a trail to a discarded dress covered in grass stains.

Ben drew in a deep breath and stepped into the bedroom.

Stockings had been flung in the direction of the bed, but had fallen short, dangling off the edge of the coverlet. A pile of cotton underthings sat near the entry to the water closet. Steam rolled out of the small room. The air smelled of jasmine and something else, something floral.

He took another step, listening to the roar of his heart, not daring to believe what was before him.

Livy.

She sat in the bath facing away from the door, head leaning back on the edge of the tub, humming a tune Ben didn't recognize. Slender fingers gripped the copper bath, twitching every so often while the gentle slope of her shoulders rippled the water.

Ben turned back to the bedroom he'd just passed through, searching for any signs of a male presence. There were no waistcoats. No discarded cravats. Not so much as a shaving kit or a pair of boots.

Buttercup wasn't here.

His head swung back to the woman in the bath. Thick sable hair, freshly washed, fell over edge of the tub, water dripping down the silken strands to pool on the floor. The tips of her breasts, if he could see them, would be bobbing just below the surface, flushed pink from the heat. Her entire body would be rosy. Soft.

A low sound came out of him.

She sat up abruptly, sensing his presence. Taking up a bar of soap from the small table beside her, Olivia turned and flung the square in his direction.

"I warned you Phaedra, don't sneak up—" Olivia's lips parted in surprise as she took him in. A wounded look flashed in the dark eyes, along with hope and a great deal of anger. Or possibly annoyance her bath was being disturbed. Ben was so struck by a pert nipple cresting the top of the water, he couldn't concentrate.

The bar of soap hit him in the chest, falling to the floor with a dull thud.

“Is he here? Buttercup?” Ben’s words were hoarse.

The answer was clear, given the bedroom held no sign of anyone inhabiting the room except for Olivia, but Thomlinson seemed the sort who would sleep apart from his wife. “Did you marry Buttercup?”

Olivia’s lovely features flushed with outrage. A sopping wet rag hit him in the face. “What do you bloody think?”

Christ, she was *angry*. Furious. The pale pink hue of one taut nipple flashed again. The crisp upper-crust accent sent a wave of arousal curving below his waist.

“Livy.” Ben took a step forward, thinking of nothing but touching her. The hurt look crossed her features once again sending a punch to Ben’s heart.

“You left me,” she shouted. “Not a word. Passing me over to Peter Thomlinson as if I were a scone on a tea tray. I’m honorable,” she said in a gruff, flat tone imitating him, “so you should have the scone, Buttercup. Though I’ve rubbed my mouth and other body parts all over it.”

A small brush on the table beside her was the next object to be tossed his way. Olivia’s aim was quite good, not surprising given she’d been throwing peas and the like at Phaedra for years.

“I *was* trying to be honorable. You were set on doing your duty to Lord Daring,” he replied. “You would have hated me for making you ignore your responsibility to your family, especially because of what I am.”

Ben was going to strangle Georgina. The note had said nothing about Olivia being here, nor had his cousin informed him that Olivia hadn’t wed Buttercup. He supposed this was Georgina’s way of getting back at him for not informing *her* when Leo had arrived in New York.

Well played, George.

No one was here except for Olivia, that much was clear. And she was angry at him. But also deliciously naked. Ben was having trouble stringing together his thoughts, given the thing he wanted most in the world was within arm’s reach.

“So you just cheerfully handed me over to Peter,” she snapped back. “How thoughtful.”

“I didn’t do it cheerfully,” he hurled back. It had crushed him to leave Olivia at Halloway Park. He’d regretted doing so the entire ride to London and almost turned back.

“After all the things you and I—” The color of her cheeks deepened. “Did you imagine I would just go to a marriage bed with Peter after—” She shook her head, and her shoulders drooped. “Get out. I can’t speak to you at present.”

He’d hurt her. Deeply. “Livy, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to compromise the duty you felt to Lord Daring. And I have been living a lie. I couldn’t—”

“I was *never* going to marry him. I couldn’t. I came to your room that night to tell you, and then you—” The dark sheen of her eyes cut down to his trousers. “Well, other, more important things took precedence. But my thoughts grew muddled because—” Her hands wandered along the small table, looking for something else to throw at him. “I thought we had reached an understanding that night. You told me you loved me.”

