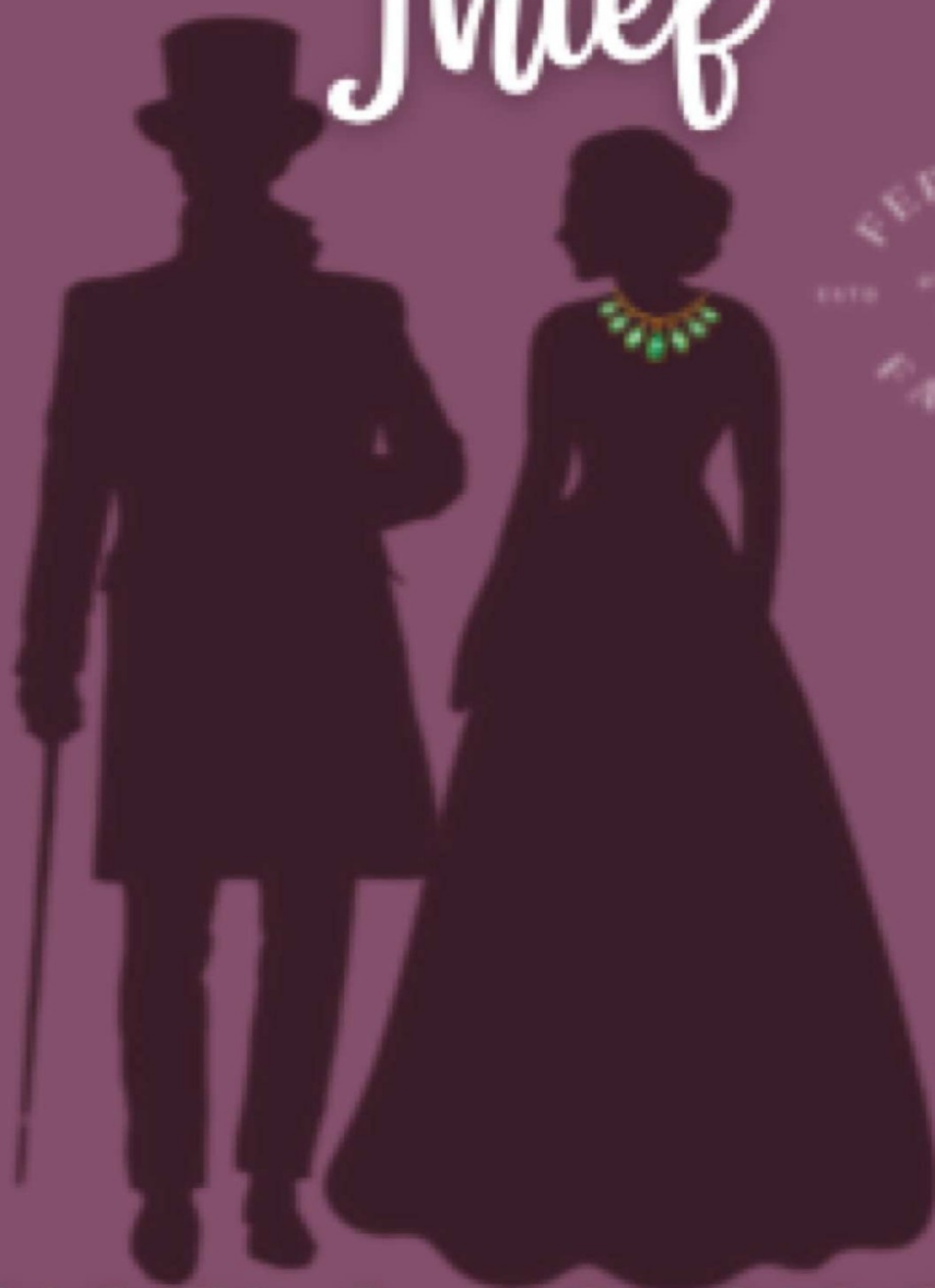


The Vicar

AND
THE

Thief



FERNLEY
ESTD 1878
FAMILY

ANGELA JOHNSON

The Vicar
AND
THE Thief



The Vicar
AND
THE Thief



ANGELA JOHNSON

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For Joslynn

Bursting with a brave heart.

A confident performer in dance and cheer.

Beautiful, a fearless jokester, loving and kind.

*You are a billion times more charming than the reddest of red
roses!*

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Chapter One

Gilbert Fernley had been destined for the church from the moment he opened the Bible and read the account of the creation. A spiritual kindling erupted in his chest each time he pondered the majesty of God's power and the ability He had to command debris to form into a planet and then breathe life into a man and a woman. This excitement had carried him through his studies, his time as a curate, and the first few years as a vicar until he suddenly realized there was a gaping hole in his life. How to fill it, he didn't know.

The realization had come on with a sudden intensity on a Sunday as he crossed from his office to the chapel. Not expecting the rush of emotion, Gilbert hadn't had time to prepare for the overwhelming melancholy it presented. Nervously standing before his parishioners, Gilbert's hands shook as he fumbled for the papers where he'd written notes for his sermon. His mind went blank as he realized he'd gathered the wrong sheets, and instead of a sermon on spiritual welfare, he held a list of people he intended to visit.

A first-time vicar or curate newly out of university might find the lack of notes troublesome. But a seasoned vicar should have a sermon at the ready for such occasions. Gilbert had one such sermon prepared, yet as he opened his mouth to speak, his mind was filled with overwhelming darkness and his words failed.

In that moment Gilbert felt much like he imagined the ancient priest Zacarias must have felt when the angel struck him dumb for doubting the miracle of a child in his elderly years. Gilbert couldn't speak, and a strange ringing sounded in

his ears as the world around him went silent. Smiling up at him were familiar faces of people who had known him since long before he was in leading strings patiently waited for the moment he would speak, yet nothing came out.

Gilbert opened his mouth and then closed it with haste multiple times before shutting his eyes to regain his composure. He simply needed to push his doubts and fears to the back of his mind before falling to pieces in front of his parishioners. Yet, falling to pieces seemed the only possible solution to the lack of coherent thought.

With his mind in chaos, Gilbert dipped his head to the congregation. He fumbled with his Bible but found it too heavy to carry, and so he abandoned the book to the pulpit before making his exit. He managed to put one foot in front of the other as he scrambled toward the door he'd walked through seconds before.

As he turned the doorknob, his hand slipped and then with the greatest of effort, he turned the knob as his curate's voice rang out through the chapel. Gilbert didn't know what excuse was made, and he didn't care. Sinking to the ground, he put his head in his hands as he waited for a return of sanity.



GILBERT SAT IN A COMFORTABLE ARMCHAIR, IN HIS OLD bedchamber at Primrose Hall, with a blanket over his legs, while waiting for the physician's diagnosis. Although he'd grown up at Primrose Hall, it was no longer his home, and he felt like an intruder. The same robin egg blue bed hangings and comforter reminded him of his youth and all the years that were long in the past. He didn't want to stay at Primrose Hall, but unfortunately for him, he'd had little choice once Baxter, Briar, and his mother had made up their minds. In his state of unrest, Gilbert had complied, and Gigi had had him removed and situated at Primrose Hall before church services had ended.

His ability to think and speak had returned almost immediately following his embarrassing display, but that had not dissuaded the extra care and comfort from his family. Although he appreciated their concern, it was not necessary. Nor had it been necessary for Phineas and Adelia to rush to Primrose Hall as if they were attending a death bed. If Gilbert didn't gain control of the situation, he would soon have all his brothers in residence and he wouldn't have a moment's peace so he could discover what had come over him.

"You will see once Doctor Grayson has made his determination that I am perfectly well. It was a simple bout of nerves." It had been more than that. But what could the doctor determine from a few pokes around the stomach and a thump or two upon his back?

Phineas shrugged his shoulders and turned away from the window with a serious tightlipped frown. His eyebrows furrowed as he considered how to respond. "Nerves? I am not a physician, but I do think it was a bit more than that."

"Exactly! You are not a physician."

"No...but I see fear in your eyes. Much more than I have ever seen before."

Gilbert pursed his lips and fought the urge to confide in his brother. What could he say that Phineas hadn't already guessed? He and Phineas kept no secrets between them. It had been that way since they were born. No one had expected twins. Phineas arrived first and then less than a minute later Gilbert entered the world as the youngest of the pair. Up until they expressed their different choices in possible professions and education, everyone outside of their immediate family had thought they were the exact same person. Although they were not identical in looks, it was assumed they were identical in personality.

Wanting a change in topic, Gilbert tucked the blanket firmly around his body, huddling against a chill that Phineas didn't seem to feel. "How is Adelia?"

"Stop deflecting my questions."

“I do not know what you mean.”

“You have done this our entire lives. You refuse to allow others to see your pain. You hide behind a dark mask and prefer to let me stand in the light. This situation is not about me.” Phineas’s glare stopped Gilbert from denying the accusation.

“The episode lasted less than five minutes but seemed like a lifetime.” That was all the information he cared to divulge. It wasn’t that he didn’t want help, it was more the need to give others the opportunity to share their problems. He was a vicar, after all. What good was the spiritual leader to his parishioners if all he did was moan about his own grief?

Phineas sat in the window box, his gaze causing Gilbert unease. It was obvious from his raised eyebrows and folded arms that he expected a better response. Gilbert cleared his throat and adjusted in his chair as he formulated an answer. He was ready to deflect from the situation once more when the door to his bedchamber opened and the doctor reentered with Gigi and Baxter.

Doctor Grayson held out a bottle with a brown sticky liquid. Taking the chair across from Gilbert, he placed the bottle on the table. “I have two solutions for you, Mr. Fernley. One might seem a bit more pleasurable than the other.”

“Please, continue doctor.” Gilbert tried to focus on the doctor, but his eyes kept wandering back to the sticky mess within the clear bottle on the table.

“It is clear to me you are suffering from a bout of overwork. You do too much for others and never focus on your own needs.”

Gilbert’s attention turned from the small bottle to the doctor. “How did you determine this?”

“A simple technique of deductive reasoning. A healthy young man does not go into hysterics without reason.”

“Hysterics?” Gilbert would not sit and listen to nonsense. “It was a simple bout of nerves. There is no need for

medications of that sort.” He pointed to the sticky substance in the bottle and frowned in disgust.

“Taking this medication three times a day is one way of healing your illness. But I do have another solution.”

Forgetting the chill of moments before, Gilbert threw the blanket off his legs and stood. He instantly regretted the loss of warmth and wished he’d had a fire set in the grate. “If you are finished, Doctor, I would like to get back to my duties.”

Ignoring his outburst, the doctor continued speaking. “If you are averse to medication, rest will do the trick.”

“An even more grotesque solution.” Gilbert was not one to *rest* while his flock needed help. If he was not there to serve them, then he was no good as a vicar.

Gigi stepped forward and took his hand. Squeezing it, she waited to speak until he gave her his full attention. “Consider it, Gilbert. You have a curate who rarely sermonizes and needs the practice.”

It was a truth he couldn’t deny. Poor Mr. Blackstone rarely had the opportunity to perform the duties of the vicar. “I agree. He could use more practice.”

Gigi brightened and pulled him into her embrace. “Very well, dearest. We leave for London in a week and we would love to have you join us.” Before he could argue, Gigi continued. “It need only be for the spring session, and then if you are well, we will allow you to return to your duties.”

Unable to deny his mother anything, Gilbert found himself silently acquiescing to her wishes. He turned to his brothers hoping to gain their sympathies by laughing off the absurdity of spending the season in London. “Rest. In London. What a laugh.”

Phineas and Baxter both nodded and spoke in unison. “A perfect solution.”

With everyone decidedly against him, he had no other option than to accept their kind offer and spend time in London. He knew his mother and sisters-in-law would expect him to attend balls and the theater every evening, but he had

other plans. Gilbert intended to ponder his scriptures and discover the cause of the gaping hole within his chest. He had faith that the word of God would solve all his troubles.

Chapter Two

Eliza Davenport decided she was a fish out of water as Lady Pipperton and a short overstuffed peacock of a woman smirked in her direction. She wasn't in the same social circle as the countess and her elaborate friend, but her presence at the party seemed to amuse the two women enough that they had taken notice. None of Eliza's friends had yet arrived in London, and therefore she stood on the outskirts of every party, accepting the veiled whispers and disapproving glares in her direction as an indication that she should have stayed home.

Her attendance at each of these parties was a result of luck. A simple hand of cards had changed her life and future posterity. When she'd been a little girl, she'd dreamed about working in a large home as a lady's maid. But with her father's newfound fortune, she wouldn't have to worry about finding work in a great home, for her life was now a paradox. She was the daughter of a wealthy merchant and the granddaughter of a talented yet humble stable master.

There were very few people amongst the *ton* who would allow her to forget her grandfather's profession. Those who were considered her friends never frowned upon her humble beginning. At least they never had in her presence. She could well remember the one-bedroom home she had lived in with her parents when she was but a little girl. She also remembered nights filled with hunger and the fear of not knowing if there would be a small bowl of porridge on the table for her morning meal. Yet, all that suffering had long passed.

One lucky night and a shrewd investment the following morning had filled coffers she'd never known existed, moving them from the wrong side of poverty to the upper class. Similar to the famed mythological Midas, everything her father touched turned into a success. He was tolerated by the wealthy because he had an affinity for filling their coffers with coin. But that didn't make her, her younger siblings, or her parents the equal of anyone at the ball she currently attended.

Another night of watching young women dance while she stood on the outskirts of Society was near ending when she found the Duchess of Dorset standing before her. Eliza curtsied, expecting the woman to pass by without giving notice. But when she lifted her head and straightened, the duchess remained steadfastly in front of her.

Having attended finishing school with the duchess, when she was known as The Honorable Miss Lucille Williamson, Eliza wasn't as nervous as she would have been with another duchess.

"Your grace?" The duchess eyed Eliza as if she were looking at a scuff of filth upon her slippers. Knowing this would be the pinnacle of her evening, Eliza kept her head high and refused to allow Lucille to intimidate her.

The duchess waved off her entourage of friends and settled in beside Eliza against the wall. She spoke with a pompous drawl that dripped with memories of their days at school when Lucille would endlessly torture her. "Eliza, it has been an age since we last visited. You look well. How is your grandfather faring? I admit when last I was at the Earl of Newport's estate, I wondered if I should venture out to the stables to inquire after your family. But I thought better of getting my slippers dirty."

"My grandfather no longer resides at Lord Newport's estate, as you well know. But thank you for your kind inquiry into his health."

Expecting the duchess to leave now that she had done her duty by reminding Eliza she didn't belong amongst the *ton*, Eliza pulled her fan out to hide the heat in her cheeks. She

waved it one complete round before the duchess reached forward and snapped it out of her hand.

“I do not care to stand here while you try your hand at seductive fan waving.”

Heat rushed up Eliza’s neck to renew the burn in her cheeks. “That was not my intent, your grace.”

“I came with a specific request. One I think you should be willing to accept.”

“Why would I accept anything from you?” Eliza had never been on friendly terms with Lucille and couldn’t imagine why that should change now. “We are not friends.”

“My friendship could pull you out of the corner of ballrooms and land you a suitor. Even more, you might find yourself the recipient of an offer of marriage. That is, if you agree to help me.”

Eliza’s interest was piqued. She’d never had a suitor. The closest she’d ever been to entertaining a man was when she’d visited Lady Adelia and Mr. Fernley in Whitby the previous autumn. They’d introduced her to Mr. Fernley’s twin brother, Mr. Gilbert Fernley. But the short visit hadn’t developed further than a night of nervous conversation.

“A suitor? Who do you have in mind?”

Duchess Dorset kept her face impassive as she waved a hand in front of her, motioning to the crowds of people around them. “One word from me and you will have your pick of handsome and wealthy gentleman. Why, even Duke Dorset’s heir might be willing to take you on a ride in Hyde Park. My husband’s son from his first marriage is quite the eligible bachelor and close in age to both of us.”

Caught up in the excitement of a possible courtship with the heir to a duchy, Eliza let go of her previous dislike of the duchess and found she was ready to hear the request. “What favor do you need of me?”

“You are aware of my dear friend from our school days, Eloise Haversham?”

“I am.”

“I trust you received an invitation to her engagement party on Thursday next.”

Eliza nodded. Everyone in London and the surrounding areas was bound to attend the affair. Eloise was set to marry the heir to the Earl of Wilmington.

The duchess continued speaking. “Eloise has a notebook with damaging information about me and the duke. During the party, I want you to sneak into her bedchamber and find the notebook. It is a small black book with an eagle embossed upon the cover. She keeps it in the drawer of her dressing table.”

“I would not know how to begin to do something so awful. I am sorry, Lucille, but I cannot do as you ask.”

“We are no longer in school, my dear. You will refrain from being so informal.”

Closing her eyes to avoid rolling them at the duchess, Eliza took a moment to compose herself before responding. Lucille and others similarly titled would never allow Eliza to forget her lower status. “I do apologize, your grace.”

“It will benefit you to help me in my situation. I have it on good authority that Eloise has damaging information about you in her booklet as well.”

Instantly on her guard, Eliza turned toward the duchess. “What sort of information?”

Duchess Dorset lifted her hands and pulled at the tops of her gloves, ensuring they were tightly fit to her delicate fingers. “One can never be too certain of the gossip others collect on them. But you will discover the salacious details once we have the booklet in our possession.”

“I cannot imagine anything of the sort being said about me.”

“Trust me, darling, you will want to stop the information from getting out. Think of the damage it could cause your family.”

Shaking her head, Eliza tried to imagine why Eloise Haversham would write anything negative about her. “What purpose does she have to spread misinformation?”

“The destruction of your impeccable reputation would suit her well. You must see the brilliance behind it.”

“No, I cannot.”

“If you hope to save yourself the hassle of denying her claims, you must assist me in the collection of the booklet.” Duchess Dorset handed Eliza the fan she’d confiscated moments before. “Once you have the booklet, send word to me through a trusted servant. We cannot be seen exchanging stolen property in the open.”

As the duchess took her leave, Eliza went back to fanning herself. She was no longer overheated, but it was better than standing in the corner without anything to do. Her eyes roamed about the room in search of Eloise Haversham. When she spotted the fair-haired woman, she couldn’t help but wonder what Eloise could have in her little black book that would be more damaging in the eyes of the *ton* than the fact that her grandfather was once a servant.

Chapter Three

Eliza's heart raced as she twisted the doorknob, the click echoing through the empty hallway for anyone with half a mind to hear. She took a second look back the way she'd come to ensure no one had followed her. The lack of shadows told her she was utterly alone on the second floor.

The start of a new song sounded as the violin bows purposefully slid across the stringed instruments. As a master of the violin, she could smell the rosin that would rise off the strings like dust floating in the air. She had three minutes, at most five, before her mother noticed she was missing. There was no time to reconsider. Lying in bed the previous night, she'd decided if there was damaging information against her family, she must retrieve it, no matter the cost. Straightening her posture, Eliza pushed the door open wide enough to slide through. The moon shone brightly through the windows, lighting her way to the vanity.

She'd been in Eloise Haversham's dressing room only once, but it had been enough for her to remember every section of furniture and inch of carpet without the need of a candle. As soon as she slipped through the door, Eliza rushed across the room and searched each drawer until she found the black notebook. She ran her fingers along the front of the book to feel the embossed illustration of the eagle before tucking it into a special pocket she'd sewn into her stays that morning.

With a growing discomfort in her chest, she backed out the door and retraced her steps down the hallway, descending the stairs and reentering the ballroom before her absence was noticed. A sickening triumph tingled in the pit of her stomach

as she realized no one suspected her of any untoward behavior. She might have preferred being caught instead of getting away with theft. But as she'd been successful, Eliza forced the frown from off her face and stood against the wall in the hallway while her heart slowed and her breathing returned to normal.

The last strains of the quadrille played as Eliza waltzed back into the room and took her place in the corner so she could watch as everyone around her enjoyed the festivities. No one had missed her. Her parents stood with the same group of people as they had when she'd left, completely unaware of the theft she'd perpetrated.

As the heaviness of guilt rested upon her shoulders, Eliza bowed her head in shame. She expected to spend the rest of the evening with her heart beating wildly for fear Eloise would discover the missing notebook. She closed her eyes in regret while considering another quick trip up the stairs to return the stolen item when she noticed someone was standing in front of her.

"Eliza! I did not think I would find you here this evening. Where have you been?"

"Where have I been? I think the better question is when did you arrive in London?" She knew Adelia had planned to be in London for spring, but she hadn't expected her so soon.

"Phineas and I arrived this very morning. We brought Mr. Gilbert Fernley with us as well."

"Oh? I am surprised he was willing to leave the vicarage for so long a time. Will he stay through the end of the season?"

"You did learn much about him with that one meeting. He is overly dedicated to his flock. But we have convinced him he needs to rest."

"Rest. In London. Are you mad?"

"I do believe that was Gilbert's reaction as well. I knew you would be a perfect match for him."

"I doubt it." The weight of the little black book increased as she thought about the handsome vicar. He wouldn't want a

woman tainted by thievery. Realizing she had a genuine opportunity for a match with someone unaffected by Duchess Dorset's meddling and threats, Eliza felt the heaviness of the notebook increase to the weight of a brick. With Gilbert Fernley in London, she wanted to slip back up the stairs and return the book to its rightful hiding place. She needed but a moment to herself to search the contents and discover the secrets Eloise had scribbled about her family.

Adelia took hold of Eliza's arm and pulled her out of the shadows. "Now I am here, you will have no reason to hide in a corner. I will have you dancing and conversing with gentlemen all evening."

Eliza allowed Adelia to pull her across the room to a group of women she knew by name only. She hadn't ever had a proper introduction, but now that Adelia was chaperoning her through the crowds, she would likely meet many more people than she'd expected. As they squeezed into the group, Eliza's eyes fell on the duchess, causing sweat to bead upon her forehead.

"Lady Adelia," Duchess Dorset said, her eyes never leaving Eliza as she spoke. "How lovely it was to hear you had returned from the Egyptian desert."

"I am thankful to be back in England, your grace. I had not heard of your marriage. Allow me to apologize for not sending my well wishes on your entrapment of a duke."

Adelia's response made Eliza smile. Everyone knew the duchess was unhappy with her situation. To bring it up in such a nonchalant way was indicative of their strained past.

"And you have married as well."

"Yes, Mr. Phineas Fernley is my husband."

"An interesting match. Not one I would have expected for the daughter of a marquess. Although I did hear Marquess Huntly went mad after your mother died. Perhaps you could not find a better match than the third son of a deceased earl."

Eliza found herself shrinking away from the bitter words meant to insult her dearest friend. It had been many years

since Adelia had been in society, but her wit hadn't taken a back seat to the Duchess of Dorset.

Adelia smirked. "Nor more than a mismatch between the youngest daughter of a no-account baron and the Duke of Dorset. How much did your father have to pay the duke to take you off his hands?"

Everyone in the group went silent as Adelia and the duchess narrowed their eyes in stubborn defiance. Neither one was ready to cower to the other. In a shaky voice, one of the women Eliza had just been introduced to filled the strained silence with unimportant chatter.

"Miss Davenport, did you notice who asked Miss Marsden to dance?" Miss Moore forced a nervous laugh and placed a hand over her mouth in a pretense of shock.

"I did not." She didn't need to see the evidence to know Lord Finning had asked Miss Marsden for a third dance of the evening. Only that could have spurred a mention of the couple.

"When do you think they will post the banns?" Miss Moore smirked as she continued with the mindless chatter.

Miss Glenn frowned as she looked upon the people lining up for the next dance. "Another ball. Another engagement. Is this the future we have before us? Will we truly have to watch everyone around us marry?"

"Is that not the purpose of the season?" Miss Moore asked.

Eliza turned toward the dancers, silently wishing she was amongst the group of happy people. Hiding the wistfulness of her emotions, Eliza forced a laugh with the two women. Making an offhand comment, she tried to join in the banter, but her words felt forced. "What other purpose do we have but to make entertainment for our neighbors?"

"Absolutely no other purpose. For we are wholly unworthy of notice." Miss Glenn's words were said in jest, but Eliza knew they held a specific amount of truth that she refused to entertain.

The weight of the notebook she'd snatched pulled on her dress, once more reminding her of the promise the duchess had

made. Was the theft of a simple notebook so dear to the duchess that she would keep such a significant promise? Eliza could find a way to sneak back up to Eloise Haversham's bedchamber and replace the notebook without notice, but the allure of dance partners, courtships, and a future marriage stopped her from following the instinct in her heart. A notebook was easy to misplace and to replace. And with that justification, Eliza cleared her conscience of any wrongdoing and enjoyed an evening with her very best friend, Adelia.



THE CARRIAGE ROCKED, CAUSING ELIZA TO BUMP INTO THE side. Groaning, she rubbed her arm. If she'd been focused on her surroundings, instead of the little black book in her pocket, she wouldn't have a bruise forming on her shoulder.

Her mother reached forward and placed a hand on her knee. "You seem distracted this evening. Is there any specific reason?"

Eliza knew what her mother was inferring. The desire for suitors and an elevation in status never seemed to end. "If you are referring to a man or a dance partner, I think you should know the answer by now. I am the last female in London with whom men wish to entertain a courtship."

"Do not think of yourself so harshly. When the time is right, you will be sending suitors away." Her mother's never-ending optimism had grown tiresome months previously at the start of the season. She was now a few months from the end of the season, and her only hope for a match had been traded for the theft of a notebook. Somehow the presence of the book put a new cumbersome weight upon her conscience.

Eliza turned away from her mother, unable to handle another discussion of eligible men, clothing, and coiffures. It was easier to be agreeable in all things so the conversation could end. "Perhaps you are right, Mama."