“I do love you.”

An unused bar of soap, still wrapped in paper pinged off his thigh.

“How *could* you?” She stood up and faced him, water sluicing down the delicious curves of her body. Flushed a luscious pink, as he’d imagined. Trembling with anger and hurt. Hurt he had caused.

Ben’s entire chest twisted up. “I was trying to make things easier, *better*, for you.” He held up a hand and took a step forward. “I didn’t want to saddle you with a pickpocket from the edge of Five Points.”

“No, you’d rather allow me to have children with enormous heads. An entire herd of buttercups.” A tear ran down her cheek. “How dare you decide what I want. Whom I *love*.”

His chest tightened further as the air left his lungs. He had never been sure, especially after telling her what he was, that Olivia *loved* him. “I didn’t—I didn’t want you to have to choose between me and your duty to Lord Daring. If I had compromised you, I would have taken your choice away. Don’t you see? You’d have hated me once you found out what you gave up for me.” A hand went up to press against his heart, wishing it didn’t feel like the damned thing would burst right out of his chest.

“You left me a virgin under some ridiculous guise of honorability. So I wouldn’t be *forced* to choose you.” A sob stuck in her throat, and one small fist thumped her own chest. She stood proudly before him. Brave. Naked. A soap bubble caught on one nipple. “But the choice was *always* you, Ben.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “We are everything to each other. How could you think—”

Ben moved himself toward the tub, kicking away the bar of soap, and reached for her just as a sob filled the air. “Shh, Livvy. I’m sorry.”

Her hands pummeled his chest. “How could you believe that of me?” Another cry left her. “That I didn’t want you?”

Cupping the side of her face, he kissed the tears running down her cheeks. “Don’t cry. I’m sorry,” he whispered, lifting her out of the bath, dripping water all over the floor, and held her close to his chest. “Forgive me.”

Olivia buried her face against him, her fingers grabbing at the edge of his coat. “You should have just ruined me instead of leaving.”

“I sure as hell won’t make the same mistake twice.” Water dripped all over the expensive rug as he carried her to the bed. Laying her down, he kept his palm splayed over her stomach, holding her in place. “Say it again.”

“I choose you, Twist.” Slim arms reached for him.

“It’s Ben,” he said with certainty before his lips came crushing down on hers. “Benjamin Cooke.”

Ben's mouth fell on hers, tender at first before becoming hungry. His hand pressed to her stomach, his long fingers stretching across Olivia's damp skin as he kissed her until she could taste his longing for her. The sweep of his tongue spoke of every moment they'd been apart, love and desperation mingling with every breath.

"I won't let you go after this. Not ever. Not even if you live to regret your choice." His voice thickened. "I won't be able to."

"I know." She sighed as his lips moved to graze gently along the side of her neck, his hand snaking up to cup the flesh of her breast and squeeze gently. The warmth of his breath slid over her nipple before closing over the small peak, using his teeth to toy with her until she moaned.

"I'm not good, Olivia." The words skittered along the stretch of her stomach while his hand never left her breast, pinching at the nipple he'd just worshipped with his mouth. "Not in the way that you are. Benjamin Cooke isn't any better than the boy named Twist who was raised in a brothel." He paused as his long fingers caressed her hip. "If any other man ever touches you, I'll gut him and feel no regret for doing so. I'll protect you until there isn't any breath left in my body. I'd burn down all of New York if you asked me."

A tiny shiver prickled her skin. This was Ben. All of him. Unapologetic. Ruthless. A threat in an expensive coat and boots.

“I still choose you.”

A satisfied sound came from him. The fingers along her hip held on tighter as the edge of his tongue traced along the inside skin of her thigh. His breath stirred the hair covering her mound as he nipped and sucked his way with agonizing slowness to the place Olivia wanted to feel him most.

“Did you touch yourself while we were apart and think of me?”

A rush of wetness stole between her thighs at his rough, possessive tone. There were nights when she’d missed Ben so much, so desperate for him, that Olivia had tried. The results had been mixed.

“I—” The rest of her words were cut off as Ben pressed a finger inside her. A moan escaped her lips as he drew the digit out with agonizing slowness, dragging the tip purposefully along the sensitive spot inside.

“I’m listening, Olivia.”

Another finger joined the first, stretching her, two fingers now thrusting deep inside her, every stroke heightening the pleasurable sensation building within Olivia. His thumb pressed along the lines of her slit, teasing along the one spot begging for his attention.

“I wanted you,” she finally choked out. “I couldn’t—” The movements of his fingers and the press of his thumb teasing at the swollen nub hidden in her folds had Olivia’s mind unable to form a coherent thought. Her back arched as another finger slid inside her, stroking along her inner walls until she became mindless with pleasure. “Oh please, Ben.”

“You asked so nicely.” He pressed his thumb down while his fingers curled inside her. Then he bit the soft skin of her inner thigh.

Lights burst before Olivia’s eyes as she cried out his name, the feel of his teeth sharpening the pleasure. Her limbs trembled, one leg curling over his shoulder as he coaxed out every moment of her climax. The waves of sensation rolled in rapid bursts over Olivia’s prone form until slowing to a soft

flutter along her skin. A gasp burst from her lips as his fingers left her.

“Stay still.”

A grin formed on her lips as she struggled to regain her breath. Propping herself up on her elbows, she took in the large male before her, heart racing at the knowledge she would finally belong to him.

Ben stood up from the bed, the forested depths of his eyes predatory. The deep green blocked out the brown and gold. He tore off his coat, tossing it to a nearby chair.

Two knives slid out of an inside pocket, thudding dully on the rug. Boots came next, which he placed nearer the bed.

Olivia could see the gleaming hilt of another knife, sticking out of one.

“How many?” She swallowed, her skin growing warm again, knowing that this dangerous creature who was discarding his clothing belonged solely to her. “How many knives do you carry?”

“Five.” Ben never took his eyes from her. “A pistol too, sometimes. Don’t let it concern you, Livy.”

“It doesn’t.” Ben was her sanctuary. The greenhouse protecting not only her person, but her heart and very soul. He would never allow anything to hurt her nor anyone she loved. He was honorable. Loyal. Overprotective to a fault. *Good* in all the ways that truly mattered. She supposed Lord Shipton wouldn’t agree.

“I love you.” Olivia’s words echoed inside her heart. “I love you.”

He looked up from the buttons of his shirt, the longing for her shimmering in the deep forest of his eyes. “You are,” the timbre of his voice grew raspy and thick, “everything to me, Olivia. Each beat of my heart. The air in my lungs. My dreams.” The shirt fell to the floor along with the remainder of his clothing. “You are the very *breath* of my soul, Livy.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. “I am?”

He slid next to her on the bed, cupping her face, and kissed away the tear. “*Everything.*” A grin tugged at his lips. “Except you won’t be a virgin any longer. Not after I’m finished.”

She grinned back at him, threading her fingers through the thick mahogany of his hair. Kissing the line of his jaw, breathing in the scent of pine and snow along his neck.

He rolled, hovering over her on all fours as his fingers once more pressed between her thighs, preparing her for what was to come.

“I know what to expect,” she assured him. “I’m ready.”

Ben studied her, concern for her swirling in the color of his eyes. “I’m big, Livy. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I think it unavoidable.” She reached up, fingers trailing over the length of him, marveling that something so hard could also possess such velvety smoothness.

Dark lashes folded over his cheeks as a soft moan came from his lips, before he settled between her thighs and Olivia’s hand fell away. Ben breathed along her neck before kissing her tenderly. His hand trailed down to take hold of her hip, slowly inching inside her.

“I’m sorry,” Ben whispered along the curve of her ear, the only warning before he thrust inside her.

Olivia bit her lip, struggling to hold back the whimper of pain as he seated himself inside her body. The sense of fullness was like nothing she’d ever known. Her muscles fluttered, straining to accommodate his body inside hers. The brief tear of her virginity wasn’t noteworthy. A mere pinch. But Dear God, the rest—

Olivia sucked in a breath. Thank goodness he’d taken time to prepare her, but it wasn’t nearly enough. What if she never grew used to this?

Ben kept his body still. “Breathe, Livy.”