As the carriage ambled to a stop in front of Davenport House, Eliza made her excuses so she could examine the notebook. She needed to know what Eloise Haversham had written concerning her family. Running up the stairs, she tripped on the hem of her dress, righted herself, and then rushed with poise the rest of the way to her bedchamber. Quietly shutting the door behind her, she lifted her dress and fumbled with the pocket until she'd extracted the little black book.

Thumbing through each page, Eliza realized she was looking at a diary. She learned more about Eloise's personal thoughts than she cared, but nothing about her own family. There also seemed to be nothing about the Duke and Duchess of Dorset. Continuing her search through the book, Eliza realized the only people Eloise's writings concerned were her fiancé and his family.

Since Eloise was engaged to marry Lord Wilmington's only son and heir, it made sense that her focus would be solely upon the man she loved. Eliza was ready to close the book and consider the night a complete mistake when her eyes fell upon the information Duchess Dorset wanted. It had nothing to do with the duchess. Nor did it have anything to do with Eliza. But the information would damage Eloise Haversham's reputation and future marriage.

The little black book was not as insignificant as Eliza had originally convinced herself. Now she had to decide if it was right to protect Eloise Haversham's secret or to trust the duchess and hope for a future filled with handsome men, dancing, courtship, and marriage.

Chapter Four

Gilbert preferred the peaceful countryside over the bustling streets of London. Even the parks were overcrowded and full of happy people picnicking and laughing. When he was surrounded by others, he desired solitude. When he was granted that wish, he desired to be near people.

The greatest wish of his heart was to figure out where his discontentment had started. He'd been perfectly happy the previous week, and now it took every ounce of strength to pull himself up from bed each morning and dress for the day.

Dragging himself from the breakfast room to the morning room where his brothers, their wives, and Gigi would be, he pushed the need to go back to bed from his thoughts. Lying about would not provide an answer to his distress. If he was to discover the source of discontentment, he would need to be alert.

Gilbert walked with care through the hallway and into the morning room to find his family was entertaining guests. With a nod, he acknowledged Mrs. Davenport and Miss Davenport. He'd expected to meet Miss Davenport again, given she was friends with Adelia, but he hadn't expected a visit so soon after arriving in London.

Preparing himself for the weeks and months of hints regarding courtship from Adelia and possibly even his mother, Gilbert took a seat on the outskirts of the conversation and feigned interest. But instead of listening to the ladies recounting the previous night's activities, Gilbert reviewed

every verse in the first chapter of Genesis. He would never again be caught off guard when standing at a pulpit.

After silently reviewing the first four verses, Gilbert pondered upon the attributes of light and darkness within the soul of man. For if there was a necessity for God to differentiate between light and darkness on earth, then there must be a significance to those attributes within a person. His main concern was for the darkness within himself. Could he remain a vicar if he was unable to resolve the overwhelming fear that had taken over his soul?

Although he was sitting by himself in a crowded room, he found the familiar ache for solitude creeping into his thoughts. A visit to the library or a walk in the garden would soothe the pang of angst that never seemed far away. He considered it for a moment and decided it might not hurt to take his Bible out into the sunlit day to study and ponder. Thinking of his Bible, he remembered leaving it in the very room where he currently sat. To his dismay, the well-used brown leather covering and worn pages were displayed just beyond his reach in front of Miss Davenport.

It was difficult to look at Miss Davenport without thinking about their previous introduction at Snow Manor. She'd spent one night in Yorkshire while traveling through to London, but he had enjoyed every moment of their lively conversation.

They'd joined forces to win three games of whist against Adelia and Phineas that evening. He well remembered Miss Davenport's laughter and quick wit each time a winning card had been placed. She had a smile that lit up the room and put everyone at ease.

To see her now, he would never have believed her capable of the carefree laughter she'd displayed that night. Her doleful eyes and forced pleasantries piqued Gilbert's attention and pulled him away from his internal commiseration. If he could assist her with her troubles, it might make his time in London more palatable. He could continue his work as a vicar and bring light back into his life. He was always happiest when serving others.

Miss Davenport's usual cheery voice was replaced with a flat lifelessness he never would have associated with the woman he'd met at Snow Manor. "I am thankful you are in London, Adelia. With you here, I will no longer spend my evenings in a corner wishing for companionship."

"I assure you, Eliza, I will not allow you to go another evening without a dance." Adelia looked around the room until her eyes landed on Gilbert. "I know Gil will not allow you to miss out on the quadrille this evening."

Miss Davenport's eyes went wide, and a spark of excitement erased what he had considered a doleful look only moments before. Gilbert gripped the arms of the chair and he silently reprimanded himself for staying a moment too long. He could have left his Bible in here and taken a copy from Baxter's library. A silence muted the rustling of fabric and the ticking clock as everyone waited for his response.

"I would be honored if you would save the quadrille for me, Miss Davenport."

"Thank you, Mr. Fernley. It would be a pleasure."

Adelia sat forward and took her friend's hand. "You should save the supper dance for Gil as well."

Gilbert knew Adelia considered herself indebted to him for the assistance he'd rendered upon her arrival in London the previous year. She'd found herself distraught on the crossing from Egypt to England, and he'd assisted her as he would have any fellow person in need. She didn't need to find him a wife as repayment. He was ready to say as much but stopped himself from speaking as he noticed Miss Davenport quickly extracted her hand from Adelia's grasp.

The moment was far too uncomfortable for anyone to disagree. Not only were he and Miss Davenport embarrassed by Adelia's forwardness, but his brothers were both smiling with pleasure. It seemed they enjoyed his discomfort. There was only one possible solution to the situation. He had to offer himself up for the supper dance as well.

“Let us hope it is not a waltz. Otherwise, you might have sore feet by the time we sit for supper.”

Miss Davenport dipped her head in his direction, accepting his offer for the second dance. The pleasure she’d displayed moments before was replaced with hesitancy. “Thank you, sir. If it is a waltz, I suggest we find a cool glass of punch and watch the daring participants.”

“Well,” Mrs. Davenport said as she abruptly stood. “We should be on our way. We have a few other visits to make this morning.”

Gilbert waited for the women to leave before turning on Adelia. As soon as the carriage passed in front of the windows, he turned toward his newest sister. “Why did you offer my assistance to Miss Davenport?”

Adelia put her hands on her hips and stood her ground. He knew she had a stubborn streak, but he’d never received the full extent of her sassy wit. “Someone needs to pull you out of this melancholy state. I think Miss Davenport has the charms to do so.”

“I am in London for rest and relaxation. Spending my nights at parties will do nothing to solve my health crisis.”

“Do you think we have not heard you walking the halls at night? You haunt this place like a ghost searching for his final resting place.”

“It is referred to as insomnia.” Gilbert hadn’t slept since arriving in London. He tried to lay in bed and count sheep or repeat the ten commandments until exhaustion could overcome his senses, but he had yet to find success. “I will do my best not to roam the halls in the future.”

“You may roam as you please. But you cannot claim rest as your goal when you are not resting.”

Gilbert turned to Phineas hoping he would soften his wife’s intentions, but brotherly loyalty had to be second to loyalty in marriage. It didn’t matter that they were twins. Phineas would take his wife’s side on every argument. “Traitor!” Gilbert mumbled as he turned to Baxter, Briar, and

Gigi. He pointed toward Adelia and sighed in exasperation. “All of you know what the doctor said. Rest. Relaxation. Time to heal. A regiment of dancing cannot be helpful.”

Baxter shook his head. Finally, it seemed like someone was on his side—until he spoke. “Miss Davenport might not be the one to save you from yourself, but a few dances and conversations with the lady won’t injure your sensibilities. Perhaps another lady might draw your attention. We will not know unless you attend functions each night.”

“What is this? A conspiracy to find me a wife?”

Gigi walked forward and took his arm, pulling him toward the sofa. “What a silly thing to say. No one is conspiring against you. If we were, we would not be so open with our intentions. We do want to see you settled. I would think that was obvious.”

Gilbert put his head back against the sofa and closed his eyes. “I simply do not have enough of a spark within myself right now to extend the effort a courtship deserves. The mere thought of nights at the theater and rides through Hyde Park makes me want to crawl into bed.”

“Wonderful, then we will focus on balls and garden parties.” Gigi seemed to completely ignore his concerns. Gigi patted his arm while she nodded to Baxter. “We will be by your side throughout the entire season.”

Baxter stood, and then, before any resistance could be had, he pulled an unwilling Gilbert to his feet. “We have an appointment with my tailor at Henry Poole and Company this morning, and then we will go to a haberdashery for other items.”

“Baxter, you know what I earn as a vicar. I cannot comprehend purchasing a new wardrobe at this time.”

“Accept it as a gift from me and Phineas. We both want to see you happily settled.”

Gilbert looked to Adelia and Briar to see they were cheerfully awaiting an answer. “You mean your wives want to see me settled. I know who the masterminds are behind this

ploy. Adelia already tried to match Miss Davenport and myself. I only need to figure out Briar's part is in all this."

Briar put a hand over her heart and feigned a look of innocence. "I could never hope to deceive you. But I do wish for your happiness. I have never seen you so forlorn, and it frightens me to think you have lost your direction."

"Lost my direction?" Although he made a show of offense, it bothered him more that she had seen through him. It was true. He had lost his sense of purpose and a desire to serve others. But he didn't care for anyone to know of the internal battle he fought. "How preposterous."

"It is settled. We will spend the day getting you fit for Society." Phineas took hold of his arm and pulled him toward the exit. "I will loan you my best evening clothes until your suits are prepared, and my valet will attend you each evening to tie your cravat."

Grumbling, Gilbert gave the only response he thought would stop his brother from this ridiculous course of action. "Why did you not stay in Egypt?"

Instead of allowing the rude comment to injure his sensibilities, Phineas laughed and pulled Gilbert out the front door to a waiting carriage. Phineas completely ignored his brother's arguments as he pushed Gilbert onto the cushioned seat. With Baxter in tow, the three set off for the tailor's shop.

Chapter Five

Eliza was thankful she'd received the letter from Duchess Dorset early in the morning, before leaving to visit her friends, otherwise she would have made the mistake of visiting the Duchess's home in Mayfair.

Eliza had decided not to provide the information that would allow the duchess to blackmail Eloise Haversham, instead tucking away the booklet in the back of her closet. No one deserved to have their innermost thoughts and mistakes exposed. She would protect Eloise's secret as best she could, and when the time presented itself, she would find a way to return the booklet.

As she waited outside the gates of St. Mary's Church on Paddington Green, Eliza concocted an excuse while she shivered from a light breeze. Although it was officially spring, a cold wind nipped at her nose and burned her cheeks.

Bouncing from one foot to the next, Eliza waited a quarter of an hour before a carriage with the Duke of Dorset's seal rambled to a stop in front of her. A footman hopped down from the back of the carriage and opened the door before motioning Eliza forward. She hadn't expected to do more than make her excuses, but when the duchess beckoned her into the carriage, Eliza complied.

"Your grace, I do not think an extended visit is necessary." Eliza fumbled with the ties on her reticule before looking at the duchess.

"Where is the book?"

“I was unable to find it. Eloise must have tucked it away somewhere other than in her desk.” Eliza had the unfortunate habit of blushing when she told a falsehood. She hoped her face was hidden in the shadows provided by her bonnet and the carriage so the duchess wouldn’t notice.

“I am not a simpleton for you to deceive.”

“Nor am I, your grace.”

“Then you will hand over the booklet this instant.”

“It is not in my possession.”

The duchess examined Eliza with pursed lips and a doubtful countenance. Her eyes burrowed into Eliza’s soul as the carriage rumbled down the streets of London. It was too much for Eliza to hope the duchess wouldn’t notice her nervous twitching; nonetheless, she kept her fingers crossed.

“I am very disappointed in you, Eliza. I asked for a simple favor. A notebook is replaceable. The scribblings are of no interest to anyone but those about whom they are written. Are you not curious as to the information Eloise has on you?”

“Everyone knows my grandfather worked as a stable master. They know my father is a tradesman and new money. No other accusations have been lodged against my family.”

“Did you even try to find the booklet?”

“Yes, your grace. I gave my best effort to the task.”

“Yet you have failed.” Her silky rebuke sent a shiver down Eliza’s back.

“I do apologize. I am not skilled at deception.”

The duchess let a humorless laugh escape before lifting her fan and opening it with the flick of her wrist. “I believe your skills may be put to further use on my behalf. That is if you still want dance partners at this evening’s soiree.”

A giddy leap of excitement danced around in Eliza’s stomach as she allowed her girlish dreams to rise above the despondent disappointment under which she’d hidden them. Was it possible the duchess, the horrible girl who’d teased

Eliza without remorse while attending finishing school, would keep true to her word and provide men for dancing and possible courtships?

“You will keep the promise you made to me regarding the duke’s son?”

Duchess Dorset waved her fan slowly, a smug smile tugging at her lips. “The Earl of Wigtown would be happy to do my bidding. But, since you failed to obtain the booklet, you must repay my kindness with a different item.”

Eliza cleared her throat uncomfortably. Unsure of how straightforward she should be, she hesitated in her response. She was not comfortable perpetrating another theft. As it was, she didn’t need the duchess to assist her with Society. Adelia was connected and had a kind brother-in-law who had promised her two dances for the evening. “I...I was under the impression that obtaining the book from Eloise was the requirement. Since I have failed, I cannot rightly accept your offer.”

The duchess laughed as she flicked her wrist and expertly closed her fan. “Do not concern yourself over the booklet. I am certain I already know Eloise Haversham’s secret. I simply wanted a confirmation.”

“It is unfortunate I was unable to find the book.”

“Forget the book.” The duchess leaned forward and placed her gloved hand over Eliza’s. “You will do my bidding, with success this time, or I will spread a little bit of a rumor about you through the ballroom this evening.”

“Nothing you could say about my family and our humble beginnings would surprise those in attendance.”

“Pet, you are quite innocent. I do not care about the tired old rumors regarding your family. With one itty-bitty whisper in the ear of Lady Pipperton, your reputation will be ruined.”

“You would not be so cruel.”

“I would if it would get me what I want. If you do as I ask, you will be rewarded far beyond a simple courtship. I will ensure you are married to my stepson, the heir to my

husband's estate and title. If you fail again, I will have no other choice than to destroy you.”

“What more do you need from me?” She hated the feeling of desperation, but a clean reputation was all she had to keep her going from a wallflower to a disgrace. Denying allegations would do little good, given she was the descendant of a long line of servants. If she could marry an earl who was also a future duke, no one would dare frown upon her.

“There is a gathering at Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford's this evening.”

“Yes, I am to attend.”

“Very good. Mrs. Rutherford has a charming diamond bracelet that belongs to my dear husband's late mama.”

“How did Mrs. Rutherford come to possess the item?”

“Thievery.”

Eliza knew it wasn't true, but she'd already discovered the duchess wouldn't accept arguments. “Do you know where she keeps the bracelet?”

“In a display cabinet in the ballroom.”

Eliza shook her head. There was no way to retrieve an item kept in the very room where everyone would be dancing. “How am I to take it?”

The duchess rapped on the top of the carriage, bringing it to a stop. “I trust you will use the ingenuity of your heritage to figure it out. We will meet again tomorrow morning at the same time and place for the exchange.”

As the door to the carriage opened, Eliza stumbled out and looked around to find she was farther from her house than she'd been when on Paddington Green. Turning back to the duchess, she hadn't a chance to make a request as the door shut and the footman retook his position before the driver set the horses in motion.

“The ingenuity of my heritage! They were servants not thieves.” There was no one around to hear her angry retort, but she stomped her foot and snarled the comment anyway.

It took her a moment to realize they'd driven a few blocks east of Paddington Green. Once she had her location, she turned south toward home and started the long walk. If anything, it would give her time to consider a plan for stealing the bracelet.



IT WAS THEFT. THERE WAS NO OTHER POSSIBLE WAY TO describe the requests Duchess Dorset had made of her. It was wrong, and the logical side of her brain told her to accept the consequences of the duchess's anger and walk away from Society. If the duchess truly planned to destroy Eliza's reputation, she would not hesitate. Adding thefts to the situation would give the duchess a valid rumor to spread and one Eliza could not deny without telling a falsehood.

Eliza slowly walked toward the display case along one of the side walls as her parents left her so they could chat with friends and associates. Looking at the jewels and valuable items was not a crime. She had nothing else to occupy her time. If anyone questioned her reasons for looking at the cabinet, she would simply claim an interest as there was nothing else for her to do until Mr. Fernley claimed his two dances. To her embarrassment, they weren't even the first two of the evening. The one consolation this evening would afford was that she would enter supper on Mr. Fernley's arm. Her parents would finally have supper without her following along.

The cabinet was filled from floor to ceiling with delicate trinkets and large vases. Thankfully she was not the only one interested in examining the items. If she decided to do the duchess's bidding, she hoped this meant she wouldn't be the obvious culprit. Slowly walking the length of the cabinet, her eyes fell upon the diamond bracelet perched grandly upon a red velvet pillow.

The lack of a glass covering left each of the delicate items open for anyone with a mind to snatch them away. Looking about, Eliza assured herself that no one was paying attention to

her. She lifted her hand to rest it upon the edge of the shelf as she contemplated her decision. Was she truly ready to take a priceless piece of jewelry for Duchess Dorset? Running her hand along the wood, the rough edge snagged the middle finger of her new white gloves. Pulling away, she examined the loose thread caused by her carelessness.

“That should be simple to fix.”

Eliza turned away from the cabinet with a smile on her face. “Adelia, I did not expect you so early in the evening.”

“I hope you remembered to save the quadrille and supper dance for Gilbert.”

“Yes, of course.” Eliza felt her cheeks heating as shame filled her chest for considering the theft. There was no need to do the duchess’s bidding. With Adelia in town, Eliza was no longer friendless.

Allowing Adelia to pull her away from the cabinet, Eliza looked down at her glove. Preparing to make an excuse and find her way to the resting room, Eliza leaned toward her friend. “I must take a moment and mend my glove.”

“There is no time. The quadrille is the next dance, and Gilbert is expecting to stand up with you.”

“Adelia, I wish you had not forced his hand.” It was the proper thing to say in that moment, but it wasn’t how she truly felt. She was excited to spend more time with Gilbert Fernley.

“Hush, darling. Gilbert is a ponderous man. As a dedicated vicar, it takes him more time than most to make such offers. I had to take charge for both your sakes.”

“I do not want to be a bother. If he wished to dance with me he would have asked.”

“Now that you have done your Societal duty by feigning shame over my boldness in offering two dances for him, you must no longer think about it. Gilbert is the kindest man you will ever meet. He is devoted to his profession. Devoted to God. And I do not think anyone is truly aware of how intuitive he is. He can see deep into a person’s soul, which will show

him your goodness.” Adelia pulled her toward the Fernley party as Eliza’s blush deepened and her feet loudly shuffled.

The last thing Eliza needed was a ponderous vicar looking into her soul. If he was blessed with the ability to discern one’s innermost thoughts, she needed to acquiesce to the two dances and then keep her distance from Mr. Fernley. If he discovered she’d taken Eloise Haversham’s diary, all would be lost.

Her voice caught in her throat as the music for the current dance ended. As the quadrille was announced, Mr. Fernley stepped forward and dipped his head. “Miss Davenport, I believe this is my dance.”

Her voice came out a bit higher than normal, causing her blush to flare again as she curtsied. “Yes, sir.”

Accepting his arm, she took deep calming breaths as they joined the queue with the numerous couples gathered for the quadrille. As the music started, Eliza knew she couldn’t be secretive and silent through the entire dance. Such behavior would cause curiosity. She would have to find a way to speak to Mr. Fernley without divulging her devious actions.

“How are you enjoying your time in London?”

A frown creased Mr. Fernley’s entire face. She hadn’t expected the stern reaction to her question. When she’d met him in Yorkshire, the previous year, he’d been cheerful. “I had hoped to find time for rest.”

“Adelia mentioned as much. Although, I think you have chosen the wrong town for rest.” Eliza stepped forward and took the hand of the man dancing next to her, briefly exchanging partners. When next she took hold of Mr. Fernley’s hand, he nodded in response to her previous statement.

“Exactly.”

Eliza giggled. With a flirtatious smile she instantly regretted, she allowed a bit of her personality to show through. “You should travel back to Yorkshire immediately. The countryside is preferable when one is ailing.”

Mr. Fernley raised his eyebrows at her and gave a grimace. “Do I look as though I am ill? I would not want to scare away the neighbors.”

“You look perfectly handsome, sir.” Eliza’s eyes went wide as Mr. Fernley lips turned up in a smile that filled his entire face. She had been rather bold.

“I did not think you were so plucky, Miss Davenport.”

Eliza took hold of his hand, a little more roughly than she’d meant as she was nervous and making herself look the fool. “I do not know what I am saying. I am completely overcome by this entire evening.”

She exchanged partners again, smiling at the man who led her through the steps before tossing her back toward Mr. Fernley. She didn’t dare speak to him for the last turn of the dance. When it ended, she was surprised by his comment.

“Forgive me, Miss Davenport. I should have accepted the compliment without causing you distress.”

Eliza curtsied, her balance wavering as she took another look at his brilliant smile. Gilbert Fernley was much more handsome than she’d realized. “Think no more of it.” Instead of accepting his arm so he could escort her back to Adelia, Eliza stepped away. “I must take a moment to gather myself in the resting room.” She pointed to the string trailing off her glove as he prepared to argue with her. “Please excuse me.”

As she entered the resting room, she spotted her maid and quickly gave instructions for her to mend the glove. Sitting on a soft settee, Eliza allowed her mind to run away with the possibility of a match with Gilbert Fernley.

If she matched with a man over whom Duchess Dorset had no influence, she could relieve herself of the burden of theft. She wouldn’t have to take the bracelet and do the duchess’s bidding to find a husband. She’d nearly convinced herself of this as the reminder of Duchess Dorset’s threat against her reputation resurfaced in her mind. The duchess was unnecessarily cruel.

Eliza twirled her finger through her hair as she imagined the life of a vicar's wife. It would be very different from what the duchess was offering. There might be moments where she pined for social status and ease, but it would be an honest life. Her dowry would ensure they never struggled financially, that is, if it was properly invested.

"I thought I would find you in here," Adelia said as she and Lady Grafton sat across from her, taking two armchairs.

"My glove should be mended soon enough. Were you searching for me?"

"We wanted to ensure you were well. You left the room without returning to us after the quadrille." Lady Grafton's Bostonian accent never failed to surprise Adelia. She knew the countess was from the states but somehow always let it slip her mind.

"I am perfectly well."

Adelia pursed her lips and smirked. "What did you think about Gilbert?"

"He was very kind, Adelia. Make nothing more of it." Eliza didn't care to announce her hopes, even to her best friend. She would set her cap for the handsome gentleman at the appropriate time. She decided it would take at least a few more nights of dancing.

Adelia removed her gloves and examined her fingernails. "I admit our goal is to find him a wife. Gilbert spends his days serving the people in the parish and he often forgets about his needs. Both Phineas and Lord Grafton are quite worried about him. Gigi tries not to fret over her sons, but I think a mother must always concern herself over her children's needs."

If this conversation was a way of convincing her to consider Gilbert Fernley a match, a gentle suggestion was all that was needed. "A lovely idea." Blushing from the thoughts she'd entertained moments before, Eliza prayed she wasn't silently revealing her hopes.

Lady Grafton nodded. "We have quite a few ladies on our list. We have not decided who would be the best option."

Taken aback, Eliza realized she had been too hasty in her assumptions. “Oh? Who are you considering?”

Adelia took up her gloves and slid them gracefully back on her hands. “We have a long list. It is best to give him options, so he does not think we are pushing him into a marriage. He must be the one to make the final decision.”

“I see.” Turning to her maid, Eliza noticed she was nearly finished mending the glove. “You must hurry and introduce Mr. Fernley to these women before the next dance starts. He will likely want ample time to evaluate each woman.”

“Find us when you return to the ballroom.” Adelia stood and kissed Eliza on her cheek. “We have much to speak about now we are together in London.”

Eliza nodded. “I agree. We can chat through the rest of the night.”

Eliza sat heavily onto the settee. She might have to consider the duchess as a benefactor after all. She couldn't rely on a relationship with Mr. Gilbert Fernley if his sisters were determined to introduce him to a lengthy list of available women.

A sickness settled in the pit of her stomach as she seriously considered giving into the duchess. She decided to make a list of each reason she should or shouldn't follow through with the theft. With her gloves mended, Eliza walked into the ballroom and passed by the cabinet. The bracelet still sat on the same plush velvet pillow opportunely positioned for her to snatch it away. But before she did so, she needed to decide if it was the right course of action.

Standing off to the side of the ballroom, she watched as Lady Pipperton leaned toward a group of women with an excited expression of intrigue. Everyone knew that woman was in possession of tasty tidbits of gossip she had no business knowing. Even though the validity of the information was always in question, it didn't stop the rest of the *ton* from discussing each salacious morsel until it had morphed into something unrecognizably scandalous, ruining the reputation

of any poor woman who had the misfortune of being their target.

If Eliza didn't do as the duchess requested, it would be her name on these women's tongues. It was easier to navigate Society without the added pressure of refuting gossip. This fear made her believe she should do as the duchess requested.

Inching back toward the cabinet, Eliza considered the guilt she'd experienced after she had taken the notebook from Eloise Haversham. A diamond bracelet was far more expensive and would weigh heavily upon her conscience. She'd already lost sleep over the booklet; therefore, she should forget about the duchess's promises and stick to the proper hobbies approved for women of her station.

Eliza's eyes wandered around the room until they landed on the queue of dancers to find Mr. Gilbert Fernley standing across from Lady Lillian Browning, the daughter of the Marquess of Hastings. The glowing pleasure on his face lit the room around him far better than the candle sconces attached to the walls. Had he reacted similarly to her? Or was he enamored with the daughter of a wealthier and titled man? She decided this was another strong endorsement for her to perform the theft.

If she chose to take the bracelet, would it be enough for the duchess to provide dancing partners, courtships, and a possible spouse? Or would the duchess require more? It was possible one theft would lead to another, where she was caught in a web so powerful, she couldn't break free. She decided it was best not to take the bracelet.

Eliza was ready to rejoin Adelia to chat away the evening when the allemande was announced. She searched for Mr. Gilbert Fernley to find he was leading Miss Caroline Hawk to the dance floor. Miss Hawk tripped over her own feet to land in Mr. Fernley's arms. His gracious smile and pink cheeks told her she didn't compare to any of the women Adelia and Lady Grafton had introduced him to that evening. She was certain when he chose a wife, it wouldn't be her. The duchess was offering an engagement and a title. Could she pass that offer

up to find herself a spinster and a burden upon her father and eventually her younger brother?

Before she could find another reason to refuse the duchess's offer, Eliza stepped up to the cabinet and replaced the diamond bracelet with the simple gold chain she wore upon her wrist. She slipped the stolen bracelet into the sash at her waist. The stones uncomfortably pressed against her stomach as a reminder of what she had done.

She wasn't proud of herself. Theft was nothing to smile upon. But she had successfully fulfilled her end of the bargain. Eliza found a vacant corner of the resting room to hide in as she removed the heavy diamonds from her sash. She tucked it into the hidden pocket in her stays realizing they pulled a bit more than they had when she'd taken the black booklet. The weight on her clothing was a physical reminder of her newfound fallen state, but she gathered her courage and reentered the party.

As another song burst through the ballroom, Eliza watched as the dancing couples clapped their hands and jovially bounced up and down with the beat of the tune. The movement, and her shame caused her stomach to turn sour. Eliza put her hand over her mouth to hold back the sick threatening to spill out.

Closing her eyes, she fought the urge to return the bracelet to the pillow. She wasn't a thief. She was an honest Christian and she firmly believed in the wrath of God when He was faced with judging a sinner.

With her mind made up, she opened her eyes, intending to go back to the resting room to remove the bracelet from her hidden pocket, but she found her pathway blocked by Duchess Dorset.

Her voice shook as she forced words to leave her mouth. "Your grace?"

The duchess examined her state of unease. She smiled in delight. "Guilt does little for the complexion. Stand a bit taller and straighten your posture."

“Do you need something?”

Grabbing the arm of her stepson, the duchess pulled him toward her. “Miss Davenport, may I introduce my stepson, the Earl of Wigtown.”

She hadn't realized she'd stretched her hand out until Lord Wigtown bowed and took hold of it in greeting. “A pleasure, Miss Davenport.” As the music ended and a scotch reel was announced, Lord Wigtown continued speaking. “Are you engaged for this dance?”

“No, my lord.”

“Then allow me to stand up with you.”

“I would be delighted.” She nearly choked on the words but found the strength to push through her remorse as she placed her hand on his arm.

Eliza didn't look back at the duchess. She convinced herself she could make the situation right by returning the bracelet after the dance, but when she arrived home that evening, she felt the tug of the bracelet on her stays as she walked up the staircase. Between Lord Wigtown and supper with Mr. Fernley, she'd somehow forgotten to restore the bracelet to the red velvet pillow.

Chapter Six

Gilbert was intrigued. It had taken less than four minutes of dancing with Miss Davenport for the sinking darkness in his chest to ease. The angst that had held him captive gently released the tentacles around his heart, elevating a sense of hope. The overwhelming desire to spend more time with her was an irrational response to her gloved hand resting in his, but it was nonetheless true to what he had experienced. Could a woman lend him the strength to fight against the overwhelming darkness? Was she the source of light his heart yearned to find? Was it possible after years of filling his life with religious studies and service those two things were not enough to make him happy?

As the current dance ended, Gilbert escorted Miss Alice Kenward back to her mother. A few pleasantries later left him walking away from the Kenwards to find his family once more. He spotted Baxter, which meant the rest of their group would be nearby. Watching his family from a short distance, he felt a sense of loneliness. Gigi smiled at something Baxter said, which seemed to evoke a response from Phineas causing Adelia to place her hand on Phineas's arm.

Gilbert wasn't in love with Adelia. Although, he truly didn't know what emotions came with loving a woman because he'd never experienced those feelings. He was certain that when love arrived, he would think about the woman every waking moment. At this point, he only thought of Adelia when he noticed Phineas's reaction to her presence. There was something tangible about the way Phineas and Adelia looked into each other's eyes that left Gilbert fraught with envy.

Perhaps it was a result of their connection as twins. Gilbert often shrugged away the suggestion that he and Phineas shared a bond and could silently communicate emotions, but the way Phineas gazed at Adelia left a mark upon Gilbert's heart. Over the past months in Yorkshire, it had slowly crept upon him until he could no longer tame the jealousy. He wanted to feel how his brother felt.

He and Phineas had shared everything from the moment they were born, with few exceptions. They had taken different career paths, which hadn't been much of a surprise to the rest of their family. Phineas disliked practicing the pianoforte, which boded well for Gilbert because he enjoyed the solitary moments in the music room. Now, Phineas had moved down the path of life by taking a wife. It wouldn't be long before everyone in the family knew of Adelia's growing condition. Phineas would be a father before the end of the summer, and Gilbert might possibly still be tailing behind his brother, stuck in the shadows: little growth within his personal life and stagnant in his profession as a vicar.

A few deep, focused breaths allowed Gilbert to shake off the momentary desire to find a corner and ponder over this new discovery. He forced a smile back on his face before approaching his family.

As he slipped in between Phineas and his mother, Adelia eyed him with the face she made when examining fashion. She stepped around Phineas and brushed at invisible lint on Gilbert's shoulder. "What did you think of Eliza? We have not had a moment to decide if we are introducing you to the right women."

"It was a lovely dance. But not what dreams are made of." He didn't know how to explain the momentary hope he'd felt while dancing with Miss Davenport.

Adelia turned to Phineas and glared. With one fluid movement, Phineas turned on Gilbert. His jaw tightened. "We are attempting to help you find a wife. Why can you not accept our meddling?"

Leaning forward so only Phineas and Adelia could hear, Gilbert whispered. "Have you considered the possibility that one dance cannot determine destiny?"

Phineas's eyes softened, and his jaw went slack. "Not in the least. I know you, Gilbert. Better than you know yourself. If you believe Miss Davenport is not your future bride, then tell us your opinions of Miss Hawk or Lady Lillian. You also danced with Miss Kenward. Are any of them possible matches? We will not stop until you are happily settled."

"I simply need time. Love is best when a connection is nourished."

Phineas scoffed. "Love? We are speaking of marriage. Love can happen afterward. It did for Adelia and me. Same with Archie and Rosalind."

Adelia closed her fan and then used it to playfully swat Phineas's arm. "Leave it to you to dissuade your brother from taking a wife. Not everyone is forced into marriage."

Gilbert looked away from Phineas and Adelia as they teased each other. It pained him, in the center of his chest, to think he would never have a love as beautiful as the one displayed before him. The melancholy he'd experienced moments before intensified as it had while in Yorkshire. With a sudden pang of jealousy, his vision blurred and his body went cold.

Jealousy had never reared its ugly head between Gilbert and any of his brothers, but especially not Phineas. How could he feel a loss so deeply when he'd never had a woman to love? He hadn't felt this way when Baxter and Briar had married. Nor had he considered Archie's and Rosalind's marriage enviable. But as he watched the brother to whom he was closest in every aspect of his life, the world seemed to stop turning and he knew deep down that love, or the lack thereof, was the root of his problem.

The same ringing in his ears that had plagued him previously sounded again, and he took an involuntary step backward. He was losing his nerve. Placing his hand in his pocket, he searched for a handkerchief to wipe away the beads

of cold sweat on his forehead. But he seemed to be grasping in an empty pocket.

“Gilbert?” Phineas’s hand landed on Gilbert’s arm, pulling him out of his despondency. “What happened? Baxter, call for the carriage. We must leave.”

Gilbert quickly shook his head and pulled away from Phineas. “I am exhausted. It has been a long week. Give me a moment to collect myself and I will be well.”

“We are leaving. The doctor said you needed rest, and we pushed you into this evening without care for your wellbeing.”

“We will make a scene if we leave so early in the evening. Besides, your wife made me promise the supper dance to Miss Davenport.”

Adelia put a hand over her mouth as tears pooled in her eyes. “I should never have done so. Not with you being ill. Gilbert, please forgive me.”

“I assure you I am fine. A little tired is all.” Trying to bring a bit of humor into the moment, Gilbert gave his best quizzical glare at Adelia and Briar. “If I play along with this scheme you two have concocted and do not find a suitable wife, will you promise to stop meddling?”

Adelia quickly nodded. “I will not say another word about it.”

Briar took hold of Adelia’s hand, her excitement nearly bursting as she bounced on the tips of her toes. “But you must make an effort. We cannot do all this work and have you behaving badly during dances and courtships.”

With a sigh, Gilbert took a moment to look at the guests around the room. There were beautiful women standing in every corner, laughing and chatting and dancing. His eyes searched out Miss Davenport. To his dismay, he noticed her speaking with a man. He didn’t know who the mystery man was as he could only see him from behind. He considered it of little importance until the man kissed her hand. It was possible she had multiple suitors.

Begrudgingly, he pulled his attention away from Miss Davenport, and he acquiesced. It might possibly be the only way he would overcome the darkness covering his every thought. “Very well. Over the next three months, I will give Briar and Adelia the opportunity to find a match for me. If by the end of the season I have not found accord with any of the women placed in my path, then every one of you will stay silent on the subject forever.”

A pleased smile crossed Phineas’s features. “You have my solemn vow.”

Gigi hesitated. “Dearest, does that mean you will never again seek a wife?”

“I cannot say. In three months, I will make that decision.”

Baxter dipped his head. “I will stay silent.”

Gilbert looked back to Gigi. As his mother, she seemed to struggle to agree with his decision. But when she finally nodded, he found his shoulders loosen a little. With the decision made, a bit of cheerfulness cleared out a corner of the darkness covering his heart. He wouldn’t admit it to anyone, not until the darkness was completely gone. But he felt a bit lighter and a lot relieved.

Offering his arms to Adelia and Briar, he took a deep breath in preparation for the next three months. “I am placing myself in your capable hands. What are your plans for the rest of the evening?”



WHEN HE’D HANDED HIMSELF OVER TO ADELIA AND BRIAR for matchmaking, Gilbert hadn’t expected each evening of dancing would be followed by a morning of rousing discussions focused upon his options, but as he entered the breakfast room, he found his family patiently waiting. Yawning from a near sleepless night, Gilbert filled his plate and sat next to Gigi.

“Good morning, mother.”

His mother put a hand over his and squeezed it. She often did this to offer comfort. At that moment, Gilbert took it as a sign for what might have been said before he arrived.

Baxter finished chewing, wiped his mouth with a serviette, and smiled pleasantly. It seemed everyone was waiting for the earl to speak. “Tell us, which of the ladies did you find the most intriguing?”

“Subtle.” Gilbert had yet to pick up his silverware. As he gazed down at the plate of eggs and meat, he decided he might want to wait for the afternoon meal and hope it was less heavy. “Would you prefer I choose a wife now, or may I take a few days to decide?”

“By all means, take a few days. We have the rest of the season.”

Gilbert turned to Phineas, hoping for sympathy, but found he was engrossed in the morning newspaper. “Anything of interest?”

Phineas placed the paper on the table and pointed to the center. “A theft has been reported from Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford’s. It seems a bracelet went missing during the festivities last night.”

Gilbert remembered seeing a bracelet amongst the many items displayed. He gave it little thought before yawning once more. This was a better topic of conversation than marriage prospects and so he dove into questioning the article. “Does the inspector have any suspects?”

“Everyone who attended the party would be on the list. It will take a while to narrow hundreds of people down to one suspect.” Phineas passed the paper to Baxter and then to Gilbert.

There wasn’t anything significant in the story, at least Gilbert didn’t think there was, until he reached the end. There’d been a replacement bracelet made of imitation gold. “It is strange the culprit left a replacement.”

Baxter was quick to respond. "I can guarantee he thought it would prevent anyone from noticing a missing item."

"Why remove the bracelet during the thick of dancing and conversation? I'll wager it must have occurred after the ball was over." Phineas applied copious amounts of butter to his toast before throwing it back on his plate without taking a bite. Realizing he'd put too much on the bread, he started scraping the excess off.

Gilbert watched as Phineas scraped the knife on the edge of his plate leaving a blob of butter. This was another difference between him and his twin brother. Gilbert might be ponderous, but he did everything with the greatest of intention. Before Gilbert asked his question, he noticed his mother and Baxter both watching with amusement as Phineas tried to salvage his toast. "Could the imitation bracelet be traced to the owner by way of the manufacturer?"

"That will be for the constable in charge of the case to discover." Phineas dropped his knife to the table and picked up the toast. As he took a bite, he grimaced.

"Try using marmalade to balance out the butter." Gigi pushed a jar toward Phineas.

Gilbert took one last look at the *Morning Post* as he decided to eat his morning meal. It was a curious thing to have had a theft at such a grand and well-attended party.

Chapter Seven

Eliza found the seats in Duchess Dorset's carriage to be hard. Even though the carriage was well-sprung, the cushions were unbalanced and hard from years of use. On any other day, she might consider the elaborate material impressive, but she had a sick feeling in her stomach as they drove away from Paddington Green.

"I certainly hope you have the bracelet." The duchess examined her fingernails before slipping her gloves onto her hands.

"It is in my reticule." Prepared for this interaction, Eliza had removed every other item from her bag so the bracelet would be easy to retrieve. Reaching into a darkened object to find one item, when nervous, would only cause her fingers to fumble, resulting in an uncomfortable pause.

"Out with it." The duchess enhanced each syllable with a clipped tone that left Eliza's hands shaking.

Eliza nervously reached into her reticule and extracted the heavy, elegant diamond bracelet. But before handing it over, she needed to know this was the end of their agreement. "We have both fulfilled our promises. Now I have an introduction to the earl, I need not rely upon your graciousness any longer."

"Oh? Have you secured an offer of marriage?"

"Not yet."

"And you expected your charms to win the earl's admiration." The duchess smirked. "You are a silly girl."

Eliza peered down at her hands and bit her lips together. She hadn't truly thought the situation through. "I expected you to follow through with your end of the bargain. You promised me dance partners and a courtship with Lord Wigtown."

"A conditional promise."

"I have fulfilled my end."

"Not yet." The duchess held out her hand and Eliza slowly passed the bracelet to her. "Wigtown will pick you up from your house for a ride through Hyde Park during the fashionable hour. You will be seen by many of Society's most influential people."

"Thank you, your grace."

"In exchange for my kindness, I will expect you to continue showing your appreciation through little tasks I ask you to complete."

"I do not mind helping you, but I would prefer not to resort to thievery."

"Who said anything about theft?"

Eliza shut her mouth and sat uncomfortably awaiting her next assignment. She turned to look out the window as they rode through London, passing people out for morning strolls completely unaware of the dangerous situation in which she currently found herself.

The duchess continued speaking. "You are aware of Lord Townsend?"

"Yes, I am."

Pointing out the window at a large home, the duchess spoke once more. "This is his home. Lord Townsend has a silver snuffbox encrusted with rubies that belongs to my dear husband's late father. He keeps it in the morning room."

"Are you asking me to retrieve it for you?"

The duchess sighed before hitting the top of the carriage. "Why do I constantly have to repeat instructions to you?"

"I apologize, your grace."

As the carriage came to a stop, the duchess held out her hand to stop the footman from opening the door. Turning to Eliza, she gave her final instruction. “You will send word through Wigtown when you have collected the item. Simply imply that you would like to meet with me.

We will redezvous at the same time on Paddington Green the following morning.”

“But I have never been to Lord Townsend’s home. Nor does my family have an introduction to him. How am I supposed to gain entrance and steal an item?”

The duchess rolled her eyes and then pounded on the side of the carriage. As the door opened, Eliza knew their conversation had ended. She stumbled out and gathered her bearings so she could arrive home in time for the carriage ride through Hyde Park.

The long walk gave Eliza ample time to consider a match with Lord Wigtown. He seemed regal and far too important to want a connection to the daughter of a tradesman. She was more suited for a humble man. Mr. Gilbert Fernley’s profession as a vicar fit her personality, at least it had before she’d had taken on the profession of a thief.

Mr. Fernley might be the perfect match for her, but if he ever discovered what she had done, she was certain he would turn her away. It was best not to entertain thoughts of a man she couldn’t have. In her current situation, it would be hypocritical to assume the role of a vicar’s wife, for every woman she’d met who had married a vicar was considered a paragon of honesty.

Pushing thoughts of Mr. Fernley’s tall stature, dark brown hair, and blue eyes to the back of her mind, Eliza set her hopes upon a match with Lord Wigtown. He was also a handsome man. He wasn’t as tall as Mr. Fernley, which was a disappointment. In fact, he was a tad shorter than Eliza. Wigtown’s hair was red, and his eyes were brown. He was the absolute opposite of Mr. Fernley in both physical features and personality.

As she turned into the yard of her family home, Eliza forced a smile on her face. She didn't want anyone to think she'd been distressed. When she entered the house, she handed her bonnet, gloves, and pelisse to Mr. Smith and then stepped into the parlor to visit with her parents for a short time. She quietly took up her embroidery while she listened to the conversation.

"They are certain it was a well-organized theft. The paper claims the thief left another bracelet in place of the missing one adorned with diamonds."

Eliza placed her embroidery on her lap. If she continued to work on the project, they might notice her shaking hands. So, she slowly moved each hand under the sides of her legs and tucked her feet as far under the sofa as possible. Feigning interest, Eliza prayed her voice did not reveal her secret. "What are you speaking of, Father?"

"A theft. Under the noses of everyone at Rutherford's party last evening. The culprit replaced a diamond bracelet with a cheap imitation."

Eliza's thoughts stayed on the last part of the statement. She'd put the gold bracelet her father had proudly given her upon the plush velvet pillow. When he'd presented the trinket to her, he'd claimed it was fine handcrafted gold from the east. "What do you mean by a cheap imitation?"

"The inspectors claim it is an imitation of gold. A bit of a strong pill to swallow for Rutherford. Their house was dripping with a display of their wealth."

Eliza turned to see what her mother thought of the entire conversation. Her interest was piqued, but she continued to work on her sewing project without commenting. Turning back to her father, Eliza gave the only response she could think to say. "What a terrible thing to happen at a party." When her father went back to reading the *Morning Post*, Eliza continued speaking. "Father, is it easy to spot a fake diamond or imitation gold?"

"All these questions. Do not interrogate your father." Her mother chided her further with a disapproving glare.

“I only ask because it seems they were able to determine the fake rather quickly.”

Her father took a less formal approach and indulged her inquiry. “I would not be where I am today if I was unable to spot a forgery. It is quite simple for one with a trained eye, darling.”

Discomforted by her father’s admission, Eliza dipped her head and extracted her hands from under her body. She rubbed at the red imprint of the fabric from her dress and the sofa causing her hands to sting from the pressure of sitting on them. “If you will excuse me, I must dress for my outing with Lord Wigtown.”

For the first time since she’d entered the room, her mother’s attention was drawn away from her sewing. “It is odd, is it not?”

“What, dearest?” Although still very much a part of the conversation, Eliza’s father went back to looking at the post.

Her mother continued speaking. “An earl paying call to Eliza.”

A frown creased Eliza’s features. If her parents questioned the match, it would mean all and sundry would take notice.

“I have connections to the Duke of Dorset through my dealings. It is time his son took notice of my beautiful daughter.”

“You are a tradesman. A duke does not require his son to pay call to a tradesman’s daughter. No matter her beauty.”

Eliza demurred from her father’s praise. Her beauty had nothing to do with the earl’s notice, and it was best she not put on airs. “Mama,” Eliza said, her voice rising in pitch. “The Duchess performed the introduction with her stepson. I do not expect much to come from the connection. She was simply showing a kindness as we attended finishing school together.”

Eliza left the room without waiting for a response. Although she knew the connection was based on her continued efforts in helping the duchess, she wanted to look her best. As

she climbed the first three steps, she heard the vestiges of her mother's final comments.

"I certainly hope Eliza's sensibilities are not injured by this earl. I cannot imagine it will go beyond a carriage ride."

Her father grumbled. "Why not? Do we not have as much wealth as the duke? Lord Wigtown's title is honorary until he claims the duchy, which makes him no better than me. It would make me proud to have a titled daughter."

"Oh, Abner!"

Her mother's exasperated voice echoed in her ears as she ran up the stairs and rang for her maid. She planned to prove her mother wrong and win her father's affections by gaining a title for their family. She would do all within her power to raise their station with a marriage to the earl. She only needed to forget about her guilt and do as the duchess asked.



ELIZA COULDN'T HOLD BACK THE SMILE AS LORD WIGTOWN shook her father's hand and bowed to her mother. He treated them as equals, which shouldn't surprise her as he had been a perfect gentleman the night before as they'd danced at the Rutherfords' party.

She should have been in a state of endless happiness, but the moment was marred by a sting of guilt within her chest. No amount of fatherly pride or a nod of approval could stop the pounding of her heart as she remembered the earl's presence in her home was a result of her agreement with the duchess. A sullen regret filled her chest as she watched her father's posture straighten. He seemed an inch taller than he had that morning, and she knew he was certain this outing would lead to a courtship and then marriage. He would be devastated if she ruined her chances with the earl and lost the opportunity to bring a title into their family. If her parents ever discovered the reason Earl Wigtown had paid call to her, they would never forgive her.

For a moment she allowed herself to imagine what could have been, if the man speaking so eloquently with her father were tall and dark-haired. Mr. Fernley wouldn't bring a title, but he did have connections that could help her younger siblings find spouses when they entered Society.

She couldn't allow herself to believe all would have worked out with Mr. Fernley. His sisters were introducing him to half the women in London. But an inkling of doubt pushed those concerns away and convinced her that if she had waited a little longer, her loneliness would have been alleviated.

As Lord Wigtown held his arm out to her, she accepted it and allowed him to escort her to the carriage. She had to push Mr. Fernley from her thoughts as she gave a tight-lipped smile to the earl. When she settled onto the plush cushion in the barouche, she was ready to see if the outing would give her insight into Lord Wigtown's personality, and in turn allow her to show him more of her likes and dislikes.

She waited until the carriage was well on its way before turning to the earl. "Thank you for requesting a ride with me today."

Lord Wigtown pursed his lips and quirked his eyebrows at her. He examined her face before he spoke. "Let us not be coy, Miss Davenport. I am aware of the duchess's agreement with you."

Eliza dipped her head and averted her eyes. "Then you know what I have done to secure this connection?"

"We all have our little secrets that keep us at the forefront of Society."

"Everyone has secrets such as mine?"

The earl turned toward her with amusement. "To successfully navigate Society, you must be willing to play the game. Everyone will fault you for what you have done. If your part in the theft is revealed, they will despise you for it. But deep down within their cold, embittered hearts, every single member of the *ton* will sympathize with your desire for notoriety."

“I simply want to find a suitable match. Participate in dances and have friends. I care nothing for notoriety.”

“Then you have joined forces with the wrong duchess. My stepmother is under the impression you wish to marry for a title.”

Eliza squirmed in her seat. When she was nervous, she had a bad habit of playing with her hair, she slowly lifted her hand to twist the ends of her hair around her fingers. “Is that not the goal of every lady?”

“Then you are a title hunter.”

“Not exactly. Although, it would make my father very proud to have a title in the family.” She thought about mentioning Mr. Fernley but decided against it. She didn’t need to make Lord Wigtown think there was another offer for her hand. “There are titled families accepting daughters of tradesmen as suitable matches.”

“Yes, which is my sole purpose in doing the duchess’s bidding. I have heard of your generous dowry. It is alluring. Therefore, we will make a show of a courtship for the next month, and if my stepmother requests it of me, I will then ask for your hand. She will get her wishes, I will receive your dowry, and you will get a title.”

Ashamed at her part in this entire debacle, Eliza chanced a glance at the stoic earl. “It is obvious you find this entire charade distasteful. Why do you do her bidding?”

“I have other uses for my stepmother. If I do what she wants, then she will comply.”

Eliza found a large, heavy pit forming in her stomach. “A marriage with me is a means to an end with the duchess?”

The earl burst into fake laughter as the carriage entered Hyde Park. He took hold of her hand and made a show of admiring her to those passing by. “Smile, darling. Everyone is watching.”

She didn’t pull away from him. Instead, she played the game of acknowledging the same people Lord Wigtown greeted while her thoughts ran along a path she cared not to

entertain; but entertain it she must. Keeping her nerves calm, Eliza had to know the details of her situation. “You will ask for my hand, but for what purpose? Would it be a marriage in name only?”

“Certainly not. You would be my wife in every way.”

“But if marriage to me is so detestable, why would you go through with it?”

Wigtown leaned toward her and made a show of whispering in her ear. “I already told you. It is all part of the games we play in Society. We must do our part to keep the *ton* exciting and relevant.” The heat of his breath and the silky tone he used sent unbidden shivers of fear through her body.

She didn’t respond to his comment, at least not with words. Closing her eyes, Eliza debated the practicality of what she was doing. She wanted to have a successful season in which she could find a man to marry. A man who could provide a way forward for her family in this world they were navigating and provide connections to suitable matches for her siblings. But was Lord Wigtown the answer?

Could she sacrifice happiness to ensure her sisters were allowed to make love matches? Looking to Lord Wigtown, she examined his profile, noting the tufts of red hair sticking out from under his hat. She wanted to go back to the previous week and make different decisions. For now, she had to wear a mask of indifference to Lord Wigtown’s statements.

They circled Rotten Row three times before the earl instructed his driver to take them to a secluded hideaway within the park. Eliza tried to scoot away from the earl, but he kept his hold on her arm.

When the driver brought the carriage to a stop, the earl grumbled. “Leave us.”