His arms were corded bands of muscle on either side of her, restraining himself when Olivia sensed he wanted nothing more than to ravish her.

Ben pulled out and thrust firmly once more, this time burying himself so deep a low moan came from her pressed lips. Olivia's back arched, hips raised toward him. Muscles she had never been aware of clamped down, pulling a sound from him.

"Mine, finally," he growled. "*Only* mine."

"Yes." Olivia dragged her nails along the carved slope of his thighs and across his muscular buttocks to his back. Scars teased at the edges of her fingertips.

"Oh, Livy," he rasped, voice hitched with emotion, eyes never leaving her face.

She would never, not in her entire life, forget this moment. The sensation of two halves finally becoming whole.

Ben tried to be gentle, rocking into her, holding back. But she welcomed the punishing feel of him. *Needed* it to seal them together. There was a bite of pain, but it washed with the pleasure as she lifted her hips to his, urging him to not be so careful. Olivia wrapped her legs around his waist, begging him in a broken voice for more as he took her harder, until she could feel him down to the marrow of her bones.

His hand moved between them, touching her until Olivia's pleasure began to spiral upward again. Their bodies moved together, hers clumsy, his sure, until she writhed, nipping at the skin of his shoulder.

Ben thrust, pushing Olivia's body almost to the edge of the bed. His fingers teased, holding Olivia's pleasure from her, until she sobbed. Begged.

"*Everything.*" His big body grew taut, the cords in his neck standing out. Growling out her name he finally allowed Olivia to fall into the abyss of pleasure with him.

Ben shifted his weight to the side. Pulling Olivia with him, he carefully lifted her leg over his thigh, refusing to allow his body to leave hers. He curled protectively around her, warm and solid. The brush of his lips against Olivia's temple had her sighing in contentment. This was a blissful moment, even if she was a bit *battered* by the experience.

"You should soak in the bath. I'm told it helps."

"Not yet." She smiled, pressing her forehead against his chest, basking in the solid feel of him beside her. "But I suppose I will need another bath and definitely a glass of scotch."

A rumble of amusement came from him. "I will provide both." His big hand threaded through her still damp hair. "I never expected you." The words were solemn, his gaze serious. "Never thought I would—have *this* feeling. I knew at Elysium. Became certain when I saw you sitting across from me at the duke's table."

"That you loved me?" Olivia looked up at him curiously.

"No. Not exactly." He shook his head. "Georgina told me once that the first time she set eyes on Leo Murphy, she knew she *would* love him." Ben kissed the tip of her nose. "I knew that you would be—"

"Everything."

"Yes," he agreed.

Olivia frowned, her fingers finding and tracing the scar along his ribs. It worried her, that they had not discussed the future. Or more specifically, how they would have a future. Ben had given her up to return to New York and tell Jacob Rutherford the truth. But it didn't appear, given he had just been in Boston on Rutherford business, that he had.

And Morgan Stewart was still alive, so Ben hadn't removed that particular threat.

Olivia wasn't sure what that meant for their future. Possibly, she and Ben would need to leave New York forever. Georgina was certain her father wouldn't take the news of Ben's identity well.

"I want you to know that I am prepared," she said. "Whether you decide you wish to wed me or—"

"I do." Ben cupped her face, his brows drawn together in confusion. "Why would you assume I didn't?"

Olivia dipped her chin, relieved at his words, though truthfully, she would have gone with him whether he wed her or not.

"You should know, I have an enormous dowry," she related with determination. "Obscene, really. More than enough. I'll make sure Tony has no qualms about giving it to me. We can start again. Leave New York."

"Why would I leave New York? And I don't need your damned dowry. Averell's a prick."

"Tony is not a *prick*." Warmth burned her cheeks at the vulgarity. "He's a *duke*. I'm trying to be helpful," she snipped. "To let you know I have funds should they be necessary."

A deep, sexual sound left Ben. "I love it when you become prim and crisp."

Indeed, he did. Olivia could feel him swell where he was still lodged inside her. He tilted his hips, just slightly.

"This is quite serious," she gasped at the sensation.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

“I only meant,” Olivia continued in a tart voice, “that I understand that you must tell Jacob Rutherford. You came back to New York to confess everything to him. Georgina is certain her father won’t be receptive to your confession, and I quite agree after meeting him. When you do tell him, hardship is sure to follow and—”

“He knows, Olivia,” Ben said softly. “*Has* known almost since the day he saw me sitting in the kitchens of his home, shoving an entire loaf of bread with butter into my mouth. But I am still Jacob Rutherford’s son, regardless of where I came from.

“He loves you.” Olivia looked up at him.

“Yes, he does, which came as a surprise. Jacob adopted me when I was twelve. I didn’t know. I only recall a vague memory of being waved into his study where an older gentleman asked me some questions. Legally, I am his son. The sole heir to Rutherford Shipping, although there are hefty provisions for both Georgina and Lilian. I imagine Cordelia is aware of what Jacob did, which explains why she doesn’t like me.”

“Jacob Rutherford adopted you,” Olivia said, stunned by the turn of events.

“When I told him about finding the coat,” Ben said, toying with a lock of her hair, “Jacob poured me a glass of bourbon and asked me if I thought him an idiot. I won’t repeat the rest of the conversation. Might singe your ears. Jacob knows everything and told me in no uncertain terms it was no one else’s business.”

Ben looked . . . lighter somehow. As if the shadow of Twist and Morgan Stewart no longer dogged his every step.

“So while I appreciate the generous offer of your dowry, Livy, it isn’t necessary. Nor do we have to leave New York to avoid Jacob’s wrath. In fact, I imagine he’ll be thrilled I’m wedding the granddaughter of an earl. There is more to the story.” He rubbed a finger over her mouth, lingering on her bottom lip. “But there are other things I want to discuss.” His finger moved to her breast, tracing along the edges to circle

one nipple. “I do appreciate your willingness to provide for me . . .” He kissed her, sucking at her bottom lip until Olivia moaned. “And become some sort of fugitive from society. It’s very touching.”

“So I can spend the whole of my dowry on manure, if I choose?” she whimpered as he gently moved his hips.

“Every penny. Make a magnificent garden for the house I’ll build you.” His lips caught hers. “Whatever will make you happiest, Livy. I will always only want your happiness.”

The sound of the door to the bedroom nearly being torn off its hinges as it was flung open startled Olivia from sleep.

“Jesus.” Tony’s voice. “You bloody—”

“I’ll kill you,” Leo snarled, interrupting his brother.

A cover was thrown over Olivia’s nakedness and secured around her shoulders and head. Ben pulled her against him, protecting her, as always.

She so loved that about him.

“Calm yourself, my love.” The sound of Georgina’s voice, unsurprised at finding them in such a situation and slightly muffled through the blanket met Olivia’s ears. “Ben, use a portion of that blanket for yourself. *Please*. There are ladies present. And you aren’t killing anyone, Leo. Ben plans to wed Olivia.”

“I do,” Ben drawled, not the least concerned with Leo’s threats. “I should never have left her in England. Your Grace, I would like to formally ask for Olivia’s hand.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Leo growled.

“Leo,” Georgina said in a placating tone. “He’s ruined her.”

A resigned sigh filled the room. “I suppose he’s better than Haven,” Tony snipped. “Marginally.”

“He isn’t.” Leo sounded furious. “Phaedra, return to the drawing room. Why are you even here witnessing this abomination?”

“Christ, Leo. Do you need to be so dramatic?” Ben again. “I’m hardly as bad as Haven.”

“Wait until I tell Mama,” Phaedra piped in. “She’s once again failed in raising proper young ladies. Olivia was her last hope, her *final* hope. Her Grace will not take the news well.”

Dear God, were they all clustered around the door?

“*Get out.*” Olivia sat up, pulling the blanket from her face, glaring at all of them. “Leave. This instant. Shut the door behind you. I am not able to receive you at present but will appear in the drawing room within a half hour.”



NEARLY AN HOUR LATER, BECAUSE OLIVIA DID NEED TO BATHE once more, she sat perched on the edge of a large sofa, back ramrod straight, hands clasped before her. Ben sat beside her, wrapped around Olivia’s smaller form like a large, dangerous vine. He, Tony, and Leo seemed to be engaged in a contest of cold stares and murderous looks.

Phaedra, thankfully, had been banished.