As the driver climbed off the perch atop the open carriage, Eliza argued. “My lord, it is not appropriate for us to be alone without a chaperone.”

“Yet your parents did not send a companion with you. A bit of an oversight on their part.” Lord Wigtown touched her

face and tipped her head back. He ran his finger down her neck, causing her eyes to close as she gasped from the unwanted thrill of his touch. "I told the duchess this would only work if I found you acceptable."

"I do not know what you mean, my..."

Her words were lost as he closed his mouth over hers. It took her a few seconds before she realized the Earl of Wigtown was kissing her. She wanted to pull away and slap him for the impropriety, and yet she couldn't move out of his tight hold. As though he didn't notice her hands pushing against his chest, the earl pulled her tighter toward him as he deepened the kiss.

Never having been kissed before, Eliza wasn't skilled in responding to a show of affection. Somehow, the hurried movements didn't communicate passion or love. They didn't make her long for more. Instead, a cold, unsettling shudder spread through her body, much like she had been doused with a bucket of cold water. This was the epitome of disrespect. As he bit down on her bottom lip, Eliza gasped and again tried to pull away. To her dismay, he held her in a tight embrace, forcing her to endure the slimy exchange until he was finished.

He licked his lips as he patted her cheek. "That was fun."

Eliza wiped her lips and discovered a small amount of blood on her white gloves that had oozed from the spot he'd bitten. "I did not give you permission to kiss me."

The earl grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. "I do not need your permission."

"This was not part of my agreement with the duchess." Eliza pulled herself toward the exit of the carriage. All concern for her sisters and her father's anticipation of a title fled as she was determined to end the unwanted attention Lord Wigtown had given. Living in a loveless marriage was tolerable, but only if the man was respectful.

Before she could step down, the earl pulled her back and threw her against the seat. Raising his hand to her, she tried to

turn away before he hit her. Unfortunately, she wasn't fast enough. His hand left a sting upon her cheek.

“This is my arrangement with you, Miss Davenport. I will not be used in the games my stepmother concocts without having a bit of fun. Lest you forget, I have information that will send you to prison or worse, the gallows. Theft is not taken lightly within the laws of our Society.”

Frightened, Eliza found tears dripping down her cheeks. She'd always imagined a ride in Hyde Park would uplift her spirits. Instead, now that she'd experienced this part of Society, she'd prefer to stay safely on the outskirts watching others partake of the so-called delights.

With the reality of her situation so plainly explained, Eliza rubbed the spot on her cheek that stung from his hand. “Please, do not hit me again.”

The earl scooted closer and positioned her head once more. “This time, you will participate.”

“I do not know how, my lord.”

Earl Wigtown laughed. The wicked glint in his dark brown eyes that now seemed black made her cower further. “I told the duchess I wanted an innocent. She certainly delivered on her promise. By the time we are married, you will be prepared for our wedding night.”

She would not marry this man. Not for a title. Not for connections. She only needed to find a way out of the grasp he and the duchess held over her. Closing her eyes, she prepared herself for another kiss, but found herself waiting as his hot breath assaulted her face.

His hand pressed against her neck as he whispered. “It will be my pleasure to teach you.”

Her body shook as more tears leaked out of her eyes. “Please take me home.”

His thumb pressed harder against her neck. “Not until you've learned the lesson I have for you today.”

As he closed his lips over hers once more, the only difference between this kiss and the last was the crass instructions the earl provided on how he wanted her to respond.

When the earl left her on the doorstep of Davenport House, Eliza did not say farewell or send salutations to his stepmother and father. Instead, she charged up the stairs and locked herself away in her bedchamber.

“It was two kisses.”

She said the words out loud to convince herself there was no reason to feel defiled. Nonetheless, talking to herself did nothing to change the fact that she felt violated and unable to attend the ball that evening. She made excuses about being ill and stayed in bed.

Chapter Eight

Gilbert stood across from Miss Lavinia Wickes waiting for the music to start. With a scrape across the strings of a violin, he bowed in unison with every man standing in the same queue. Stepping forward, he took hold of Miss Wickes hand and escorted her through the opening steps of the minuet.

“Miss Wickes, I am most curious about your family. You hail from Essex?”

Miss Wickes demurred and bashfully nodded. He’d had a difficult time engaging her in conversation each time they had been together. Without a squeak or a peep of conversation, she left Gilbert to fill the next three minutes with one-sided musing.

“How many siblings do you have?”

A soft whisper exited Miss Wickes’s mouth, leaving him confused and without an answer. He hadn’t heard what she’d said over the music and conversation of the other couples on the dance floor. Gilbert didn’t want to make a lady uncomfortable by staying silent, and so he continued to ask questions and receive whispers in response.

He’d promised to apply himself to a search for a wife, which meant he had to consider the attributes that would make a proper wife, not only for him, but for his profession. He needed a wife who could help him with his work as a vicar. A woman who could take the lead when necessary and help with charity baskets and families in need. Unfortunately, Miss

Wickes's bashfulness around people made her the least likely woman for a match.

Finishing the dance, Gilbert led her back to her mother and sisters. "Miss Wickes, it has been an honor."

Miss Wickes whispered a response, but it was lost as her mother reached over and pulled Gilbert's attention away from her daughter's timidity. He wondered if it was a ruse to make him forget about Miss Wickes's quiet demeanor. "Mr. Fernley, we are so humbled you have smiled upon our little Lavinia. We do hope you will seek her out again."

Gilbert looked toward his family, standing a short distance away. "I will find out if I have any openings left this evening, ma'am."

"Such kindness and generosity I have rarely seen."

Bowing before taking his leave, Gilbert heard Mrs. Wickes's excitement as she questioned Miss Wickes regarding every second of the dance and conversation. He hated to break the mother's heart, but her daughter didn't seem at all interested in furthering their acquaintance.

Sidling up to Phineas, Gilbert was thankful for a moment to rest. The next set hadn't been announced, so he had a respite before seeking out his next partner. He thought to pull his family out to the cool air of the night but found himself intrigued by Adelia's concern.

"Do her parents actually believe an earl will pay call to her?" Adelia's comment sounded harsh, but Gilbert chose to stay his opinion until he knew the full extent of the conversation.

"Dearest," Phineas said, "is it possible there are circumstances or an arrangement of which we are unaware?"

"Eliza would have told me if she had an understanding with Wigtown. I must warn her of his character. That man is vile."

"I agree with Adelia. We must learn everything we can about Lord Wigtown's intentions toward Miss Davenport. If there is no reason for us to continue matching her with Gilbert,

then we must move forward with other options. I wish we hadn't chosen her for two dances at the Rutherfords' party. It was too much for a first introduction." Briar's mention of the Rutherfords' party put a smile on Gilbert's face. As music started once more, he swayed in time to the beat as he remembered Miss Davenport's graceful dancing and witty conversation.

Although he was perfectly content, he noticed Adelia's hands were tightly clenched around her fan. Gilbert frowned as he remembered Miss Davenport had claimed she had spent the previous weeks waiting for friends to arrive in town so she didn't have to be alone at each party. "Why are you concerned about Miss Davenport and Wigtown? I thought she did not have any suitors."

Adelia and Briar both turned toward Gilbert, their impatience showing with tight set jaws. Adelia was the first to soften. "There are rumors of Wigtown paying call to Eliza. They were seen in his carriage in Hyde Park this morning."

Gilbert nodded in understanding. His excitement for another dance with her plummeted into nothingness as he realized a titled gentleman would encourage any woman to consider herself in love. Holding back his disappointment, he tried to sound impartial. "I was unaware."

Adelia continued speaking. "Eliza is not here. She has claimed an illness that seems highly unlikely, given she was seen on his arm this morning. And Wigtown claims he will not dance tonight as there is not a woman tempting enough to pull him away from the card tables."

Gilbert exchanged a knowing look with Phineas and Baxter. They knew Wigtown from their youth. "Wigtown is a rake. Miss Davenport would do best to keep her distance."

"Perhaps her illness was caused by riding in close proximity to Lord Wigtown. Heaven knows I would find any time in his presence most disagreeable. We should visit her on the morrow." Adelia released one of her hands from the fan, and with a flick of her wrist, she opened it with the skill of a well-trained lady of the *ton*.

Briar took hold of Adelia's arm and pulled her into a conspiratorial stance. "I think the visit should be made by Gilbert. He should take flowers from the hothouse and let her know she was not forgotten."

"I agree." Adelia pointed her fan at Gilbert. "And you must offer a courtship. She is the most agreeable of all the women we have set before you."

Gilbert tried not to splutter out a response, but his words caught in his throat, and he found himself coughing. To his dismay, Phineas pounded on his back. "Take a few deep, calming breaths before you argue with my wife. She does have your best interest at heart."

"I would prefer time to consider my options." It was true that Miss Davenport had been the most sincere and talkative during their interactions. She seemed genuine. Most importantly, when he had danced with her, his heart had lightened and the darkness he feared melted away. Yet, he hardly knew her, and it seemed rather forward to ask for a courtship so soon.

"No." The response came in unison from both his brothers. He'd expected Adelia and Briar to be the difficult ones.

"Do you not think it is too early for a courtship?"

Phineas gave an impatient glare. "Courtship is a time to discover if you are compatible. It does not mean you will marry her."

"I suppose you are right. I will do so on the morrow."

"Very good." Adelia beamed with pleasure at his acquiescence.

Gilbert locked his hands behind his back and widened his stance a little. "Now that we have resolved this issue, who have you reserved for the quadrille?"

"Miss Killian," Adelia responded.

Nodding in appreciation, Gilbert left his sisters-in-law to their plotting and his brothers to keep an eye on the plotting so it didn't get out of hand. He hadn't come into London seeking

help, but they were efficient and dedicated to the purpose of matchmaking, which left him apprehensive yet hopeful.



GILBERT HAD SPENT THE ENTIRE NIGHT WORRYING OVER MISS Davenport. From the moment he'd heard she was ill until he finally fell asleep, he'd fretted. He'd tried to convince himself that he would be concerned for any of the women he'd danced with, but it wasn't completely true. He admired Eliza Davenport. He found her to be handsome in both features and temperament. It was odd for him to have formed an attachment so quickly, but she was truly one of the most genuine people he'd spoken with while in London.

With the help of Adelia and Briar, Gilbert had received introductions to far too many eligible young ladies. Each lady had individual traits to make her unique, but overall, he hadn't felt an attachment to any of them beyond Miss Davenport. With a collection of flowers from the hothouse, he sat in the morning room awaiting Miss Davenport's arrival. His leg bounced in nervous anticipation of going through with the task his sisters had set him to do. Would she consider him too forward if he suggested a courtship so early in their acquaintance? Or was she in agreement with Adelia and Briar? Should men request a courtship simply for the need of discovering compatibility?

As the door opened, he waited for her to enter before offering the flowers. Bowing, he held the flowers out. "Miss Davenport, thank you for accepting my visit. I pray you are well this morning."

"Heartily well, Mr. Fernley." To his surprise, Miss Davenport ignored the flowers and sat near the door in an oddly placed chair. She was as far away as one could sit without being in the hallway.

As a vicar, he'd visited many sick parishioners, and he understood the desire they had to distance themselves when

not at their best. Acting upon his instincts, Gilbert nervously pressed forward and placed the flowers on a nearby table. “I understand you were unwell last evening, and I wanted you to know your witty conversation was missed. I heartily enjoyed our time together at the Rutherfords’ party.”

“How very kind.” Her words were flat with an air of disinterest as she kept her gaze focused on the door. He wondered if she was preparing to flee from the room.

Undeterred by her lack of attention, Gilbert continued. “I pondered upon our short discussions, the last time we danced. We seemed well suited.”

“Oh?” Miss Davenport’s leg shook as she adjusted in her seat. “When was this?”

“At the Rutherfords’ party.”

With a forced release of air, Miss Davenport lifted a hand to her hair and twirled it around her fingers. “I agree. It was a lovely evening.”

“I wanted to inquire...if it is agreeable to you...” He was nervous and his words weren’t forming exactly as he’d expected, but he trudged through with the hope that Miss Davenport would take pity upon him. “Would you be amenable to a courtship so we could know each other better?”

“What?” Clearly taken aback, Miss Davenport gripped the arms of the chair as though it would fly out from under her body.

It wasn’t the response he’d hoped for, but it wasn’t a refusal. Walking toward her, Gilbert asked his question with a bit more confidence. “Our short time together has made me believe we could be a fine match. But to fully determine compatibility, I would like to take you for a ride in Hyde Park.”

“No! I do not care for Hyde Park.” The strained response left him baffled.

“We do not have to go to the park. We could visit Vauxhall and the theater or any number of other outings.” Still hoping

she would accept, Gilbert pressed forward. “Perhaps you need a bit of time to consider?”

“I apologize, Mr. Fernley, for whatever I have done to make you believe such an offer would be well received. I am not now, nor do I believe I will ever hope for a courtship with you.” Miss Davenport stood and gestured toward the door.

Heat rushed up his neck as he crossed toward the exit. As a gentleman, he felt compelled to oblige. Yet, it pained him to know she could dismiss him so easily. He didn’t know what he would say, but he knew leaving would mean the end of a connection between them, for he would not force his company upon a woman so decidedly against him.

Walking toward the door brought him closer to where she sat. As he turned toward her, he noticed she winced. “You are unwell and do not know what you are saying.”

“You must excuse me for being so dismissive. Please do not think poorly of me, but I am fully capable of refusing your offer.”

Disappointed in her response and the lack of a true apology, Gilbert reached for the door and took hold of the handle. Using it to steady himself, he turned back to offer a final farewell. With a dip of his head, his words stuck in his mouth as a glimpse of Miss Davenport’s face showed a color closer to that of a painter’s pallet than a woman’s fair cheek. His previous anger melted away as he realized she was injured. Gilbert knew, in that moment, she didn’t need a suitor. She needed a friend. Although she obviously hadn’t thought their previous conversation had been anything special, he would never leave a woman in distress.

“Miss Davenport,” Gilbert said as he tilted his head to meet her eyes. “I cannot leave until I know you are well. Might I send for your mother?”

“I am perfectly well. My mother is visiting friends at this hour. She will return shortly.” She was making a valiant effort to fight the display of emotions playing across her bruised cheek, but she failed in the attempt as tears dripped from her eyes.

Gilbert reached into his pocket and extracted a handkerchief. "Please, tell me what I can do."

"I am being silly, Mr. Fernley. Please do not fret over this." Miss Davenport waved her hand in front of her face near her eyes, alluding to the tears. Tears were easy to wipe away, but the bruises upon her face were his deepest concern.

When she didn't accept his handkerchief, Gilbert stepped closer. To his dismay, she flinched and turned further away, but not before he received a full view of the bruise upon her cheek and cuts on her lips. Swaying slightly, Gilbert knew it wasn't his place to pry. But he'd never left an injured creature to fend for itself, and he wouldn't start now. Reaching forward, he gently touched her chin and moved her head so he could assess the damage.

"How did this happen?"

"I tripped on my night rail this morning and bumped my face against the bedpost."

Gilbert pursed his lips as he tried to find a way to encourage her confidence. In his profession he'd visited with women who claimed their bruises were a result of clumsiness, but there was one thing most of those bruises had in common, and Miss Davenport's injury showed the same hand-and-finger shape as the others. He was certain she hadn't fallen against the bedpost. In fact, in his professional opinion, the bruising looked to be a day old. Choosing his words with care, Gilbert pressed his handkerchief into her hand. "Does it hurt?"

"Not much. I am being silly and emotional. Do not concern yourself over my ridiculous behavior."

Since she had already refused an offer of courtship, Gilbert changed tactics. Even if they never developed a relationship worthy of marriage, he would hope to call her a friend. "Miss Davenport, perhaps we could spend a little time together as friends. We could keep each other company at the many supper parties we must attend."

He wanted her to accept the offer. Not only because it would give him a chance to know her more intimately, but it

would also offer a way for him to assist her when necessary. If he could discover who had caused her injuries, it might be possible to guide her out of the dangerous situation.

Hesitantly, Miss Davenport lifted her hand to play with the same errant lock of hair she'd previously twirled around her finger. For a slight moment, he thought she would deny him friendship as well, but when she spoke, he had to suppress his excitement over one little triumph for the day. "It would be my pleasure to call you friend."

Gilbert released a sigh of contentment before taking the chair next to her. "Now that we are friends, will you promise to be more careful when around dangerous bedposts?"

"I will avoid them at all costs."

"If, by chance, one might appear at a most inconvenient moment, will you allow me to protect you?"

Miss Davenport's renewed tears told him she knew he spoke not of bedposts but of the man who had injured her. He waited, praying she would accept his offer instead of shrinking away.

She unwrapped the hair from her finger and tucked the lock behind her ear. Miss Davenport stood and walked toward the pianoforte. Her entire body turned away from him. "What a bold request for people who are barely friends."

Gilbert took his leave. "Consider my offer, please."

"Thank you for your visit and the flowers, Mr. Fernley. Both are much appreciated."

Although she was still turned away, Gilbert dipped his head before slipping out the door. He was walking down the steps to his waiting carriage when the Earl of Wigtown alighted from a carriage parked directly behind his. Gilbert dipped his head in recognition. As Wigtown walked past, he tutted as though Gilbert wasn't anyone of consequence. He behaved as though they hadn't spent time at Cambridge together, which wasn't much of a surprise. Wigtown had always found himself overly important.

Gilbert now understood Miss Davenport's reservations toward a courtship. It seemed the rumors were true, and she was receiving callers like Lord Wigtown. This would certainly dissuade her from wanting a match with a vicar. He had no title and nothing more than an old family name and connections to his elder siblings to recommend him.

As the footman opened the door to the carriage, Gilbert stalled before climbing in so he could overhear the earl's request. It was possible Wigtown was there to meet with Mr. Davenport. Wafting back to him with a gust of wind, was the earl's request. "Please tell Miss Davenport I am here for our ride through Hyde Park."

Gilbert put his boot on the step and hoisted himself up as the butler replied. "Miss Davenport is not at home to callers this morning."

Wigtown argued. "She will see me. I am certain of it."

"I must apologize, my lord. But she is unwell and not accepting visitors."

The exchange between the butler and Lord Wigtown caused several questions to run through Gilbert's mind. He'd been accepted into the home without reservation and had been allowed to speak with Miss Davenport without the watchful eye of a chaperone looming in the corner of the room.

Comparing his last quarter of an hour with Miss Davenport and the unlikely reception Lord Wigton received, Gilbert had to chuckle. A self-important lord of the peerage had been unceremoniously rejected. Gilbert sat back against the seat as the door to the carriage snapped shut. He watched as Wigtown spun on his heels, retracing his steps. This had been a very unexpected morning.



WITH HIS MORNING VISITS CONCLUDED, GILBERT DECIDED TO join Phineas and Baxter at White's. When he joined their table,

he was surprised to see Oliver and Fletcher sitting with them. As a party of five, they were missing only two brothers; Archie was in Scotland with his wife Rosalind and Cornelius was away on duty with the military.

“You are finally finished with morning visits. How did the women receive your offerings?” Phineas asked while passing a glass and a decanter of spirits toward Gilbert.

“Very well. At least, I believe they did.”

Baxter patted him on the shoulder. “It will take time. No need to rush an engagement since you’ve been in town for such a short time.”

“What happened when you requested a courtship with Miss Davenport?” Phineas asked.

The question deserved a truthful answer, but Gilbert wasn’t prepared to tell his brothers he’d failed at the first attempt. If it was an overabundance of pride, he would repent later. For now, he convinced himself it was to protect Miss Davenport from Adelia and Briar. They would not take her refusal as well as he had.

In his best vicarly explanation, which included the exclusion of facts for reasons of privacy, he responded. “I would like to ponder upon an offer of courtship a little longer. Miss Davenport was still a bit ill this morning, and I thought the offer lacked the compassion she needed at this time.”

He wished that realization had come before he’d made the offer of courtship, but he couldn’t take back his mistake now. It was best he move forward and try harder not to make a ninny of himself in the future. Gilbert lifted his empty glass and pointed to the decanter of brandy.

Oliver poured himself a drink and loudly placed the decanter back on the table. “I think it wise to wait a bit. You have been in town for less than a month. We would not want people thinking you are overzealous.”

Gilbert nodded to show he agreed and then covered a yawn by turning toward his shoulder. He had spent the previous night dancing until the early hours of the morning. Although

he'd had insomnia for many years, he'd never had the overwhelming desire to sleep as he had since Adelia and Briar had set to vigorous matchmaking. Unfortunately, his desire to sleep and the ability to fall into a peaceful slumber lacked accordance.

Fletcher sat back in his seat, resting one leg across the other. "I would like to get in on this game. Which lady do Adelia and Briar believe has the best chance of becoming Mrs. Gilbert Fernley?"

Gilbert sighed. He knew his brothers would never enter a wager in the books at White's, but they'd have a brilliant time debating the options while thoroughly vexing him. Instead of encouraging wagers, he chose to let Phineas and Baxter provide the details.

Phineas took the lead, starting with Miss Davenport. The conversation took him back to that morning when he'd noticed the injuries on her face. He was quite concerned with her safety and silently prayed she would not fall prey to another beating. If only they were confidants, he could wiggle the information out of her.

"Adelia would love to see Miss Davenport settled in Yorkshire." Phineas made the pointed statement with an expectant gaze in Gilbert's direction.

"I will take Adelia's feelings under consideration." Gilbert took another sip from his glass and realized he'd been blinded by his desire to help Miss Davenport. Adelia and Miss Davenport were closer than any two friends he'd ever known. It was possible all could be made right by having Adelia visit Davenport House.

Baxter cleared his throat pulling Gilbert back into the present conversation. "I thought you and Miss Lucy Killian made a fine pair on the dance floor."

Gilbert nodded. "Miss Killian was very kind. I enjoyed our conversation."

His brothers each sat up and turned their full attention to him. With the way they reacted, anyone looking at their group

might think something significant had taken place. Gilbert knew he needed to do something to dampen their expectations.

Continuing to speak, he let them down with ease. "I am not ready to set my cap just yet."

"Did you send flowers?" Phineas asked.

"How about a morning visit?" Baxter inquired.

"What inspired you about the conversation?" Fletcher asked.

"What are her accomplishments?" Oliver's question sent a laugh around the table.

Looking to each of his brothers, he answered them in turn. "Yes, Phineas. I picked out a nice bouquet from the hothouse this morning. Baxter, I delivered them myself. Fletcher, the conversation was engaging in that she did not speak of the weather or the state of the roads. She spoke of her likes and dislikes, which was refreshing. Oliver, Miss Killian did not list her accomplishments, but my understanding as of this morning is that she is quite talented on the pianoforte. She sings like a bird in springtime, and she adores Yorkshire."

"Very well. Were there other ladies?" Oliver asked. The eagerness of his brothers to find him a match left Gilbert momentarily out of sorts. Had everyone thought him so lonely as to hope for this eventuality? Or was it because Phineas and Gilbert never did anything without the other matching it in some particular way? The one exception had been Phineas's trip to Egypt. Since Phineas had unexpectedly returned with Adelia, it now seemed to Gilbert that his family thought they had to find him a wife as well.

Baxter and Phineas nodded at the same time, but Phineas took the lead. "We introduced him to Lady Lillian Browning, daughter of the Marquess of Hastings."

Fletcher kept track of each by ticking them off his fingers. "One of Adelia's friends, no doubt."

Phineas continued. "Miss Alice Kenward and Miss Caroline Hawk went to finishing school with Adelia. Both seemed like they would make a fine vicar's wife."

Gilbert tilted his head toward Phineas and scoffed. “A vicar’s wife?”

Phineas reached over and patted Gilbert’s hand. “No need to thank us for thinking sensibly. We need to find a woman who will support you in your duties and keep you on your toes.”

“Agreed. Briar and I have considered each of our choices regarding your position as spiritual leader. The lady must be humble and willing to help you serve your parishioners.”

Fletcher held up his hand. “Then we have five women to consider?”

Baxter shook his head. “We have scoured the *ton* for the perfect match. Introductions were also made to Lady Dorcas Grey, the daughter of Lord Darlington. Miss Lavinia Wickes and Miss Thomasina Gladstone will do fine. And last, but certainly not least is Lady Millicent Brewer, Lord Sefton’s daughter.”

Oliver let out a low whistle. “Quite the group of women.”

“We must add one more lady to the list.” Phineas’s smile put Gilbert on his guard. It was obvious his brother had a secret. “We would be negligent if we left Miss Audrey Benton out of the group.”

Fletcher spluttered and spat the liquid in his mouth back into his glass. Glaring at the amber liquid as though it had betrayed him, he pushed it away. “Why would you make such a suggestion? Audrey is not a match for Gilbert.”

Phineas shrugged his shoulders and put a hand over his chest in an unconvincing show of dismay. “She is in her fourth season, Fletch. The poor girl is bound to be a spinster by fall. I feel the need to rush anyone with an inclination of marriage toward her.”

“Marriage should not be rushed simply because of one’s age.” Fletcher picked his glass up and then glared at it. “When Audrey is ready for marriage, it will find her. We are not her brothers by blood, and therefore we should mind our own business.”

Gilbert understood Phineas's reason for adding Audrey to his list at this poignant moment. Audrey had set her cap for Fletcher when she was barely old enough to understand the meaning of the word love. Fletcher had yet to notice her admiration, or perhaps he had noticed it but chose to ignore her.

Gilbert couldn't help himself. He needed to add a bit of levity to the situation. "A wedding this year would make Gigi very happy. Since I am not convinced about any of my prospects, perhaps Fletcher wouldn't mind saving Audrey from a spot on the shelf."

Fletcher stood, causing everyone to laugh. "If you will excuse me, I have an appointment I must keep."

They waited until Fletcher made his exit before going back to their conversation. Oliver moved into the seat Fletcher had vacated to be closer to Gilbert. "So, then, which of the ladies seems the best match?"

Gilbert shook his head deciding he was finished with the topic. If Miss Davenport chose to accept him as a friend but not a suitor, he was certain no lady could heal the darkness that had entered his heart. "It's early days yet."

Phineas appraised Gilbert, as an archaeologist would view an ancient artifact. "I know which lady you will choose. If you would like, I'll tell you now and we can relieve your suffering this very day."

Oliver leaned forward and slapped his hand against the table. "No, Phineas. We must create our own wager book. One between us as brothers. Whoever is right wins the prize."

Phineas extracted his travel journal from his pocket while Baxter left to find an inkwell and pen. When they were settled back in their seats, Phineas ripped a blank page out of the back of the book and set it before them. "Set your wagers."

Chapter Nine

Eliza lay on the ground with her legs above resting on the sofa cushion while she read a lovely book titled *Sense and Sensibility*. This position was the only way to read a book, or so she had convinced herself when as a child she had first stepped foot in the library of their home in Bath.

Having refused her mother's request to attend a garden party that morning, Eliza found herself alone and in need of entertainment. She decided the Dashwood sisters would do perfectly for the afternoon.

Turning the page in eager anticipation to discover what would happen next, she ferociously read as Marianne Dashwood tumbled to the ground and injured her ankle in a rainstorm. With a gasp of intrigue, Eliza read on and somehow missed the click of the doorknob and the butler's announcement. She didn't realize there was a visitor until Adelia was standing over her.

"Is the book so engaging you cannot even acknowledge a friend?" Adelia's laugh eased Eliza's embarrassment, but only a little. "Are you comfortable down there?"

Heat ran up her neck as she rolled to her side and sat up. "Forgive me for not realizing you were here."

"Never mind that. I would like to know if the floor is the best spot for reading."

Eliza laughed. "I think it is superior to a chair, especially if you have a soft pillow upon which to rest your head."

"I will have to try it one day."

“Before you do, you must borrow this book. It is wonderful.”

“Who is the author?”

Eliza opened the cover and held it out for Adelia to see. “It says, *A Lady*.”

“Very mysterious.”

“Indeed.” Eliza rang the bell and ordered tea from the maid before taking a seat across from Adelia. “I was not expecting visitors at this hour. Why are you not at Lady Henderson’s garden party?”

“I have not seen you for over a week. I am worried about you, Eliza.”

Eliza’s hold on the book tightened as she averted her gaze. “I did not mean to cause a stir. If you were not in town, my absence would have gone unnoticed.”

Adelia leaned forward and poured tea for both of them. As hostess, Eliza should have done it, but she didn’t mind her friend taking the lead. Adelia handed a cup to her. When Eliza didn’t reach out, Adelia insisted by motioning to the saucer in her hand. “I am not the only one who has noticed. Gilbert is quite concerned about your welfare. I am here at his request.”

“Oh?” Eliza distractedly lifted her hand to the cheek that was no longer bruised, but still a little fragile to the touch. “It is kind of him to think about me.”

“I could be wrong, but I think you misunderstood my intentions for you and Gilbert.”

“What do you mean?”

“I expect you to marry my brother-in-law and become my sister.”

Eliza lifted her cup and took a sip of tea before responding. She certainly hadn’t expected Adelia to be so open. But then, it had been years since they’d spent much time together. Soon after Adelia had left finishing school, her father had taken her away to Egypt, where she’d lived for several years.

“Does he know you hope for a match between us? And if you are so determined, why introduce him to all the other women?”

“Men are interesting creatures. They must believe they are the one in charge of their marital choices. Otherwise, they behave irrationally, and it is difficult to play matchmaker. But I have already persuaded him in your favor. I believe he is quite smitten.”

“What makes you so certain?”

Adelia pursed her lips and tapped her finger against the teacup in her hand. She considered the question for a short moment, which caused Eliza’s heart to skip a little. Was it possible Mr. Gilbert Fernley thought she was truly worth his time?

“He has not asked after the welfare of any of the other women. Nor has he requested anyone in our family pay call to them.”

Eliza rolled her eyes and turned away from her friend. She knew his reasons for asking after her, and it had everything to do with their last conversation. He was concerned about the bruises on her cheek. “You may tell him I am well.”

“Yet, you stay out of Society. Is there a reason?”

“If it worries you, I will reenter Society by attending the Penhales’ *soirée*.”

“That was not what I asked. Eliza, what happened to cause you to feign illness?”

Setting her teacup and saucer on the table none too gently, Eliza’s temper flared. “I thought vicars were supposed to be confidants. How long did he wait after visiting with me before he told you about the bruises on my face and the cuts on my lips?” Eliza stood and paced the length of the sofa. “I am thankful I said nothing of importance to him, otherwise it might have already spread throughout the *ton*. Whom else did he tell of my injuries?”

Adelia slowly leaned forward and calmly set her cup and saucer on the table as well. “No, dearest, Gilbert did not betray

your secret. To what bruises and cuts do you refer?"

Adelia's calm yet worried demeanor and her genuine concern calmed Eliza's temper and left her humbled. She carefully lowered herself back onto the sofa. "He truly did not say anything?"

"Not a word."

"It was nothing, really." She added the last part as Adelia's demeanor changed from concern to disbelief. When Eliza realized she hadn't convinced her friend, she started rambling. "I have this annoyingly long night rail. My maid had so many chores to do, she hadn't taken the time to hem it. The material is a lovely shade of blue and so I chose to wear it anyway. The morning Mr. Fernley visited I found my toe stuck in the unhemmed material, and I tripped and hit into the bedpost. A bit silly."

"Obviously not too silly, since you were ready to denounce Gilbert if he had informed me of the issue."

"Forgive me, Adelia. It was an embarrassing situation, and when he asked if I'd be willing to enter a courtship with him, I refused without taking time to consider the offer. I would truly prefer to forget the entire situation."

Adelia moved from the sofa where she'd been sitting so she could sit next to Eliza. "You would tell me if someone had hurt you?"

"How silly, Adelia. Were you away from England so long you do not remember we are a civilized Society?"

Adelia smiled indulgently. "Not at all. I merely want you to know you can trust me. I will be your fiercest confidant."

"It is not necessary, unless I fall once more." Eliza wiped at tears as they fell onto her cheeks. She didn't want to cry, but as tears streamed out of her eyes, she was unable to stop herself. "I am sorry. This is wholly unnecessary."

Adelia put her arm around Eliza and pulled her closer. "We must allow ourselves to cry. It helps us build strength of character."

Eliza buried her head in her hands as she considered telling Adelia everything about her situation. As she planned out the words, she knew admitting to the thefts was not an option, mainly to preserve herself from the retribution of Lord Wigtown and Duchess Dorset.

“Forgive me for being so silly.” Eliza closed her eyes and filled her thoughts with the duties of a hostess. If she didn’t think about her wretched state, she wouldn’t cry over it. “Have you tried one of the lemon cakes? They melt in your mouth.”

“I will eat one later. Eliza, you can confide in me.”

Knowing she must give an excuse for her behavior; Eliza chose to give a partial truth. Adelia rubbed Eliza’s back in a circular motion that was oddly comforting. She closed her eyes and leaned into the backrub. She needed a friend. “I have never been able to keep a secret from you.”

“It is best not to try.”

“Lord Wigtown requested I join him for an afternoon in Hyde Park a little over a week ago. I foolishly accepted.”

“He hurt you?” Adelia’s outrage was exactly what Eliza needed to help her heal. “Does your father know what he did to you? Is Duke Dorset aware of his son’s ill manners?”

“My parents believe my clumsy falsehood.” Before Adelia could argue, Eliza quickly turned toward her to make certain her words were heard and accepted. “You promised to be my confidant. No one needs to know the truth.”

“How deeply did he injure you?”

Eliza knew what the question meant, and so she quickly assured her friend. “It was two very unwanted kisses, a bite, and a hand to my face. I will conclude by saying he lacks the finesse of a gentleman when there is no one around for him to impress.”

“Please tell me you will not allow a courtship with the earl. He is an odious man.”

“I cannot completely avoid him when out in Society. But I will continue to refuse to spend time alone with him. This is

my reason for staying away from Society so long.” Eliza embraced her friend. “Thank you for listening.”

“You are my very best friend. You should be fully aware by now that I will not allow you to suffer in silence.”

Eliza wiped at the left-over tears. Picking up the book she’d been reading, she handed it to Adelia. “Now, we must speak of happier things. This book is absolutely wonderful. You must borrow it once I have finished.”

Discussing the book kept Eliza’s mind away from her worries. Once Adelia had left, a flurry of emotions took over once more, and at the forefront of her thoughts was her reentrance into Society. The only reason she was able to sleep that night and prepare for the Penhales’ ball the following day was because she didn’t have to worry about fulfilling a request from the duchess. She hadn’t completed the last task the duchess had set, and therefore she would have a night free from deceit.

Chapter Ten

“Mr. Fernley, how do you manage to dance with such grace?” Miss Thomasina Gladstone’s question caught him off guard. Was it not the man’s duty to compliment a lady on her dancing? He thought about returning the compliment but knew it wasn’t possible to do so with sincerity.

“Years of practice, Miss Gladstone.” He kept his mouth in a pleasant but tight smile as Miss Gladstone stepped on his toes for the third time in two minutes. Hiding the wince, he searched his thoughts for a compliment he could give the lady. Fortunately for him, she was ready with another observation.

“I have heard all the best dancing tutors hail from Yorkshire. You must have learned at the feet of the most capable instructors.”

“My brothers and I were instructed by a governess. She was quite capable.”

As they separated and took the hands of the couples dancing diagonally from themselves, Gilbert took the opportunity to search the room for Miss Davenport. He hadn’t seen her for over a week. When he didn’t find Miss Davenport, he turned back to Miss Gladstone and gave his full attention to her once more.

“Miss Gladstone, have you enjoyed the season?”

“Exceedingly!” Miss Gladstone’s eyes sparkled much more than they should have for such a simplistic and rote question. It was the type of question a man resorted to when he had little else to say.

As the musicians strung their final cords, Gilbert bowed to his dance partner and then escorted her back to her mother. He kept his eyes alert, searching about the room as his attention focused on the ramblings of Miss Gladstone.

“Have you heard about the robbery? Everyone is speaking about it.”

Her question pulled Gilbert’s eyes away from the surrounding guests to focus directly upon her. “The bracelet?”

“Yes. I remember admiring the diamonds at the party. It is a pity someone had to take it. Poor Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford.”

Scrunching his face in concentration, Gilbert released her arm and stopped walking. It wasn’t the most suitable topic of conversation, but he wanted to know what others were saying. Turning to Miss Gladstone, Gilbert said, “The only information I have is what was printed in the *Morning Post*. Have there been further developments? Is there a suspect yet?”

“Everyone agrees it must be a servant. No one of our acquaintance would stoop to thievery.”

“It would certainly cause a panic if it were a party attendee and not a servant.”

Miss Gladstone leaned toward him, her face alight with intrigue. “The constables are taking this quite seriously. Whoever it is will not escape justice. My father believes they will be transported, if not worse. He would not allow me to sit in the drawing room as he and my brother hashed out the details, but I may have overheard them speaking, and my father believes the culprit will find themselves at the end of a hangman’s noose.”

“I would agree with your father. Although, it is not wise for you to listen in on indelicate conversations.”

“You will not speak of it to my father?”

“I dare not, Miss Gladstone.” Gilbert retook her arm, tucking it through his as he led her through the crowded room back to her mother. “Thank you for the dance.”

As Gilbert turned to leave, he couldn't help overhearing the start of a conversation between mother and daughter.

"I stepped on his toes at least four times, and I accidentally kicked him in the lower leg. Do you think I have a chance at catching his admiration?"

Although he missed her mother's reply, Gilbert knew Miss Gladstone was not a match for him. It seemed cruel to continue asking her for dances knowing she was not the one he hoped to pursue.

Expecting to share these thoughts with Adelia and Briar, Gilbert stopped short of interrupting the conversation his family was engaged in as he realized they were also speaking of the recent theft. Stepping up to the circle, between Phineas and Baxter, Gilbert stayed silent, hoping to gain further information.

"It is strange for a theft to have occurred so openly," Phineas said with a strained laugh.

"The man has courage; you must agree with that." Baxter's comment matched Gilbert's thoughts precisely. Theft was usually done in the dark of night when no one could possibly catch the culprit.

"Do you think there have been other thefts?" Phineas asked.

Gilbert was intrigued. "You believe there are more?"

Baxter nodded. "It has not been publicized, but a booklet was taken from Lord Wilmington's home the night of Miss Eloise Haversham's engagement party. Very few people know of it."

Phineas shook his head. "Perhaps there are more victims who have yet to realize their items have been stolen. We could very well hear of further thefts in the coming weeks and months."

"It is horrible." Adelia took hold of Phineas's arm, her concern showing as she touched the emerald necklace she wore. "It has caused everyone to be suspicious of their friends

and acquaintances. Worse yet, some people are blaming the servants.”

“What do they think this is? A mass theft amongst the elite perpetrated by the serving staff? For what purpose?” Baxter shook his head in disgust.

Gilbert placed a calming hand on Baxter’s arm. “It is a natural human inclination to believe those we care about are not capable of deception.”

“I agree. But as we stand here speaking about the thefts, it is very possible the perpetrator is currently stuffing an expensive trinket in their pocket, and no one will know until the item is missed.” Phineas’s statement left everyone in the circle silent.

Clearing his throat, Gilbert looked to Adelia and Briar. “Which lady am I to dance with for the minuet?”

“Miss Killian.” Briar’s smile told him she hoped for an attachment to form.

He thought highly of Miss Killian, but he hadn’t yet given up on Miss Davenport. Knowing the supper dance was directly after the minuet, Gilbert hoped for the confirmation that he would be spending the dinner hour in delightful conversation. “And the supper dance?”

Gilbert fought the urge to look down as he asked the question. Now was not the time to show embarrassment. If he didn’t allow his family to see which lady he preferred, they might urge him in a different direction.

“We secured Miss Davenport for the supper dance.” Phineas nudged him with his elbow. A show of support and understanding.

Taking a deep breath, Gilbert made a parting reply before seeking out Miss Killian. “Keep your eyes and ears open for the would-be thief. If the culprit is as sneaky as we think, he could steal the jewels off Adelia’s and Briar’s necks without your notice.”

Chapter Eleven

Eliza had never smiled enough to make her face hurt, until that moment. Supper with Mr. Fernley was delightful.

He didn't try to charm her with ridiculous conversation. Nor did he show his intelligence by making her feel inferior. Instead, Mr. Gilbert Fernley gave genuine compliments that were pleasing enough to bring warmth to her cheeks, resulting in the perfect blush.

Mr. Fernley dished the next course, placing a plate of meat and vegetables before her. She was ready for their conversation to continue in the same lighthearted tone as before. Instead, his words wiped all amusement from her mind and made her ill. "Do you think we are the only two people at this party not speaking of the infamous thief?"

Eliza grasped her fork and knife, hoping to avoid the conversation by stuffing food in her mouth. Unfortunately, she dropped her knife as her hands shook. The clinking of silverware against China stilled her breath and caused the conversation around them to go silent. Gathering her composure, Eliza ignored the added attention from nearby guests as she clumsily responded. "Surely there are couples falling in love this very moment."

"Is it possible for love to develop over roasted potatoes, mashed turnips, and dry, over-cooked venison?"

"Dry? How unfortunate." Eliza used her fork to poke at the meat, finding it was as Mr. Fernley had said.

"Now you can see why interest is firmly placed on the thief."

“I suppose.” Eliza wanted to speak about anything outside of the thefts. She would discuss the state of the roads if it meant she didn’t have to know what people were saying about the missing diamond bracelet and the culprit.

“I have heard the cat burglar has been dubbed the Beau Monde Phantom.”

“Oh? They have given the thief a name?”

With an air of mystery, Mr. Fernley quirked an eyebrow and lowered his voice to just above a whisper. “It does fit the culprit. He is a nighttime phantom intent on taking items that do not belong to him.”

“Very astute.” Short breathy replies were all she could manage on the topic to keep her voice from trembling.

A pause in their conversation made one of her legs bounce. She placed her hand upon her knee to stop it from shaking the table. Had he noticed her reticence in speaking about the thefts? Would it make him suspicious? Keeping a secret from everyone around her was more burdensome than she’d realized. No matter the situation, her mind conjured up scenarios where she accidentally slipped and told everyone she was the thief.

Eliza turned away from Mr. Fernley to hide the growing uncertainty she knew would soon show upon her face. She slowly took notice of those sitting nearby and caught the Duchess of Dorset watching her. A shudder visibly shook her body as she lowered her eyes to the plate in front of her.

“Are you cold?” Mr. Fernley asked.

Eliza bit her bottom lip and turned back to him. “Not at all.”

Mr. Fernley leaned toward her to whisper. He spoke with a pained expression and a tightness in his voice. “You seem disenchanted with the evening.”

“Please allow me to apologize. I am terribly exhausted and not good company.”

The excuse was one she'd given many times but never to avoid deception. As Mr. Fernley went back to eating, Eliza closed her eyes and focused on her regrets. If she could go back to the weeks before when she'd been lonely and without dance partners, she would tell her former self to wait. A man worth her notice and very deserving of dedicated love would arrive to make up for all the callous treatment she'd received at the hands of the *ton*.

Her heart leapt with pleasure as she imagined an afternoon stroll through the gardens at her home where he would ask for her hand in marriage. Although she would prefer marriage by special license, if he wanted to post the banns, she wouldn't disagree. Closing her eyes for only a second allowed her to picture them arriving at his vicarage as husband and wife. Her cheeks heated as the imaginary Gilbert Fernley placed a soft kiss upon her lips.

Lifting her hands to touch the spot and savor the moment, she was pulled from her fanciful thoughts as a crash of plates shattered behind her. Startled by the noise, Eliza turned to see a servant had dropped a load of dirty plates.

Gilbert placed a hand over hers. "You are trembling. It is no wonder, with the dishes breaking directly behind us."

Eliza tried to laugh it off, but she found her forced giggle caught in her throat sounding weak. She wanted the life her imagination had conjured. But her indiscretions would now prohibit her from that life. If Mr. Fernley ever proposed marriage, their union would tarnish his reputation and bring ruin to his family. She had to force a sense of indifference between them. If he thought she did not care for his attention, he would choose a different woman.

As supper ended, Eliza gladly rejoined her parents for a short time and then found her way out to the rose garden. She wanted a moment alone to calm her fears before the list of suitors Duchess Dorset had bribed to dance with her approached. Their feigned smiles and displeasure at being forced into asking the daughter of a tradesman to dance left her uneasy. She feared a repeat of the ride through Hyde Park

with Lord Wigtown—or worse—from each of the men the duchess coerced.

The garden entrance was marked by a shrubbery arch extending around the perimeter of the rectangular greenery. Pebbles marking a pathway around beds of flowers crunched beneath her slippers, poking the bottoms of her toes. With torches in place lighting the walkway, it made this section of the yard the perfect haunt for lovers having secret assignments—or in her case, a hiding place for a lonely woman escaping the ballroom.

Eliza found solace in the gardens. A light breeze touched her cheeks and nose as she leaned forward to examine the yellow roses. As she allowed her thoughts to focus on the beauty of the moment, her body froze as the sound of footsteps crunching on pebbles drew close. Recognizing the red fabric and jeweled tips of the slippers, Eliza straightened and turned to face the Duchess of Dorset.

“Your Grace, I did not expect to find you in the gardens.”

As usual, the duchess ignored polite conversation and focused on her purpose. “You have yet to complete your last assignment.”

Checking to ensure they were alone, Eliza looked back to the entrance she’d stepped through moments before. Unfortunately, the lack of anyone else didn’t ease her worry. It was quite possible in a garden with walls of shrubbery that someone was hiding beyond her vision.

Hesitantly, Eliza confirmed by shaking her head. She hadn’t thought about the snuffbox. Not after the traumatizing outing with Lord Wigtown. “It must have slipped my mind.”

“A poor excuse for not following through with our arrangement. Have I not provided you with a suitor?”

“I would not consider Lord Wigtown a proper match. He is a rake.”

“You did not specify the qualities you’d prefer. You wanted a title. I have promised you a marriage to an earl who will inherit a duchy.”

“Perhaps I do not want an earl any longer.”

The duchess laughed. The sound was forced and sent a fearful shudder down Eliza’s back. “Do not tell me you plan to marry the vicar. Mr. Fernley would not want the Beau Monde Phantom as his wife.”

“I have not set my cap for any man.”

The duchess crossed her arm across her middle and rested her other elbow on it to support her chin with her fingers. “You are entertaining. Wigtown said as much after the ride through Hyde Park, but I never thought my new *pet* had such tenacity.”

Eliza didn’t enjoy being referred to as her *pet*. “I simply want to be left alone. I do not care for Lord Wigtown’s courtship.”

“You are too late. The deal has already been struck, and I demand you keep your side of the bargain.”

“Or what?”

“Pardon me?”

“You have no way of forcing me to comply. If I refuse to keep my end, then our agreement will dissolve.”

“Not as easily as you believe. London is filled with constables intent on finding the Beau Monde Phantom. I need only slip up in a conversation, and you will find yourself in prison awaiting your fate.”

“If we continue, it will not be long before we are caught.”

The duchess reached out and slipped her fingers below the lace on Eliza’s capped sleeve. “Only those who become greedy are caught. We are not yet there.”

“Another assignment would put us directly in the path of the law. They are watching for any indication of skullduggery.”

“Then you must find an alternative way to accomplish the goal. This one should be much easier for you.”

“How could taking a snuffbox from a man to whom I have never been introduced to be simple?”

“Oh dear. I have not told you of my requirement. Since you have delayed retrieving the snuffbox, I expect you to recover a glass figurine from Mr. Penhale’s library.”

“No.”

“Why not? What connection do you have to Mr. and Mrs. Penhale that would prohibit you from completing this task?”

“I had not prepared for committing a crime tonight.” It was the only excuse she could give without repeating everything she’d said moments before. Had she worn the right stays? Would the figurine cause her dress to bulge in an improper way? There was far too much to consider when planning a theft, and she hadn’t any time this evening.

The duchess took hold of Eliza’s arm and squeezed it as she pulled her closer. “You will find the figurine and retrieve it tonight. It is a glass ballerina in a white dress. Bring it to our usual spot at noon tomorrow.”

Pulling away from the duchess, Eliza rubbed her arm to lessen the sting. “I do not know how I could be successful. I did not plan for such an evening.”

“Do not complain to me. Fulfill the terms of our agreement or you will find yourself in custody for your crimes.”

“Do you truly refuse to release me from our arrangement?”

“It seems as though we understand each other.” As the duchess turned to leave, her parting words put tears in Eliza’s eyes. Her tone changed from lofty condescension to blackmail within seconds. “I would not want to link you to the identity of the Beau Monde Phantom this evening. It would spread through the ballroom within seconds of a whisper. There is enough fear in Penhale’s home to tear the culprit apart.”

Knowing the duchess would follow through with her threats, Eliza found her way back to the house. She stood outside the ballroom, spying on the crowds of people, wondering of what they were speaking. There were couples chatting in groups. Women laughing. Men smirking. Some of

the men seemed terribly bored with their conversations. Others passionately spoke, most likely conversing about politics or the identity of the thief. She searched the room for Gilbert Fernley and found him amongst the dancers. She wasn't surprised to see he was entertaining Miss Millicent Brewer. They laughed at the same time, leaving Eliza wishing she was the woman dancing in his arms that very moment.

Instead of entering through the doors that would lead back to the ballroom, Eliza walked around the large home until she found what looked to be the library. She backed into an alcove to consider her options. Music from the party wafted across the estate, resting heavily upon her chest. She wanted to happily dance the night away with Mr. Fernley.

If she went back to the ballroom now, she would have to hide from Duchess Dorset and the dance partners assigned to her. She'd have to dance with Lord Wigtown. Sneaking into a darkened library seemed far more enjoyable than any time spent with the earl.

The answer should have been obvious, but her thoughts were muddled with fear of discovery, and she wasn't thinking rationally. Whatever decision she made at that moment, she knew her first two thefts could not be forgotten. Worse yet, a third theft would further alienate her from the people occupying Mr. and Mrs. Penhale's home that evening.

Eliza stood looking up at the night sky, searching for an answer. Stars twinkled above her, but there was no epiphany written within the sparkling lights. Bowing her head, she thought about whispering a prayer. As the words started forming, she remembered a sermon the vicar near her home in Bath had given on original sin. From that sermon, she could ascertain that God would not look kindly upon her. She had known from the very beginning of this situation that theft was a sin and yet she'd chosen indiscretion over virtue. So instead of praying, Eliza decided she would have to make the decision without heavenly assistance.

In her fallen state, she decided one more theft meant very little. She would suffer the same consequences for one theft as she would for multiple occurrences. Therefore, she chose to

hesitate no longer. She stood frozen in her spot as she listened for footfalls upon the earth and voices of people near or far. With the lack of all noise, she finally determined no one had walked this far away from the garden.

Eliza ran from her hiding place to the nearest window. To her surprise, it was already open a small crack. She pulled it open completely and pulled herself up. Eliza went slowly so she wouldn't snag her dress. There was no need to bring attention to herself, especially once the item was in her possession. As her feet hit the wood flooring, she let out a nervous sigh. Moonlight lit her way as she searched the shelves for a trinket that met the duchess's request. Instead of ballerinas, Eliza found figurines of dogs, cats, birds, and horses. Moving to Mr. Penhale's desk, she searched through drawers and found papers and pens.

Determined to find the ballerina, Eliza searched each table in the room, those along the walls and by the armchairs. Knowing there was only one place left, Eliza turned to the mantle over the fireplace. The ballerina stood in the center. Without dawdling, Eliza snatched it off the mantle and lifted her skirts. It was serendipitous that she'd worn the stays with the added pocket. Securing the trinket, she pressed her hand against the material to test the hiding place. The ballerina was too bulky.