Amanda, having been apprised of the situation, sipped on a glass of brandy, regarding Ben with a thoughtful expression. She’d been expecting this, Olivia realized, and didn’t seem surprised. Which wasn’t to say Amanda was pleased.

Tony went to the sideboard and poured out two glasses of scotch, handing one to Leo. He didn’t bother to ask Ben if he wanted anything to drink.

Just as well.

After taking a sip, Tony sputtered. “Don’t bother.” He took the glass in Leo’s hand. “Someone has switched out my scotch with overly sugared tea. *Again.*” An annoyed gaze fell on Olivia. “What are you doing with the scotch? Drinking it?”

Olivia declined to answer. Best not to incriminate herself. The current situation was tenuous.

The corner of Amanda's mouth twitched. "May I speak to Olivia alone, please?" she requested in an imperious tone, the one that said she was a duchess, and no one should disobey.

Ben's hold on Olivia's hand tightened.

"You too, Mr. Cooke." Amanda dismissed him with a wave. "But no one is to murder anyone else until I speak to Olivia," she admonished. "After, possibly, if you still feel it is merited."

Tony ambled out of the room, but Leo lingered at the door, waiting for Ben to follow.

"It's fine." Olivia touched Ben's cheek with her finger. "I promise. Don't hurt Leo."

"I won't." Ben pressed a kiss to her wrist and reluctantly made his way to where Leo stood, guarding the door. "Do you have any bourbon?" he said as he passed by Leo.

Leo's reply, more of a growl, was lost as he shut the door.

Amanda sat and took Olivia's hand. "Child of my heart, who said she would never ruin herself."

"I suppose I found the right gentleman." Olivia laid her head on Amanda's shoulder.

Amanda sighed. "You are a love match. One would have to be blind not to see it." She gave Olivia a sideways glance. "He looks as if he would tear through all of us to get to you."

Nothing, not even the family she adored, would keep Olivia from Ben. "We love each other. Ben is where I belong."

"And New York." A sad look fell over Amanda's features. "You aren't returning to London with me, are you?"

Olivia shook her head, eyes filling with tears. "I can't. I won't leave him."

Amanda hugged her close. "You have what I have always wished for you, Olivia. And though my heart aches knowing I

won't see your beloved face every day, I am joyous at your happiness. Promise me you will visit."

"A promise, freely given." She hugged Amanda. "Mama."

Amanda's eyes filled with tears. Her chest shook before a sob left her. But she was smiling.

EPILOGUE

“**A** *cernus arbor.*”

A hand floated over her naked breast, grazing the tip of her nipple. “And that one?” Ben breathed along her neck as his fingers trailed along her hip.

“*Rhododendron,*” she whispered on a sigh. “The Latin isn’t any different.”

“A shame.” His tongue trailed along the curve of her ear before nipping at the lobe. “What about the blue one?” A large hand fell between her thighs.

“Hydrangea.” Olivia giggled. “Again, no particular name in Latin. We should go back. Someone is bound to notice I’m missing.” She looked up into the night sky, marveling at the brilliance of the stars. A frog chirped to her left, buried somewhere amongst the flowers. Leo’s English garden wasn’t quite finished, but it would do for the opening of The Barrington. And the other more important event tomorrow morning.

Her wedding to Ben.

“I may have to reconsider.” He reluctantly pulled up the sides of her nightgown, securing the silk covered buttons once more. “I thought I was getting a wife who could spout off Latin to impress my business associates. I’m disappointed, Livy.”

Olivia giggled again. “Not terribly.” It wasn’t a bed of wildflowers, but Ben had definitely spent the last hour tugging

her. “You didn’t seem put out a short time ago.”

“When we stand before the minister tomorrow, I’ll be remembering all the wicked things I did to you in Leo’s garden. I can’t wait to tell him one day.”

“You will not.” Olivia swatted at him. “It took Leo two days to speak to you again after the incident.”

“Is that what we’re calling your ruination? Very well. I won’t mention to Leo that I’ve debased you in his very proper English garden.” He stood, pulling her up with him.