She had only one option. She removed the ballerina from the pocket and stuffed it down the front of her dress. Again, it didn't fit properly. Closing her eyes, she had to take a moment and calmly consider her options. There was only one way to hide the trinket without keeping it upon her body. She would have to run to the carriage house, find her father's landau and hide the ballerina under one of the seats.

Chapter Twelve

Limping toward his family after another country dance with Miss Gladstone, Gilbert was ready for the dancing portion of his evening to end. He stood against the wall and lifted his foot to rub the spot where Miss Gladstone had stepped three times during this last dance. “Please tell me we are finished for the evening.”

Adelia’s hand instantly covered her mouth as she hid a laugh. Phineas didn’t try to hide his amusement, but after a hearty laugh at Gilbert’s expense he relented. “We can honestly say you gave it your best.”

“No, we cannot.” Adelia glared at her husband. “Gilbert has one last dance with Eliza Davenport. Then we may leave.”

His gloomy mood lifted as he searched the room. He hadn’t noticed Miss Davenport since she’d left his side after supper. He spotted her parents nearby, but she was not with them. He looked to the couples queuing up for the allemande, but again she was not with them. Turning toward the veranda, a grin spread across his face as he found Miss Davenport reentering the ballroom.

With his grumpy mood immediately lighter, Gilbert put his foot on the ground, wincing at the pain once more before limping across the room to escort Miss Davenport to the queue before the music began.

“Miss Davenport, I believe you are my partner for this dance.”

Miss Davenport rapidly blinked her eyes and fumbled over her response. “Would you mind, very much, if we did not join

the queue?”

An inward relief flooded over him, and he agreed with more vigor than was necessary for the situation. Although, in his defense, his foot was far too injured to dance. He would have to put a cold compress on it to help the swelling go down. “You have saved me from making a fool of myself. May I escort you to the refreshment table?”

She bit her bottom lip and shook her head. “I am not thirsty. But do not let me stop you from partaking of the various offerings.”

Gilbert held his hands behind his back as he assessed Miss Davenport’s demeanor. She was distracted. During supper she’d been pleasant, a bit nervous, but that was to be expected when in the beginning phases of a friendship. But the warmth he’d felt from her earlier seemed completely gone.

“Miss Davenport, might I request a moment of your time to discuss a concern?”

“Hmmm?”

Gilbert pointed with his head toward a section of wall that was away from the crowds and private enough for a conversation without causing a scandal. He limped beside her as he considered how to approach the topic of their acquaintance.

“You are injured?” Miss Davenport’s sympathy made him think he’d misread her previous indifference.

“It is not too terrible. But it would have made dancing comical.”

“Dancing can be dangerous with certain partners.” She let out a little laugh that made him think whatever had been bothering her before was no longer an issue.

Had he read the situation incorrectly? Had something happened while she was out on the veranda? He was ready to launch into a series of questions to determine if he was wasting his time or if she enjoyed his company when Miss Davenport’s attention wandered once more. Gilbert followed

her gaze around the room, but he found he hadn't any idea what or whom she was seeking.

The happiness he'd come to associate with Miss Davenport slowly leaked out of his heart and fell into the pit of his stomach like pebbles hitting the ground. Was this an indication she preferred another man?

"Miss Davenport?" She didn't answer, and so he said her name once more. "Miss Davenport?"

"Yes?"

"I am a fool." Gilbert hadn't meant to say the words out loud, but in his disappointment they escaped.

"What?" Miss Davenport turned her full attention to him and shook her head. "Do not say such cruel things to yourself. What has made you believe this?"

Deciding to be forthright with her, he took a moment to gather his words before expressing himself with as much grace as he could muster given his disappointment. "For the past fortnight, I have convinced myself there is a connection between us. When we dance and speak, I find my entire body lights up with the deepest pleasure I have ever experienced. I spend my days in anticipation of meeting with you, but it now seems completely one-sided. Is it possible that you have no interest in pursuing even the simplest notion of friendship with me?"

He could have said the words to the wall and received the same response as he got from Miss Davenport. She hadn't heard a word he'd said. Instead, she found who she was looking for and quickly turned back to him. "Mr. Fernley, pardon my distracted thoughts this evening. I must speak to my mother without delay. We can continue this conversation on the morrow. I am at home to visitors between eleven and two each day."

Confused, Gilbert stood in disbelief as she glided across the room. He watched as she pulled her mother toward the hallway and out of sight. By the time he decided to rejoin his family, he realized Miss Davenport might be the woman to

completely break his heart and send him further into overwhelming darkness. For no other woman of his acquaintance had lit his passion for marriage. The loss of any of his other dance partners would not injure him so greatly.



GILBERT FROWNED AS HE STARED AT THE FLAMES IN THE hearth. Since arriving in London, he had slept a total of three full nights. The lack of sleep did nothing to alter his mood as he had lived with insomnia for much of his adult life. He'd tried all the holistic remedies from hops and lavender under his pillows to munching on stewed Spanish onions, but nothing worked unless he was able to clear his mind.

For many years, he'd used the hours of solitude to search out answers to pressing matters posed to him by parishioners. He had also used the time to delve into excruciatingly dull topics of theology, hoping to lull his mind into sleep, but it never worked. Consequentially, he'd learned quite a lot and no longer found those topics dull.

Since the fateful day where he'd lost his nerve and been unable to preach a sermon, he now spent the lonely hours searching the library at Grafton house for answers to his own theological questions about light and dark. He wanted to know how jealousy could form so quickly and how happiness with certain individuals could ease the pain of envy.

Theoretically he knew light came from God. Light was a source of hope and faith, which supported his profession and his way of life. Searching through the Bible, he was discovering metaphorical and spiritual references to light that seemed to help dissolve small portions of the darkness over his heart, but the verses didn't help him fully escape the apprehension he'd now realized was a part of his life.

As he pored over the writings in Psalms, Gilbert heard the click of a lock followed by the sound of a door opening and a rustle of clothing. Pulling his attention toward the door, he

expected to find his mother, Yet instead, he found Adelia standing with a candle in hand and a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her hair had wrappers tightly woven along the fringe and a long plait in the back.

His mind instantly went back to the day he'd found her frantically searching this exact library in need of answers to a problem plaguing her heart. He understood more about the relationship between Phineas and Adelia in that moment than he ever had before. The reason Phineas had chosen Adelia was because she was similar in many ways to Gilbert.

A passing thought sparked a bit of light in his mind, and he wondered if he needed to find the female version of his twin brother. But what woman was as adventurous as Phineas? Shaking the thought away, he focused on Adelia.

"I thought I heard the rustling of thin Biblical pages. It woke me from a lackluster slumber, and I have tossed and turned for the last few hours unable to clear my mind and resume sleeping."

Gilbert smiled and welcomed her into the library by pointing to the chair opposite his. "I had not taken you for an insomniac."

"You misunderstand me, Gilbert. I could not sleep for worry over you."

"I did not intend to cause concern."

Adelia brushed away his words with the wave of her hand. "Have you found an answer to your query?"

Gilbert looked down at the Bible and pursed his lips. He hadn't found a sufficient answer. But had he told her of what he was searching? "What question?"

"I imagine you are searching for the answer to your overwhelming anxiety."

"Pardon?"

Adelia laughed a little, and then tucked her legs up onto the chair. Gilbert found a blanket and handed it to her. He watched as she situated herself, waiting for an answer. "You

must have forgotten I have experienced long term anxiety. I know what it feels like, and although you will most likely never confide in me, I believe it is the reason you clutch your chest and fight with an overwhelming darkness.”

“You experienced darkness?”

“It prohibited my ability to see what was before me. I honestly believed Phineas did not love me. Yet you were able to assist in removing the fear that caused the darkness. My vision cleared and I was finally able to see everything Phineas had sacrificed for me.”

Gilbert chuckled, a humorless sound he’d become accustomed to. He’d never thought it right to confide in Adelia, but she was right. She knew from her own experience how suffocating the darkness could be, and she also understood the strength it took to defeat it. “It is strange. Up until the moment I was standing dumbfounded before my congregation, every answer I ever needed was fulfilled by the word of God. Now I find myself empty and seeking without receiving the comfort I have come to expect.”

“Have you figured out the reason yet?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“I have never seen a vicar so unsettled after receiving an answer from the Bible. What has you so out of sorts?”

Gilbert considered answering her with a falsehood, but she’d just reminded him of the night she’d placed her confidence in him. Certainly, she would not have said what she did had he not been a vicar. But the trust Adelia had placed in a stranger that night would never be forgotten. It had been the first time he’d met her. That night was the reason she was compelled to find him a wife. If she did not know the desires of his heart, the reason he had such great despair within him, how could she assist?

“I have fallen into the same dark abyss that brought Cain to kill Abel, Esau to sell his birthright to Jacob, and Judah and his brothers to sell their youngest brother Joseph into slavery. There are many more examples in the Bible that I could share,

but I think those are sufficient. I have seen what my brother has, and I want it for myself. I ache to have what Phineas has found.”

“If you are speaking of treasure, you may have all you need. Phineas would not keep it from you.”

Gilbert leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees while supporting his head under his hands. “It is not money I desire.”

Adelia’s eyes went wide and her face heated. “Gilbert, you do not mean to say you have more than brotherly feelings for me?”

Chuckling, Gilbert shook his head. “I admire you greatly. But no, I do not wish you were mine. What I hope is to have a woman as lovely and perfect as you.”

“I am not perfect. You know at least one of my indiscretions quite well. Phineas could divulge more of my shortcomings, although I will punish him if he does.”

Gilbert laughed even more. “I will warn him not to speak a word of your indiscretions.”

Adelia leaned forward and placed a hand on his knee. “We have found dance partners for you every night. Is there not one who could bring you happiness?”

“Yes, but she refused an offer of courtship. There are moments when I believe she has softened toward me, and then she turns cold without notice. I am dreadfully confused over the entire situation.” He hadn’t told anyone in his family about his offer to Miss Davenport, so it surprised him when Adelia’s lips twitched as she held back a satisfied grin.

Resting her head against the back of the chair, Adelia repositioned her shawl, pulling it tighter around her. “Phineas tells me he often does not understand what I want because I give veiled responses. What was her reaction to your offer?”

“She said, no.”

“A simple response of, *no*?”

“That is correct. But I would not have asked for a courtship had I thought her indifferent.”

“You would not have requested a courtship so soon if Briar and I had not insisted. We have pushed too far. I do apologize.” Adelia paused as she considered her next words. He could see she held back as she inhaled with the intent of speaking, and then released the breath without a response. Finally, she spoke. “Perhaps she was overwhelmed with her situation and misunderstood your question.”

Gilbert considered it might be a possibility. She was injured and not at all herself. But had she misheard him at the Penhale’s that evening? Or was she truly so distracted she hadn’t heard a word he’d spoken? “I suppose you could be correct. Is there a way for me to redirect and ask once more, without looking foolish?”

“What is love if it does not cause us to act irrationally?”

“Oh dear. I am not an irrational man.”

“You will know how to react when the time comes. If by chance you do not have such instincts, I will help you win the heart of the woman you love.”

“I will hold you to this promise.” Gilbert might have sounded desperate, but the despair in his heart seemed overwhelming as he thought of losing the light Miss Davenport brought with each interaction. Looking back at the Bible, he considered Adelia’s advice. He hadn’t found anything within the scriptures to resolve his temporal concerns. Perhaps another attempt at happiness wouldn’t hurt. “Thank you, Adelia. You have given me hope. I will find an appropriate time to ask her once more.”

Adelia stood and yawned, which prompted Gilbert to do both as well. She took hold of his arm and pulled him toward the door. “Wonderful! Then let us both find peace with a night of sleep.”

He was uncertain he could calm his mind enough for sleep to take over, but it didn’t matter. A bit of light had again

entered his heart, giving him the hope that all was not lost with Miss Davenport.

As he lay his head against his pillow, Gilbert thought of books he had at the vicarage that could help with his search on light and darkness. Although he didn't want to repurchase them, they were currently out of his reach. When he'd built a list in his head of books to review at Hatchards, he turned on his side and made a list of sermons he could write. He was always looking for new perspectives on religious topics.

As the night wore on, Gilbert's mind replayed conversations with his family, along with moments he wished he could relive and respond to differently, and then finally his thoughts settled on Miss Davenport. Within what seemed like seconds of him thinking about her delicate smile, he was suddenly waking from a night of sleep as his curtains were pulled back and the sun was brightly welcomed into his room.

Gilbert yawned and sat up as Phineas stood over him. "Good, you are alive."

"What do you mean?" Gilbert stretched and closed his eyes as he yawned once more. Speaking while his mouth was wide open, his words came out a bit jumbled, but not so much that he was misunderstood. "Of course I am."

"It is nearly ten in the morning. You have never slept this long." Phineas reached forward and put two fingers on Gilbert's neck as though he were searching for something.

"What are you doing?"

"Seeking confirmation of life." His lips were pulled into a tight smile, an indication that he was teasing while still being completely serious.

Amused, Gilbert pushed his brother away. "When did you become a physician?"

"This very moment." Sitting on the bed, Phineas's concern told Gilbert this was not the moment to poke fun. "Given your health crisis, I am happy to see you had a night of rest. But do send word when you plan to sleep late. You have everyone in

this house in quite a state of unease. Mother has insisted we send for a physician.”

“There is no need. I somehow broke through the thoughts that keep me up at night and had some rare hours of unexpected slumber. I am certain it will not happen again.”

As Phineas left the bedchamber, Gilbert slowly made his way to his wardrobe to find something suitable to wear for the day. He'd never slept so long, not even in his youth. He was more determined in that moment to seek marriage with Miss Davenport than he'd been before, for it was thoughts of her that had settled his mind, providing uninterrupted hours of rest.

Chapter Thirteen

Hatchards Bookshop, located in Piccadilly, was Eliza's new favorite escape. It wasn't that she enjoyed spending her days in a bookshop reading, it was more about the quiet contemplation one could find amongst shelves of books. She also knew Duchess Dorset and Lord Wigtown would never think to search for her in a bookshop.

Since her life had become complicated with an unwanted hobby, she found escaping the rigors of duty by way of reading made everything a bit less complicated. A secret as devastating as hers must never be shared, and she couldn't put herself in situations where the truth might leak out. So she could bury her nose in a book and trust the characters to provide an acceptable diversion.

For this purpose, she chose to leave the library and parlor of her family home to spend her time alone. When she entered the shop, she didn't have a specific book in mind. She planned to search the shelves until something caught her interest. To her dismay, her interest was piqued by the chiming of the bell hanging over the door and the entrance of Mr. Gilbert Fernley.

Knowing her latest theft would be the topic of conversation for everyone who read the *Morning Post*, Eliza turned back to the bookshelves and scooted toward the corner. She hoped Mr. Fernley would seek books on the opposite side of the shop. As she studied the spines of the books directly in front of her, she let out a heavy moan. She was standing in the corner with books focused on topics of Christian Theology.

"Miss Davenport, may I assist you in your search for a book?"

Turning to Mr. Fernley with a feigned look of shock, Eliza put a hand over her heart to increase the validity of her reaction. “Mr. Fernley, what an unexpected surprise.”

“I did stop by your home for a morning visit but was told you had already left. I apologize for not arriving early enough to keep our appointment.”

Eliza’s ears and neck burned as she distinctly remembered setting the appointment with him at Penhale’s party by promising she would be home between the hours of eleven and two. She’d been so distracted by her theft of the ballerina that she’d wanted to leave the party with haste. “I apologize for not staying at home. I craved the brisk morning air.”

She would never admit her morning activities to anyone, especially Gilbert. That very morning, she had met with Duchess Dorset to deliver the ballerina. They’d met early enough for her to return home for morning visits, but the desire for solitude had led her to the bookshop.

The duchess had reminded her of the snuffbox in Lord Townsend’s home and then had set a new task for the musicale. Mrs. Dunlop had a diamond ring that was worth a fortune as it was an heirloom from a third great grandmother. In Eliza’s estimation, that would make the ring over a hundred years old.

“It is no matter. I understand the need for a morning walk and an afternoon of looking through books. Although, you will not want to stay too long, or you will miss tonight’s events.”

“Will you attend the Dunlops’ musicale this evening?” Eliza asked.

“I intend to be there. Rumor has it you are gifted at the violin. Will you play this evening?”

Eliza’s cheeks heated as she remembered her mother had placed her on the list of performers. “Mr. Fernley, I cannot thank you enough for the reminder that I am scheduled to play. I have been terribly distracted of late, and it escaped my mind.”

“I have noticed your inattentiveness.”

“Please do not assume it has anything to do with our friendship. I have been entertained by our time together.”

Mr. Fernley looked down at his hands. The debate happening inside his head made her wonder if she had spoken out of turn. Had he not enjoyed their time together? “Miss Davenport, I realize I have no right to ask this, but I must know if you have an understanding with Lord Wigtown.”

Caught off guard by the direct question and the intensity in Mr. Fernley’s words, Eliza cleared her throat and eased out of the nook she had made her hiding place. “What is the purpose of your inquiry?”

“I have been very open with my intentions and feelings, yet you have not noticed. Tell me if I have any hope of securing your affections.”

“I am not engaged to Lord Wigtown, nor do I ever expect to be so unhappily matched.” Eliza looked down at her hands as she twisted them in front of her. Giving him hope would be cruel, so she had to make herself seem undesirable. “You think too highly of me, sir. I am worthy of neither your compliments nor your affection.”

“Your humility does you justice, although I feel you are too harsh against yourself.”

Eliza wanted to agree with him, but she couldn’t help but admit he was wrong. “If only it were true.”

“Miss Davenport, I do not want to push you toward a connection. All I ask is that you consider me as an option. Allow me to show you who I am. I pray you will like what you discover, but if not, you may refuse me once more.”

Mr. Fernley’s modest response left her mouth dry. She wanted to respond, but found her words were caught by a fit of coughing. She turned her head away and held up a finger to request he wait for a response, but when she looked back, he was gone.

Sliding further into the alcove of books, Eliza held her hand over her mouth as the coughing continued. She was ready to rush out of the building to find a pebble to put in her

mouth with the hope that it would revive her ability to produce saliva when she found Mr. Fernley standing before her with a glass of water. She took three very lady like sips before she was back to normal.

“May I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you continue to pursue me? I have treated you poorly, especially last night. You have any number of women you dance with each evening. What brings you back to me?”

A pink tint colored Mr. Fernley’s cheeks, flowing over the ridge of his nose. She had embarrassed him. Or at least she thought she had, until he leaned forward and whispered. “It is not a conversation for a bookstore filled with people. Allow me to help you find the book you were looking for when I arrived, and I will tell you everything as I escort you to your next destination.”

Eliza turned back to the bookshelves as she considered her options. She put a finger on the spine of one of the books and looked back to Mr. Fernley. “I had not considered any particular book. I thought to browse.”

Mr. Fernley nodded and reached forward. He removed a book and flipped through the pages. “I have this one at home in Yorkshire. Since I cannot retrieve it so easily, I thought to purchase it and add it to Baxter’s library.”

“Do you have a large library at the vicarage?”

“No, but it is sufficient for my needs.”

“Have you anything other than theology in the collection?”

“My elder brother, Archie, is published. I have his book amongst the mix.”

Surprised by his candid response, Eliza blurted out the most unladylike comment that came to her mind. “You are not ashamed to admit your brother has an unsatisfactory profession?” As the words escaped her mouth, her eyes went wide, and she slapped a gloved hand over her mouth. “I did not mean it to sound so harsh.”

Mr. Fernley laughed, his face bright with amusement. "You are right. We should sever all ties with the charlatan."

"Oh, dear! You are teasing me."

"Very much, Miss Davenport." Mr. Fernley's kind demeanor had a way of putting her at ease. "What subjects did you plan to browse?"

Eliza feared she would sound like an addled-headed woman if she didn't mention a book on theology, given she was standing in that section of the shop. "I had hoped to find a book on the topic of original sin."

"Which aspect of original sin?" Mr. Fernley lit up like a candle as he pointed toward a few books. "I have studied the topic in depth and can recommend a good number of books."

"Oh." She should have anticipated this question, but with her mind bogged down with the heaviness of her situation, she lacked a strategy. "I suppose forgiveness would be a good place to start."

"Excellent." He nodded his head and then turned to the books. Running his finger along the spine, he stopped and pulled out two books. The first had a beautiful black leather binding with a gold inlay. The second was a less impressive light brown. "These are both excellent choices."

"Which would you suggest for a novice?"

Holding up the less impressive of the two, Mr. Fernley nodded his head toward it. "This would be an excellent start. The author is well informed on the Church of England and wrote it as a help for those struggling to grasp specific concepts of original sin. I think you will find it suitable."

Accepting the book, Eliza dipped her head and shyly tucked it against her body. "I am in your debt, Mr. Fernley. I would have spent the entire day searching the shelves and possibly would have never found this one."

"I rather enjoy being of service to you. What is your next destination?"

"I hope my home is not too far out of your way."

“Not at all. You do know Grafton House is only three streets away from Davenport House?”

A flutter of excitement went through her chest. She silently chided her insensible foolish heart while Mr. Fernley made his purchase and then waited for her to complete her own.

Chapter Fourteen

The streets were filled with coaches and riders. The cobblestone walkways were a little less crowded, with shoppers nipping in and out of the modistes, local haberdasheries, and other shops Gilbert ignored. His focus was intently upon Miss Davenport and how best to answer the question she'd asked while in the bookshop.

He didn't consider himself particularly talented when it came to wooing a woman, but since he had her full attention, he would not let this opportunity pass by. He would do all in his power to open Miss Davenport's favor toward him.

"Please allow me to carry your package." He didn't wait for her to respond. He simply took it from her delicate hand and watched as she played with the pink ribbon on her bonnet.

Easing into the confession he planned to make, he decided to speak about her new book. He could converse about original sin as well as anyone. "I was unaware of your interest in theology. Do you often study deep topics?"

Miss Davenport blushed, her cheeks taking on a soft hue that accentuated the beauty of her hazel eyes. "This is my first foray into the subject. Please do not imagine me as a bluestocking."

"I would never accuse you of such." Realizing from this comment that she might not want to discuss books, Gilbert decided to take the conversation toward the topic his sisters had last discussed. All women loved fashion. He could attempt to converse upon the subject. Anything to delay in answering

her earlier question. “What did you think of Lady Weldon’s muslin dress at the party last night?”

“It was lovely. I have never seen a frock in that shade of green.”

Remembering the sash Briar had mentioned, Gilbert thought it a wonderful addition to the conversation. “Did you not think the pink sash was a beautiful complement?”

Miss Davenport’s eyebrows disappeared into her hairline as her lips spread into a delighted smile. “You cannot possibly wish to converse on fashion.”

Gilbert laughed. “You have caught me out. I am rambling on about a topic of which I know little.”

“You are generous to consider my likes and dislikes, but pink sashes and the cut of neck lines do not suit you.”

“Are you suggesting I would do better to speak of Beau Brummell’s elaborately tied cravats and understated fashions?”

Eliza giggled. “Something tells me you care nothing for fashion and even a conversation of *M* shaped lapels would sound foreign on your tongue.”

“Am I so obvious?”

“Only because you are usually more refined in your topics of conversations, and I fear you are stalling.”

Gilbert’s hand tightened around the packages he held. Delaying a little longer, his heart sped up as he realized she had she admitted to knowing something about him. “What sorts of topics do I participate in?”

“Topics of importance. Intellectual, historical, theological.”

“Some would say those are uninteresting and border on making an evening dull.”

“I find those topics much livelier than the current conversation amongst the *ton*.”

“You are the only one uninterested in the mystery. Why does it vex you so?” Gilbert had spoken with a light tone, adding in a laugh to show he was jesting, but the reaction from Miss Davenport threw him off balance. He watched as myriad of emotions played across her face. Interpreting all the expressions would take a person far more skilled than he, and instead of continuing with lighthearted banter, he chose to silently observe what was happening before him.

Pressing her hands against her middle, Miss Davenport took her time before she responded. “It is not important. I simply do not find the need to focus on something over which I have no control.”

“I dare say not a one of us has control. But you must not let it frighten you so.”

“I am not frightened of the thief. I simply do not understand what the obsession is when there are so many other topics of discussion.”

They walked in strained silence as Gilbert considered her response. As they entered the park directly across from Davenport House, he tried one more time to engage her in conversation. “I think people have two reasons for focusing on the thefts: fear and curiosity. Fear for their family, their possessions, and wealth. And curiosity for who it is that has held them hostage over simple yet expensive trinkets.”

“I think you are correct, Mr. Fernley. I should not disparage the conversation further.”

Gilbert pointed to a bench under a large shade tree. He had promised to confess the reasons behind his interest. As they sat, he decided it was best to share what he had discovered about himself over the last weeks and how she had helped ease the pang of jealousy.

“Miss Davenport, you have been extremely patient with me this day. I thank you for that.” Gilbert kept his focus on the shrubbery for fear of what he would see in Miss Davenport’s eyes when he made this bold declaration.

“If I had known the unrest my question would have caused, I would have been less intrusive. You may refuse to answer.”

“And yet, I fear it is time I am plain with you. Otherwise, I fear you will continue to avoid me.”

Miss Davenport laughed, which helped ease the tension in his chest. He chanced a glance in her direction, and found she was looking at him with kindness. It was far better than he had hoped. “Mr. Fernley, I should have stated my question with more clarity. I want to know if the only reason you have pursued me with such vigor is due to my friendship with Adelia?”

Relief spread through his body, freeing his chest from the nervous tension holding him hostage. He matched her laugh and shook his head. “She may have introduced us, but my intentions are pure. Miss Davenport, every interaction I have with you leaves me breathless. I spend my days in anticipation of your company. Please, take pity upon me and allow me to show you who I am.”

“If you insist.”

“May I make one more request of you?” Gilbert asked.

Miss Davenport looked ready to reject him, but when her eyes fell upon the carriage approaching Davenport house, she reached out and grabbed his arm. Realizing what she had done, she quickly released, saying, as her face went scarlet, “I apologize for my assumption.”

“Please, do not think of it.”

“Very well. If you will keep me in this garden until that carriage is long out of sight, you may make any request you desire.”

Gilbert turned toward Davenport House. He didn’t know what to expect, but when he saw Lord Wigtown’s carriage, questions popped unwillingly into his head until he was so flustered, he couldn’t remember the request he was ready to make. “You wish to avoid Lord Wigtown? Then why do you dance with him? Why do you not refuse his affections?”

“It is a complicated matter. I truly do not wish to discuss the particulars.”

“Has your father arranged the match?” If Mr. Davenport preferred his daughter to marry a titled gentleman, there was no hope for Gilbert to secure her hand.

Miss Davenport rested her hand on his arm, which calmed his questions and sent a warmth racing through his body. Whatever dredges of darkness persisted within his chest were completely released as she left her hand atop his. “Lord Wigtown is a determined man, and he does not accept refusals.”

“Then we must give him a dose of healthy competition.” Gilbert had finally found the courage to make his request. “To that very end, and for our own happiness, would you consider a courtship?”

Miss Davenport lifted her hand from his arm and took hold of her package gripping the edges as though her life depended upon the contents. “More than anything, I wish I could agree to such an arrangement. But I cannot.”

“Why? What complication have I missed?”

“Trust me when I tell you it is for the good of you and your family that I refuse.” Miss Davenport stood as Lord Wigtown’s carriage rolled away from her house. “I must return home. My mother will wonder where I have gone.”

Gilbert absorbed her refusal as he watched her run across the street, up the three steps of Davenport House, and into the vestibule. As soon as she was off and away, the darkness reared its ugly head, and he again felt the pressure of loneliness.

As he slowly made his way toward Grafton House, Gilbert wondered if it was time to set his heart upon another woman. He reviewed each of the possibilities, but his heart kept pulling his thoughts back to Miss Eliza Davenport. Was it possible he would spend the rest of his life battling the fear of loneliness and jealousy?

By the time he entered the parlor, he was ready to give up on Miss Davenport. He would tell Adelia as much and request she and Briar no longer play at their matchmaking. He'd very nearly said the words out loud when he realized the parlor was filled with his brothers, sisters-in-law, Gigi, and Mrs. Benton with her daughter, Miss Audrey Benton.

Gilbert was certain this moment was serendipitous. Just as he was ready to give up on the woman he admired, he found his brother Fletcher sitting across from the woman who had held out hope for a match since she was fourteen years old. When she'd entered Society at the age of twenty, she'd waited and then waited some more. Year after year, she kept hoping, but Fletcher had little interest in pursuing a match as he thought of her like a younger sister. To her credit, she had never given up. It seemed like as the years passed by, her admiration had only increased.

Could he be as strong as Audrey? Would he have to wait for years? Popping up from her position on the sofa, Audrey crossed the room and took his hands as though she'd been waiting for him.

"Gilbert, it has been far too long since we last saw each other."

Gilbert held back a laugh. He looked upon her with absolute sincerity. "Did we not dance last night?"

Audrey put a hand over her mouth and giggled. "You are correct."

Peering over her shoulder, Gilbert's lips twitched as he noticed Fletcher looking as though he'd eaten a rotten apple. Audrey had never resorted to pitting the brothers against each other, but it was an action Gilbert understood all too well. She had waited long enough for Fletcher to take notice.

Tucking her hand into the crook of his arm, he walked her back to the sofa and sat in the chair next to her. "Will you sing at the musicale this evening?"

"Yes. Mama insisted. She put me on the list and told me which song to prepare."

“Wonderful!” Gilbert nodded to Audrey then looked back to see if Fletcher was still paying attention.

Understanding more fully how Audrey had toiled with rejection for so long, Gilbert decided he would do what he could to assist her in winning Fletcher’s admiration. If that meant dancing with her more often, he would oblige. Audrey was, after all, a skilled dancer, and she never stepped on anyone’s toes.



GILBERT ENJOYED PLAYING THE PIANOFORTE IN THE COMFORT of his own home. But he would never be caught performing at a musicale. He could sing as well as most men who’d taken music lessons as a child, but again, he never went out of his way to perform. His talents were more toward sharing the word of God.

Comfortably situated next to Phineas and Adelia, Gilbert’s leg bounced in anticipation of Miss Davenport’s performance. He’d heard of her accomplishments on the violin and hoped to compliment her afterward when tea was served.

“Nervous?” Phineas leaned toward him and whispered his question.

“Not exactly.” This night would be all about timing. He would attempt to impress Miss Davenport with conversation and somehow convince her to see him as an option for marriage. If he were successful, the night would end with a rush of exhilaration.

Phineas reached forward and placed a heavy hand on Gilbert’s knee. “You are shaking the house.”

Gilbert smirked and was ready to refute the claim until he noticed the couple in front of him were turned around and looking upon him with disdain. “Pardon me.”

Slouching in his chair, he planned to stay out of sight and to keep his leg motionless until the host announced Miss

Davenport's performance. Not wanting to strain to see the woman who held his every thought, he sat upright and straightened his shoulders. As the bow slid across the strings, Gilbert prepared himself for a beautiful performance that would match the others they'd heard that evening.

Miss Davenport started out slowly, hinting toward a familiar tune that made him think of his father. It had been months since he'd last thought of his father. It wasn't that he didn't miss the earl, it was more about his understanding of life and death. His father had lived a good life, so there was no need to concern himself over the state of his father's soul. As Miss Davenport switched to a minor chord, Gilbert was hit with the nostalgia of years past, and his mind replayed the last conversation he'd had with his father before he'd passed away.

Sitting in the drawing room at Dunlop House, Gilbert was transported back to the library at Primrose Hall. His father sat in one of the armchairs near the window, and he sat next to him in the other. With a tea tray set between them, Gilbert nervously picked at the fairy cakes as he waited to hear why his father had summoned him.

"I enjoyed your sermon this morning."

"Thank you, Father. I was not certain if the parable of the talents would resonate with everyone."

"What reservations did you have?"

"So many people are suffering with insecurities, long work hours, and a lack of sustenance. How can I encourage them to find activities outside of their daily tasks without sounding privileged?"

"It is not your job to tell them how to follow the word of God. It is your privilege to share God's word with them and allow them to find their way to Him."

Leaning forward in his chair, Gilbert placed his elbows on his knees. "What if I cannot serve my parishioners in the way I am commanded as a vicar?"

His father patted him on the shoulder, indicating he wanted his son to sit tall with courage. "Losing yourself in the service

of others does not mean you should forget about your needs.”

Gilbert nodded. “I do not know how to be a vicar without your guidance, father. You may never leave me to my own devices.”

To his utmost dismay, a shadow crossed his father’s features. Gilbert had often remembered that moment, and he was certain his father had known his time on earth would not be long. “I will not always be here to give you advice. You must find a good woman who will provide you with help and the confidence to perform your duties as needed. A wife who is skilled at helping her husband know what to do.”

As the final pull of Miss Davenport’s bow sounded out the last chord, Gilbert knew this memory was an indication of his father’s approval. It didn’t matter that his father was long dead and buried. He’d had a manifestation through the memories evoked by Miss Davenport’s performance letting him know that he must do all within his power to win her heart.

Chapter Fifteen

Eliza's cheeks burned as she accepted the applause for her performance. She had played with the excellence of her training. Focusing her attention on the side of the room where she knew Mr. Fernley sat, Eliza was pleased to see a broad smile upon his face. His approval evoked a sense of pride, especially since she knew he admired her. He hadn't declared himself in love, but he had hinted toward such feelings.

Turning back to the hostess for the evening, Eliza's joy over her performance ended abruptly as she noticed Lord Wigtown standing in the doorway. He was there to ensure she went through with the theft of Mrs. Dunlop's diamond ring. The constant reminder that he and the duchess were watching her every move left her frozen until Mrs. Dunlop pulled her toward the side of the room.

"There is no need for such melancholy. Your performance was far above what was expected." Mrs. Dunlop's words were meant to cheer Eliza in the wake of her momentary lapse in emotions, yet they had a much different effect upon her than pleasure. Was Mrs. Dunlop intimating that no one had expected the daughter of a tradesman to play with precision?

Eliza chose to keep her question buried. There was no need to cause a stir as she didn't need more attention pulled in her direction. Placing a hand to her throat, she choked on her reply. "Thank you, Mrs. Dunlop. You are too kind."

Pretending not to notice the earl, Eliza carried her violin to the music room so she could return it to the case. Mrs. Dunlop's erstwhile comment and the excitement of Mr.

Fernley's pride slowly faded from her thoughts as she considered taking another item that didn't belong to her. Her heart raced at the thought. Would anyone notice she had not returned to the audience? Would her parents wonder where she had gone?

Eliza's throat constricted as she left the music room and her violin. The same sick feeling she'd had before every theft returned, so she slipped into the back of the room where the next performer stood ready to sing.

Needing a moment to calm her nerves and plan out her next move, Eliza looked to the hostess. Mrs. Dunlop's gloves were snug against her fingers, indicating she was not wearing a ring. This meant the duchess had likely been correct when she'd claimed the ring was never worn.

According to the duchess, the ring was a prized family heirloom that was rarely shown to anyone unless it was to brag. Mr. and Mrs. Dunlop cherished the ring and considered it their item of greatest worth. There was one significant hurdle to finding the ring. No one, not even the duchess with all her knowledge of the *ton* and inner workings of households, had any idea where the ring was kept.

Eliza searched the room to find Mr. Dunlop. It would do little good to make her way up the stairs and find Mr. Dunlop in the hall. When she spotted him, she realized it was highly unlikely he would leave the musicale before the rest of the guests. Mr. Dunlop was seated in the center of the crowd with his head tilted to the side, his chest rising and falling in peaceful slumber.

One more visual surveillance of the room brought her gaze directly to Lord Wigtown. To her surprise, he still stood next to Mrs. Dunlop with his eyes focused upon her. His scowl told her it was time to sneak away and find the ring.

As she left the rest of the guests and performers behind, chords sounded on the pianoforte, telling her another performance had begun. She quickly started up the grand staircase, stepping gingerly upon each step to prevent noise from traveling down to the occupants in the drawing room.

The unfortunate result had her heart pounding with a force that seemed much louder than her slippers.

Giving way to her fears, Eliza decided the noise of her feet upon the stairs would be ignored due to the volume of the pianoforte. She lifted her dress and ran the rest of the distance to the second floor where she could hide out of view down the hallway. She only hoped none of the servants would have reason to visit the second floor because she hadn't a proper excuse for being away from the other guests.

Slipping through the first door in the hallway, she lit a candle and snooped very little. The immaculately dusted room lacked the warmth of personal touches, and so she decided it had to be a dedicated guest chamber.

Moving onto the next room and then another, Eliza worried she would be missed as she searched diligently for a ring that seemed well hidden. She slipped through the door to the fourth bedchamber, searched diligently in every drawer and closet, but found nothing resembling the ring. She was ready to move to the next room when she heard voices in the hallway.

"I haven't seen anyone, ma'am. All your guests are in the drawing room or the card room."

"Are you certain? Lord Wigtown thought he saw a person running up the stairs." Mrs. Dunlop's voice shook with intrigue as she spoke to her maid. "Would it not be exhilarating to discover the Beau Monde Phantom at my musicale?"

Eliza let go of the doorknob and stood with her back against the wall. Closing her eyes, she groaned as she realized the duchess and Lord Wigtown were turning on her. Was it possible they would betray her? Would this be her last night of freedom? For certainly, a thief descended from her ancestry would suffer the full consequences of the law.

"Mrs. Dunlop, do you keep anything of value in the house?" Lord Wigtown's gruff voice drifted through the slits in the door indicating he was standing directly opposite of her position.

“We have family heirlooms. But they are safe in my dressing room. I cannot imagine a thief would search through a woman’s delicate clothing.”

Eliza would have laughed at Mrs. Dunlop’s mention of underclothing to the earl, if she wasn’t falling apart from nerves and the possibility of being caught. Knowing where to find the ring did nothing to alleviate the imminent danger of her current situation. Holding her breath, she waited, hoping Lord Wigtown would lead Mrs. Dunlop and the maid back to the other guests.

Lord Wigtown chuckled. “I feel silly, Mrs. Dunlop. It is obvious you have nothing to worry over. I must have imagined the movement out of the corner of my eye.”

A door shut, far too close to where Eliza hid for her to feel safe. The noise caused her to jump and bump her hip on a piece of furniture. She slapped a hand over her mouth to keep the scream building within her throat from escaping.

“Harold, you frightened us!” Mrs. Dunlop’s voice rose in pitch as she chided the newcomer. “Well, Lord Wigtown, I do not think you were imagining anything. You must have seen my husband’s valet wandering the halls.”

Lord Wigtown spoke again. “You are correct, madam. I apologize for causing a stir on this beautiful evening.”

“Let us go back to the musicale. Lady Lillian, the daughter of Marquess Hastings, will perform next. She plays the harp most beautifully.” The footfalls of those in the hall moving away did nothing to curb the fear running through Eliza’s body.

Panic pulsed in her stomach, causing her to slide down the wall and huddle against the table she’d hit into moments before. She sat upon the floor long after those in the hallway had left. Her entire body shook from the near miss of getting caught. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she considered everything she could have lost. She didn’t want to play this game any longer. Unfortunately, she knew the duchess would never release her hold.

Pulling herself off the ground, Eliza knew she had to gather her emotions and push them to the back of her mind. Emotions were dangerous in this situation. She couldn't allow anyone to see she was unhinged. Worse yet, she had to complete the theft. If she didn't, the duchess would follow through with her threats. The room spun as she took hold of the doorknob, making her pause. She would complete this last task and then beg her father to leave London.

The season was nearing an end. It would not be unfashionable to leave a bit early. She could spend the summer in Bath at their country estate and then make valid excuses not to return in the autumn. If she must, she would cause herself injury to keep from rejoining Society. A broken arm or leg would keep her from London for at least a year.

As she peeked out of the chamber where she hid, she considered other possibilities to avoid Society that didn't include injury. She only need delay a return long for the Duchess of Dorset and the Earl of Wigtown to move on to some other scheme.

There were always her younger siblings to consider. She could find fault with their governess and insist on seeing to their education. The only problem with this would be putting an innocent woman out of a job. She couldn't do that to the governess.

She thought about visiting her aunts and uncles in Scotland. She could make an excuse to spend a season seeking a Scottish Gentleman. The only problem with this thought was her admiration from Mr. Gilbert Fernley. She cared for him too deeply to seek out another man. Every moment she spent in Mr. Fernley's presence reminded her that there were still good men in the world.

As she entered Mrs. Dunlop's dressing room, she entertained thoughts of what the duchess and earl would do when she didn't return for the next season. Would they convince another person to help them? Knowing what she knew now, it would be impossible to allow them to swindle another innocent into thievery. There had to be a solution that

didn't involve risking another person's life. All she knew was she couldn't go on in this manner.

Mrs. Dunlop's drawer of delicate clothing was neatly folded and placed to cover a layer of jewelry. A shiver of regret flowed down her back as she pushed the clothing aside and held the candle aloft in search of the ring.

It took less time than she'd expected. She lifted the diamond ring from the drawer, lifted her dress, and hid the item in her makeshift pocket. Before leaving to rejoin the party, Eliza smoothed her dress and discovered a few wrinkles. She wasn't excited at the prospect of reappearing in a wrinkled gown, but if her disappearance hadn't yet been noticed, it would not be long before her parents questioned her whereabouts.

The corridor was dark and empty when she left the dressing room. She ran to the staircase, blew out her candle, and placed it on the side table before descending the stairs and carefully rejoining the musicale. To her great relief, she slipped back into the room without notice.

Chapter Sixteen

Gilbert woke from a blissful slumber with a smile on his face. He'd fallen asleep thinking about Miss Davenport and the masterful way she'd played the violin. The conversation they'd shared afterward had been strained, but he wasn't deterred in his decision to make another offer of courtship.

It had been obvious, as they'd chatted over lime punch and raspberry tarts, that Miss Davenport was nervous about something. Gilbert liked to think her reaction was caused by a nervous tension that would soon indicate she was falling for him.

Refreshed and ready for another day of morning visits before a night of dancing, Gilbert nearly waltzed into the breakfast room. Nothing could dissuade him from a cheerful countenance. Not even the frowns upon Baxter's and Phineas's faces. He was determined to keep the happiness he'd found the previous night as a talisman against anything they had to say.

"Another theft was reported last night. The Dunlop's lost a family heirloom." Baxter looked perplexed. "Why did they not have a servant watching the valuables?"

Gilbert silently prepared a plate at the sideboard while his brothers spoke about the theft of a diamond ring. As he sat next to his mother, Gilbert reached for the butter. Spreading it across his bread, he allowed the contentment borne from pure happiness to rest upon his shoulders. Miss Davenport was right—speaking about the Beau Monde Phantom was a bit boring.

“I do not think he is listening to us.” Phineas tossed a crust of bread that managed to hit Gilbert in the nose.

“Pardon me?” Gilbert said as he removed the offending crust that had landed on his plate. He tried to glare at his brother but found he had too much joy to do so. “If you’d prefer not to eat the crust, I am certain Cook can trim a few slices for you.”

“Really, Phineas. You have the worst manners of any of my children.” Gigi’s disappointment met a mischievous smirk.

“I do apologize, Gigi. Although it has never been so difficult to hold Gilbert’s attention.” Phineas pointed to the newspaper and glared at it. “Have you no interest in the Beau Monde Phantom’s newest theft?”

“No. I do not.”

Baxter placed his fork and knife on the table making a point of showing his surprise. “Is it possible you have finally set your cap?”

Phineas shook his head. “I would be the first to know if he’d made such a bold move.”

Adelia scoffed and poked Phineas in the arm. “What makes you think he would confide in you first?”

“We are twins, my dear. If he has requested a woman’s hand in marriage, he would inform me before all others. It would be disloyal to our bond if not.”

Gilbert lifted his hands in front of him to stop further debate. “I have not secured her hand, but I have made my decision.”

“Very well. Which lady will be Mrs. Gilbert Fernley?” Phineas pulled the notebook out of his pocket and removed the sheet he’d ripped out weeks ago. This was the record of his brothers’ wagers. “Let us see who wins bragging rights.”

“I think we all know who it is,” Briar said before he could answer. “He lights up like a candle when she enters the room.”

“Do I?” Gilbert asked.

“Rosy cheeks and everything,” Adelia confirmed.

It would be easy for Gilbert to be embarrassed, but he knew his siblings teased him out of love. Not knowing who had chosen the correct match, Gilbert proudly made his announcement. “Miss Davenport is my choice.”

“I knew it!” Adelia gave a little cheer that made everyone laugh. “When will you make arrangements with her father?”

“I thought it best to ask her first. She has been a bit reluctant in the past. But after last night, I am certain I will be successful.”

Briar placed her elbows on the table and rested her head in her hands. The swoony lovesick expression on her face was followed by a sigh. “You could ask her at the ball tonight. Lord and Lady Halstead would proudly support a couple entering an engagement during their party.”

Gilbert was thankful he didn’t have to respond to his sisters as everyone’s attention was drawn to Baxter as he let out a sigh while reading a letter. Gilbert appreciated the diversion so he could determine the best possible time to approach Miss Davenport once again. It wasn’t that he didn’t wish to ask for Miss Davenport’s hand so quickly, but he did worry another abrupt offer would be received in the same manner as the last. This time he wanted to charm her and show her he could be a loving and generous husband before asking anything of her.

Looking at his brother, he watched as Baxter held out the open missive. “I am afraid you will not be able to offer marriage at Lord and Lady Halstead’s gathering. It has been canceled.”

“What?” Adelia’s scandalized cry sent laughter through the room. “Something horrible must have occurred to cause them to cancel. We should visit this morning.”

“Visit if you must, but they have provided their reasons with the cancellation notice. They fear a visit from an unwanted guest.”

Phineas sighed and sat back in his chair. “The Beau Monde Phantom.”

“Exactly.” Baxter tossed the card on the table and picked up his fork and knife once more. “I will not be surprised to find carriages filled with members of the *ton* lining the roads and headed for their country estates before the night is through.”

Gigi squeezed Gilbert’s hand. “I must agree with Baxter. No one is safe with this thief rifling through their belongings. We should consider leaving town as soon as we can make arrangements.”

Gilbert knew his family was right. This information changed all his plans. He would have to secure Miss Davenport’s hand before her family chose to leave town. Rising from his chair, Gilbert straightened his waistcoat and made his apologies. “I think it best to seek out Miss Davenport this morning.”

“Best of luck!” Phineas said.

Gilbert waved back to his family as he made for the door. As he walked the short distance between Grafton House and Davenport House, he made internal notes on what he would say. There were many logical reasons he and Miss Davenport would make a fair match. First, he enjoyed her company. She had impressed him from the first time they were introduced. She had won his heart with her kindness and her ability to put him at ease. He also loved her bright smile and her ability to converse intelligently.

Second, she was humble. She would fit into the role of a vicar’s wife without reservation. He’d heard of men in his profession finding their match from wealthy, illustrious members of the *ton*, only to discover the role of a vicar’s wife was more about service to others than attending supper parties. Miss Davenport had made it clear she didn’t care for Society.

Third, and most important, no other lady had opened his heart the way Miss Davenport had done, and he knew it was a sign of love. Without her kindness, he would still be wallowing in the depths of loneliness. She had shown him

there was happiness to be had with her by his side. He only hoped she would agree with his reasons for a marriage.

If he had more time, he would attempt to woo her with more dances and rides through Hyde Park, but there was no way of knowing when or if her family would leave London. If her parents were frightened like the rest of the *ton*, it was possible he was already too late.

Taking the three steps up to the door, Gilbert allowed for a moment of reflection. The knocker was still in place, indicating the Davenports had not slipped out of town under the cover of night. Gathering his courage, he took the gold-plated knocker in hand, rapping it against the door three times.

The sound of footsteps upon wood flooring echoed out of the open windows. The turn of the doorknob caused Gilbert's heart to quicken. As the door pulled open, he greeted the butler with his request and his card. "Is Miss Davenport at home for a visit?"

The butler didn't reach forward to take the card, which was the first indication this visit would not go as he had planned. "I am afraid Miss Davenport has gone for a walk. She said to let all visitors know she will not be available today."

"Do you know which direction she went? I could speak with her while she takes the morning air."

"I do apologize, Mr. Fernley, but I have no knowledge of her wanderings. You will have to try to visit on the morrow."

Gilbert stretched forth his hand. "Will you at least give her my card?"

"Certainly, sir."

As the door closed, Gilbert turned back to the street. Not caring to give in so easily, Gilbert chose to search the nearby park with the hope that he would find her sitting by a pond or enjoying the spring flowers. To his disappointment, she was not there.

Chapter Seventeen

As the duchess's carriage rolled to a stop, Eliza held her breath in rigid anticipation of cruelty. Duchess Dorset was never one to show true kindness. As the footman jumped from his perch upon the back of the carriage, she waited for him to open the door.

Seated uncomfortably across from the duchess, Eliza chose to forego greetings. Instead, she waited for the duchess to open their conversation.

“The ring?” Duchess Dorset held her hand out expectantly.

Pulling it from her reticule, Eliza placed it firmly in the duchess's gloved hand. “As you requested.”

Snapping her hand closed, the duchess adopted her tone of condescension. “These meetings are more delightful when you are docile.”

“I am afraid I must inform you that this is the last meeting we will have. With word of another theft and the cancellation of tonight's gathering, my father has decided we will leave London.” Eliza didn't know if she could convince her father to leave and so she was speaking out of turn, but she was certain another assignment would cause further suspicion. It would not be long before she was discovered.

“Do not be silly. No one will leave before the end of the season.”

“My father does not follow the ebb and flow of Society's whims. He does as he wishes.”

“I will find a way to keep him in town. Perhaps my husband can convince him of a profitable venture. We must not allow our blossoming friendship to fall by the wayside.”

Eliza bit her lips together and grasped her reticule tightly in her hand to stop herself from scoffing at the duchess’s reference to their friendship. “Well, if we are finished here, I think it is best I find my way home.”

The duchess knocked on the top of the carriage, bringing it to a stop. “Do remember to stop by Lord Townsend’s home. I would not want to accidentally speak your name as a possibility behind the thefts.”

Before stepping down, Eliza turned to the duchess and angrily retorted. “Please tell Lord Wigtown his ploy to reveal my whereabouts during Mr. and Mrs. Dunlop’s musicale nearly cost you the ring.”

The duchess laughed and tapped Eliza on the nose. “What good is a game that lacks a challenge?”

Choosing not to respond, Eliza stepped out of the carriage and walked away without looking back. It didn’t take her long to reach her next destination. Although she couldn’t replace the ring or the diamond bracelet, she decided it was time to return Eloise Haversham’s black booklet.

A quick knock on the door and a short conversation with the butler preceded her admittance into the morning room. With a quick look to each corner of the room, Eliza confirmed she was alone. It took her less than a second to pull the book out of her reticule. She was ready to tuck it in the drawer of the writing desk when the doorknob squeaked. Shoving the book down the front of her dress, Eliza ran to the sofa and situated herself before Eloise entered the room.

“Eliza, is this not the first time we have met outside of social functions?” Eloise was never one of her friends at school. She spent more time with ladies like the duchess.

“I wanted to wish you joy on your engagement.”

“Thank you.”

“I heard the Wilmington’s estate is quite large. Will you reside in Sussex with your fiancé’s family once you are married? Or do you plan to stay in town?”