After their wedding, Leo would be hosting the grand opening of his hotel. Inquiries for rooms had been quite fierce. There wouldn’t be an opening for another six months. Membership for the private club on The Barrington’s ground floor was already full, with a waiting list. The French chef had quit, but Torrington and Rosalind had stepped in until another was found. Phaedra had volunteered to stand at the front doors, welcoming the initial rush of guests.

“Have you written to Daring?” Ben nudged the nape of her neck.

“I have. I don’t expect a pleasant reply.” Grandfather would be less than pleased Olivia was wedding Benjamin Cooke. “Jacob is inordinately pleased, though, so that is something.”

“I told you he would be. You’re the granddaughter of an earl.”

Olivia cupped his cheek. “I hope I don’t embarrass myself by sprinting down the aisle to get to you. Tony would be most upset.”

Ben laughed before swinging her into his arms. “Come, Livy. I’ve got to get you into bed.” He nodded toward the light flickering at the edge of the garden.

The day after tomorrow, Ben was taking Olivia up the Hudson, to the house Grandmother Rutherford had once owned. He’d promised to teach her how to shoot because the squirrels would be attacking what was left of the vegetable

garden. And she was planting tulips. Rows of them. For Georgina.

Ben was silent as they made their way back through the dark halls of The Barrington.

“What are you thinking about?” Olivia said against his chest.

“Everything, Livy.” He pressed a kiss to her temple, holding her close. “Everything.”

AUTHOR NOTES

I've mentioned before in my notes for **The Wager of a Lady** that I've always found the history of New York City to be fascinating, especially the creation of the upper-class elites. The Dutch and English families who first settled Manhattan were eventually forced to accept men like **Jacob Rutherford**, **Benjamin Cooke** and **Morgan Stewart**. If you are interested, I highly recommend *In Pursuit of Privilege: A History of New York City's Upper Class* by Clifton Hood.

The Barrington is based on the first luxury hotel in New York City, Astor House (originally named the Park Hotel). Built by John Jacob Astor and opened in 1836, Astor House took up an entire city block on Broadway Street (much like The Barrington). Astor House had running water pumped up by steam engines, boasted water closets on every floor and provided guests with French milled soap.

The first true luxury hotel (and the first with running water) in the United States was The Tremont in Boston, finished in 1829. The architect was Isaiah Rogers who also (fictionally) builds **The Barrington** for Leo.

Five Points where both Ben and Morgan Stewart grew up, was one of the worst crime-infested slums in the world during the 19th century. Located in Lower Manhattan, the area of Five Points stretched near a large lake known as the Collection Pond (or Collect Pond) which over the years became a dumping ground for slaughterhouses and other refuse. **Five Points** was bordered by the Bowery to the east and Canal Street to the north both places well known to Ben in **The Making of a Gentleman** and **The Wager of a Lady**.

The railway system in England is one of the oldest in the world. The Liverpool and Manchester Railway was the first modern railway and opened in 1830. Train stations and rail lines began to populate the countryside, so it wasn't unusual

for Olivia to first take a train and then a coach to Halloway Park.

Pockets. There is a great deal of research and debate on the history of pockets in women's clothing. Originally, a pocket was merely a slot in a lady's gown. A woman would reach through to access her "pocket" which was a pouch tied around her waist. Real pockets (for women) appeared around the time of the French Revolution, but then disappeared because authorities were concerned weapons could be hidden in the folds of a lady's gown. Andromeda, my dress designing heroine from **The Design of Dukes**, makes sure that the Barrington ladies all have pockets in their clothing.

And lastly, this is a work of fiction. I may sometimes bend historical facts now and again for the sake of the story.

ALSO BY KATHLEEN AYERS

The Beautiful Barringtons

[The Study of a Rake \(Prequel\)](#)

[The Theory of Earls](#)

[The Design of Dukes](#)

[The Marquess Method](#)

[The Wager of a Lady](#)

[A Recipe for a Rogue](#)

[The Making of a Gentleman](#)

The Arrogant Earls

[Forgetting the Earl](#)

[Chasing the Earl](#)

[Enticing the Earl](#)

The Wicked

[Wicked's Scandal](#)

[Devil of a Duke](#)

[My Wicked Earl](#)

[Wickedly Yours](#)

[Tall Dark & Wicked](#)

[Still Wicked](#)

[Wicked Again](#)