“Lord Wilmington has a cottage near the estate set aside for his heir. The Viscount and I will live there until he inherits the title.”

“How lovely.”

Eloise pursed her lips and made a noise that sounded like an agreement. A strained silence filled the room as Eliza didn’t know what to say to keep the conversation flowing. She averted her eyes and stared at the wall as she tangled her hair around her finger.

The booklet stashed in her dress moved, so Eliza tried to adjust it by pressing her chest without making a scene. Holding her arm against her front, she feigned the need to scratch her shoulder while slightly moving the booklet to a more comfortable position. For a moment she thought she was successful, but the corners of the book poked her chest causing Eliza to let out a small squeak.

“Is something wrong?” Eloise asked.

“No. Not a thing.” Eliza thought she could get away with asking for a cup of tea, but it was far too telling that Eloise hadn’t requested a tray. She hadn’t expected to receive an overwhelmingly warm reception, but it would have been nice to receive the small nicety of tea. “A little parched.”

Eloise’s lips pulled tight. Without a word she stood and walked to the bell cord. While her back was turned, Eliza pulled the book out of her dress with so much force she hit her chin with the corner. Stifling her cry of complaint, she made quick work of shoving it into the crease of the sofa cushions until it wasn’t visible.

“On second thought...” Eliza stood and made her way to the door. “...I must be going. I forgot I had a previous engagement.”

Eloise’s hand stilled in the air as she turned back to Eliza. “Do not let me keep you.”

Stepping toward the door, Eliza didn't wait for the butler. She wanted to escape the house before the booklet was discovered. With a curtsy, Eliza pulled the door open. "My best to you and the viscount."



ELIZA ENTERED THE DRAWING ROOM TO FIND HER PARENTS AT their leisure. Her mother had a ball of yarn resting on the sofa beside her as she expertly moved knitting needles while crafting a shawl. Her father sat in his usual spot near the fire with a book. Clearing her throat, she stood next to an armchair so she could clench the cushion if needed.

"The Beau Monde Phantom struck again last night."

Her father stayed behind his book as he answered. "It does not concern us."

Eliza's hand nervously lifted to the nape of her neck as she twirled hair around her fingers. "I have heard the season could end early. With the cancellation of Lord and Lady Halstead's gathering, many people are planning to take refuge in the countryside."

"The men must stay for Parliament. The spring sessions will not close early, even for a thief who is terrorizing the *ton*." Her father could be dreadfully succinct when distracted by a book.

Eliza turned to her mother, hoping to gain sympathy. But her mother's words sent a chill down Eliza's spine. "Lord Wigtown visited this morning. It was dreadfully embarrassing to tell an earl you were out for a walk once more. You should stay home during visiting hours so your suitors may visit. He has called every morning this week, and you have not been here."

"I notice you did not mention Mr. Fernley's visit." Eliza still held the cards both men had left as she'd not stopped by

her bedchamber before seeking out her parents. “He is a much friendlier suitor.”

“Not as wealthy.” Her mother was much like her father when consumed with a project. Instead of giving their full attention, both continued with their tasks. “Your father and I would be proud to have a titled daughter. But if a vicar is what you want, then I would suggest you show Mr. Fernley your delightful personality. Capture his heart before his sisters match him with one of the other ladies they’ve introduced him to this season.”

Eliza chose to ignore her mother’s observations about Mr. Fernley by sharing her thoughts on the earl. “I do not care for Lord Wigtown. He is a crude man.”

Her father tore his attention away from his book as she finished shuddering over Lord Wigtown. “Do not speak about an heir of the peerage so brashly. He will inherit a duchy, which would make you a duchess. If he offers marriage, he is the one I will accept for your hand.”

“I will not marry Lord Wigtown.” Eliza was certain she had never sounded so desperate, but she couldn’t put a stop to the fear that man had caused when he’d forced her to kiss him. She felt dirty just thinking about his embrace and his lips smashed roughly against her. She tried not to think about the life he’d offer as a husband. It would be dismal and filled with hatred. “I cannot abide him.”

Her mother put her knitting needles down and exchanged a look of exasperation with her father. Turning back to Eliza, she chided. “Why did you encourage the earl?”

“I told the earl without any reservation that we will not match. Unfortunately, he is not one to take rejection well.” Turning to her father, she tried to speak calmly but failed as she knew no matter what she said, her father would do as he pleased. “If you accept an offer of marriage from him, I will refuse.” To show her defiance, Eliza separated Lord Wigtown’s stark blue card with gold lettering and intricate designs from Mr. Fernley’s humble white card with a black typeset. She placed Mr. Fernley’s on the top of the sofa

cushion before ripping Lord Wigtown's card into tiny, misshaped squares.

Her father shook his head in disbelief. "I cannot imagine what the earl has done to receive such a disliking from you."

If Eliza dared tell her parents of the evil Lord Wigtown and Duchess Dorset had brought into her life, they might whisk her away from London without a backward glance. But she didn't want to bring further shame upon herself. "A title is not worth the life he has offered. Can we not be thankful for the wealth we have been blessed with and not reach for a title?"

Her mother's shocked features told Eliza she might have gone too far with her moment of outward rebellion. Instead of waiting for them to regain their composure, Eliza took up Mr. Fernley's pristine white card and excused herself. As she stepped into the hall, the flood of emotions she'd held back poured out onto her cheeks. To calm herself, she pressed her back against the wall and closed her eyes.

"I never would have expected Eliza to behave so irrationally. Do you think she is frightened by the Beau Monde Phantom?" Her mother's comment was loud enough for her to hear outside of the drawing room since Eliza had forgotten to close the doors.

"Selfish was the word I had put to it." Her father's statement stung, but Eliza held her position and continued to eavesdrop. "She cannot believe marriage to a vicar would do our family any good in the eyes of the *ton*. She has younger siblings to think about. Perhaps we should leave town so she can remember her duty to the younger sisters who will follow her lead into Society."

Her mother sniffed, and her words were jittery as if she had started crying. "I have spent this season cultivating relationships with the Countess of St Alban and the Countess of Lonsdale in hopes that I was doing my part and training my daughter for a position in Society. Was it all for naught? Will we forever have to contend with our humble beginnings?"

Eliza couldn't listen to her parents as they commiserated over their position in Society any longer. She hurried to her bedchamber and spent the night staring out her window onto the streets of London. It was true they'd been the family who had found fortune in an unlikely way, but it didn't mean they had to turn into the creatures they'd served before they had money. For the first time in her life, Eliza wished she was the scullery maid she'd been born to be instead of a member of the *ton*.

Chapter Eighteen

Gilbert tried to avoid looking at Phineas and Adelia, but it was difficult to keep his mind focused on reading Psalms while Phineas allowed his wife to sketch his portrait. Although Phineas was sitting behind a screen while Adelia traced his outline, the setting seemed much more intimate than Gilbert expected, causing the overwhelming darkness he had come to dread to leak back into his chest and scratch at his emotions. He knew all marriages were not as successful as the ones his elder brothers had made, but he didn't think it too unrealistic to hope for the same eventuality.

He'd been unsuccessful at his attempts to visit Miss Davenport. Unsuccessful at courting the lady. And completely unsuccessful at declaring his intentions to make her his wife. He'd hoped the knowledge of his future happiness would be enough to cure him of the jealousy he experienced each time Phineas's eyes softened while he looked at Adelia. Yet, his lack of success had left him dissatisfied.

To cure his jealousy and the overwhelming darkness, he needed to declare himself. If Miss Davenport refused him once more, he would have to find love with another woman. Love was a much more complicated emotion than a simple toss of a coin. It would require the changing of his heart toward another woman, and none of the women he'd danced with compared to Miss Davenport.

Therefore, Gilbert knew he must stay the course. He needed to help Miss Davenport realize she had feelings of love for him. How to make a woman swoon at the very thought of him, he didn't know. How to help another person make her

heart take a leap of faith toward love, was even more difficult to imagine. But the thought of not securing favor with the woman he considered the only reason he continued to breathe nearly constricted his heart from pounding.

If he was not careful with his thoughts, a grimace would appear on his face, alerting his family to his inner turmoil. They would fuss over him, which was exactly what he wanted to avoid. He fully understood his issues steamed from jealousy, but how to correct the issue, he didn't know. Experiencing a jealous emotion was much different from the bloodless word floating about in a conversation. It was a black hole in the center of his body that threatened to take root and never leave.

When a deep frown creased his face, Gilbert dipped his head and hid behind his Bible. His inner thoughts were not something to be shared with his family. He would need to spend significant time on his knees and in study if he was to overcome this grief upon his heart.

Gilbert adjusted his facial expression to be one of curiosity as he took another look at the verse he'd read moments before. He hadn't been searching for terms of light and dark but had fortuitously come across a verse he'd read many times but had forgotten. It was short, yet impactful for the situation in which he currently found himself. *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*

The words sent a wave of comfort through him as he considered the significance of light and lamps in the foreground of the word of God. He didn't understand the fullness of what he was reading, but a shred of hope chipped away at the dark hole threatening to overtake his emotions. Light, by virtue of its characteristics, would inevitably overcome all darkness within its path. All he needed to do was allow a candle to shine.

While lowering his Bible so he could ponder upon the virtue of light, Gilbert sighed at the enormity of his situation. The sound carried across the room, pulling the attention of everyone to him. Baxter set aside a book he was reading. Briar and Gigi placed their needlework on the sofa between them,

and Adelia stalled in her outlining of Phineas's silhouetted head.

"It is a pity tonight's engagements were all cancelled." Gigi had to know his sigh wasn't caused by boredom, but he appreciated her gentle way of offering an excuse to the rest of the family.

Briar nodded and pointed to a pile of letters on the table. "I fear Baxter was right when he predicted an early exodus from town. We received five more cancellations."

Adelia turned away from the screen and lamp and crossed the room to fully participate in the conversation. Gilbert wasn't surprised to see Phineas following his wife. Once they were nestled comfortably on the sofa, sitting much closer than necessary for the number of vacant chairs in the room, Adelia spoke. "Perhaps we should set out for the country. We could host a house party and invite the Davenports. I think a fortnight should secure an engagement."

Gilbert closed the Bible and leaned forward to place his elbows on his knees. Leaving town seemed the proper solution, but a house party might be an invitation for trouble. "Unless the Beau Monde Phantom is apprehended, I am less inclined to think it wise to invite anyone to Primrose Hall or Snow Manor. We do not know who is involved in the thefts and we could end up dragging the issue with us to Yorkshire."

Baxter shook his head. "The first to leave town will be suspected above all others. We must stay and wait it out."

"I agree." Phineas reached into his jacket and extracted the small notebook that he used to keep notes on Gilbert's marriage prospects. "Until then, we will continue with my bragging rights. Let us all remember that I alone selected Miss Davenport as Gilbert's future wife."

Adelia playfully punched Phineas in the shoulder. "You would not have chosen Miss Davenport if I had not suggested her first. I am the one who gets to brag."

"On the contrary, my dear, gambling is a man's sport. It is terribly unladylike."

Gilbert didn't know how much more of his twin brother's perfect life he could watch. Life never seemed to move forward. He was stuck, in love, and lonely. The tightness in his heart increased, and Gilbert involuntarily moved his hand to press it against his chest. Realizing his mistake, he quickly released his tight hold and dropped his hand to his Bible.

Examining his family, he was thankful to see none of them were aware of his momentary slip. He knew what would happen if they noticed his pain. A physician would be brought in, and he would be told to rest. Rest had helped. But it was the love he held for Miss Davenport that seemed to have the greatest effect.

Taking a quiet, shallow breath, as it was all the air his body could handle, Gilbert pushed through the pain as he listened to his family discussing the Beau Monde Phantom.

"I think we should set a trap for the culprit." Baxter stood and paced the length of the sofa.

Phineas stayed where he sat, holding Adelia's hand, their shoulders touching. It was a picturesque scene perfect for an illustrator or a painter. "What do you have in mind? I do not want to put our women in danger."

Gilbert diverted his eyes back to his Bible. If he didn't control his jealousy, it wouldn't be long before everyone knew the source of his problem. He'd already confided in Adelia, but he didn't want the rest of his family to know.

"You are right. Given Briar's and Adelia's conditions, we would not want to cause distress. Do you think we could convince one of our acquaintances to host a party while we stand at the ready to capture the culprit?"

"Conditions?" Gilbert asked. He had known about Adelia, but was it possible Briar was in a motherly way as well?

Baxter cleared his throat and stood a little taller. "They are increasing."

Jealousy was a strange emotion, one he hadn't been prepared to experience yet found a part of his daily life. The effect it had on his emotions would devour him like a hungry

beast if he didn't find a way to temper the thoughts. Logic dictated that the happiness of others should not make him feel inferior, yet somehow this revelation only increased his desire to move forward with his life and get out of the rut in which he was trapped.

Briar worked a yellow strand of thread through a needle as she flawlessly set the conversation back to where they'd started. "We have many months before there is need for worry over our conditions. Let us set a trap for the Beau Monde Phantom and clear a path for Gilbert to request Miss Davenport's hand in marriage."

"I agree. We must make Gilbert's happiness our focus," Adelia said.

Baxter nodded. As the magistrate in their quiet section of Yorkshire, he was never one to sit back and allow crime to run rampant. If he could resolve the situation, he would do so without further delay. "I will send invitations out tomorrow for a gathering of trusted men. We will set plans in motion for a soirée and the capture of the thief."

Phineas held up a finger to stall the pace of Baxter's decision. "We must pick the men with precision. It would do little good if the Beau Monde Phantom attends our coordination meeting."

Gilbert nodded. "I agree with Phineas. We should make a list and discuss each person before issuing an invitation."



AS THE FOURTH SON OF AN EARL, GILBERT WAS PREPARED TO allow his eldest brother to take the lead in the conversation with the men they'd chosen as trusted confidants. As an added measure of secrecy, they'd secured a private room at Whites to hold the conference. One of Gilbert's self-appointed duties would be to assess the level of tension in the room. The Beau Monde Phantom could very well be one of their intimate friends.

With his glass of port in hand, Gilbert sat at a corner table near the window with his brothers Phineas, Fletcher, and Oliver. They'd chosen to send for Archie the previous night, but since he was at his estate in Scotland, it would take a week of travel for him to arrive. It would have been nice to send for Cornelius, but he was away in the military and wouldn't be able to help with trapping the Beau Monde Phantom.

"A mutual problem exists for all of us. The premature end of the season will cause a great deal of stress for everyone in this room, one way or another." Baxter's opening line was a strong introduction and garnered the attention of everyone in the room. A few men grunted, while others simply nodded. The most distinguished amongst the gathering gave no indication if they agreed or disagreed.

As a vicar, Gilbert's innate ability to discern the intent of people's physical actions had always been used to help those struggling. He'd helped more than one family through difficult times by noticing a change in demeanor. This time, his contribution would be his ability to read body language. He was to sit back and study the temperaments of those they'd invited and discover if anyone seemed nervous or out of sorts.

"Those of us who have a seat in the House of Lords know that the spring session will not end early, no matter the state of the sociable season. Therefore, we will have to send our wives and daughters back to our country estates without our escort."

Baxter's statement was again met with nods of approval and non-committal grunts. But there was an added reaction that caught Gilbert's attention. Lord Wigtown turned to his father, the Duke of Dorset, and let out a low chuckle as he shook his head. Did the earl and duke find the worry pervading the *ton* to be a laughing matter?

"Sending our loved ones home early could result in an imbalance of our traditions. For those of us who must stay, we will lose the comfort of loved ones sent away. There could be fewer marriage proposals, which would result in unhappy mothers. We all know an unhappy wife makes for a miserable summer." Baxter's statement was met with laughter. He paused, which gave Gilbert more time to assess reactions.

Once the room was again silent, Baxter continued. “For some women, it could be ending the season before they have a chance to stay off the shelf. For those men with daughters of a certain age, it will be a great burden to have them end as spinsters. And...” Before Baxter could finish his statement, Lord Wigtown shouted from his position on the side of the room.

“And it will create more rakes from deprived men who might have had the comfort of a marriage bed if not for the shortened season. I dare say you are all a bunch of cowardly ninnies. There is no reason to end the season early. The local law enforcement will discover who the phantom thief is before long.”

With Wigtown behaving so boldly, Gilbert’s need to discern reactions was pointless. Exchanging a meaningful glance with Baxter, Gilbert tried to convey his suspicions about Wigtown.

“Lord Grafton, please continue with your presentation.” Duke Dorset took hold of the glass of spirits in Wigtown’s hand and extracted it while everyone uncomfortably turned toward their neighbors, feigning indifference.

Baxter nodded and continued. “I invited you here today with the hope that we can join forces to discover the identity of the Beau Monde Phantom. If we take shifts guarding the upper rooms of each home with a gathering, we might catch ourselves a thief.”

Duke Dorset stood and held out his glass. “I support your initiative. I will offer my time during each event. Who is willing to host a party?”

Lord Sefton stepped forward. “Lady Sefton has been inconsolable since we canceled our ball. I will volunteer my house to catch the thief, Thursday next.” As a side note, he held his glass up and tipped it toward Baxter. “Lord Grafton, if this works and my wife doesn’t shed another tear while lamenting over her ruined hopes and dreams for our daughter’s marriage prospects, then I will consider you a miracle worker.”

Chapter Nineteen

Eliza could have cried and stomped her foot a thousand times in a tantrum, but her father would not yield.

Leaving town early was not an option. So instead of making a nuisance of herself, she accepted her lot in life. The season would proceed.

Since she had nothing better to do with her time, Eliza joined her mother for an afternoon at the modiste where they ordered new dresses. After hours of measuring and searching for the perfect fabrics, their outing ended at Fortnum and Mason. She hated to admit a weakness for sweets, but the confectionary shop brought out her desire for honey-dipped nuts and fruit along with licorice and lemon drops.

Leaning over the counter to select her favorite treats, Eliza froze at a familiar voice. A thousand thoughts went through her mind, all of which ended with the realization that as she was leaning over, her bottom was sticking out in a most unladylike manner. Since the greeting had been made to her mother, she attempted to straighten a little so her backside was modestly hidden by yards of fabric. She kept her nose firmly focused on the confections, hoping Mr. Gilbert Fernley would not notice she was standing with a handful of sugary sweets. To her dismay, since she'd vehemently refused to consider Lord Wigtown as a match, her mother would not let the only other possible suitor leave without taking notice.

“Mr. Fernley, you must not leave without greeting my daughter.”

Eliza fully straightened and dropped the bag of lemon drops on the counter before turning to face her mother and the

tall, handsome man behind her. Over the past week, he'd visited Davenport House multiple times, but she'd either not been home or had chosen to avoid visits while trying to convince her father to leave town. Dipping into a hurried and unbalanced curtsy, Eliza blushed as Mr. Fernley reached forward and placed a steadying hand upon her arm.

"You are unwell?" Mr. Fernley asked.

"No." The one word was all she could say. The touch of his hand sent a shiver of excitement coursing through her arm, and she found herself momentarily speechless. Never had the touch of a man unsettled her with such force.

"I am happy to hear this. Will you attend Lord and Lady Sefton's party this evening?"

Her voice was strained as she tried to ignore the growing pleasure his presence caused. Perhaps if she hadn't refused his morning visits, she wouldn't currently find herself unsettled by his charms. "We have secured an invitation."

"Then I must insist you save the first two dances for me."

The proper response would be to accept and exclaim her delight, but Eliza had a difficult time accepting anything to do with Mr. Fernley. She admired him, greatly. The little time they'd spent together had shown his fine qualities and generous nature. He was everything she wanted in a future companion, but she was not worthy of his love. Nor was she worthy of him. If Mr. Fernley knew of the thefts—not to mention the afternoon she'd spent with Lord Wigtown—he would not request anything of her.

Before Eliza could offer a plausible excuse for refusing his kind offer, her mother interceded. "How very kind of you. Eliza would be delighted."

As her mother turned away from their conversation to focus on one of her acquaintances who had entered the candy shop, Eliza tried to back out of the promise. "I cannot say if I will be dancing this evening. With the cancelation of so many gatherings, I feel as though I am out of practice."

Mr. Fernley laughed, his pleasure at securing her hand for two dances showing with the twinkle of delight in his stark blue eyes. “Do not fret over your skill, Miss Davenport. I will ensure a flawless two dances for us both.”

“How do you plan to keep such a promise?”

“I will capture your attention so completely you will have no other option but to dazzle me with your accomplishments as a dancer.”

Eliza dipped her head and bit her lips as heat rose in her cheeks. “You do know how to flatter a lady.”

Mr. Fernley shook his head. “My brothers would accuse me of making a cake out of myself. Tell me you will not let my attempts at engaging your affections go to waste.”

Wanting to let go of her reservations, Eliza tried to nod her acceptance, but she couldn’t forget the last month as easily as she had hoped. She was a thief, a liar, and an opportunist. All three of those qualities made her woefully unworthy of Mr. Fernley’s attention.

When she didn’t immediately respond, Mr. Fernley lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. She quickly scanned the shop hoping no one had noticed, but she found her mother and two other women smiling their encouragement. Yet, when Mr. Fernley straightened and peered into her eyes, she stayed silent as her stomach wildly danced to a nonexistent tune. She could not encourage the man. She could not indulge her girlish hopes. She had to put an end to the notion of a courtship or marriage to this good man.

Not expecting a reply, Mr. Fernley again spoke. “Since you are obviously overcome with my request, I will bid you farewell until this evening.”

Her voice caught in her throat and a croak of agreement spluttered out. “Ver...ver...very well.”

She watched as Mr. Fernley exited the confectionary shop and rejoined his brother, Mr. Phineas Fernley. She held back a laugh and placed the hand Gilbert had kissed over her mouth

as she watched the interaction. She was certain Phineas was teasing Gilbert.

She knew it was wrong to think of them with their Christian names, but it was simpler than thinking of them both as Mr. Fernley. Her smile widened as Phineas gently knocked Gilbert's hat off his head. She wondered what it would have been like to have a sister her exact age, or at least close in age. Her sibling just younger than her was a brother, and he was still at Cambridge.

She was caught up in her thoughts as she watched Gilbert cross the street to visit a different shop. With this last interaction, he had seemingly stolen her heart with his gentle kindness and warmth.

Fully unaware of the lovesick display she was making, Eliza startled as her mother took hold of her arm. "Mr. Fernley seems smitten with you."

Eliza pulled her eyes away from the windows before answering. She hoped to regain her composure before responding but found herself wholly incapable. "Oh?"

"I hope he requests your hand before Lord Wigtown takes the initiative. A lady would be irresponsible to reject a chance at marriage so she could wait for another man who might never offer."

Fully regaining her senses, Eliza frowned. Whispering so she could not be overheard, Eliza chided her mother. "I already told you I have not encouraged Lord Wigtown. We are not courting so I do not imagine he will ask for my hand."

"No matter what he says, your father would be disappointed to lose out on having a titled daughter. Lord Wigtown will inherit the title of duke."

It seemed a bit high handed of her mother to say such things. She'd been a lady's maid merely seventeen years ago. Had so much time passed and so much wealth been accumulated to make her parents forget their humble beginnings?

"Do you disapprove of Mr. Fernley?"

“You fight against your feelings when he is near. Therefore, I must believe you are the one who does not desire the match. I simply want your happiness.”

Eliza cared very deeply for Mr. Gilbert Fernley, which was the reason she could not allow her emotions to show. “I wish you had not insisted I accept the first two dances with Mr. Fernley”

“Men are jealous creatures. They take notice of women who have drawn the attention of other suitors. If Lord Wigtown and Mr. Fernley are not the matches you desire, I pray another man takes notice of you and tries to steal you away from them.”

“Unfortunately, Mama, I will spend most of the evening against the wall wondering if a match is part of my future.”

Her mother tutted and tapped her arm with her fingers. “When did you become so guarded? I hardly recognize you anymore.”

She knew her mother wasn’t speaking out of malice. Eliza had changed, drastically. She only hoped no one else would notice. “I cannot say. Perhaps I am no longer fascinated by Society.”

Eliza picked up the bag of lemon drops she’d discarded earlier and led the way to the proprietor. As she waited for her mother to purchase the candies, she planned the dress she would wear that evening. She had always looked best in white.

Chapter Twenty

“I think we should secure one dance with Miss Killian and one with Miss Kenward this evening.” Briar spoke to Adelia without consulting Gilbert.

He’d expected this exact conversation to occur, as it had been the tradition each evening as they traveled to parties, soirées, balls, and other sociable events. “I would prefer to spend my evening with Miss Davenport.”

Briar continued. “Even though you have set your cap for Miss Davenport, we cannot ignore the fact that she has avoided your visits over this past week. If I were in love with a man, I would not send him away.”

Baxter grunted. “If you were in love?”

Briar playfully took his arm and kissed his jaw. “You know my heart beats only for you.”

“I agree. We must ascertain if Eliza will accept your offer. If not, then we must show a preference to one of the other women,” Adelia said.

“I think Miss Killian is a viable option for you.” Baxter said.

The surprise comment from Baxter caused Phineas to perk up and join in as well. “You want him to match with Miss Killian so you can claim victory. I will not have it. I chose Miss Davenport from the beginning, and she is the one our brother has placed his hopes upon.”

Ignoring their banter, Adelia held a notebook and graphite pen in her hand as she scrolled through the list of names. “We

cannot slight Lady Dorcas.”

Briar sighed. “You are right. I do not know how we will fit all the women into this evening. Let us hope a few of them are engaged elsewhere.”

“No need to concern yourselves with the first two dances.” Gilbert smiled as both Adelia and Briar eyed him with curiosity. “I have already secured Miss Davenport for both.”

“You have? When did this occur?” Adelia’s questions told him he’d not only made her happy, but he’d also exceeded her expectations.

“I spotted her at Fortnum and Mason’s this afternoon and had a short conversation with her.”

Gasps of delight and excited chatter from his two sisters followed his pronouncement. Turning to Phineas and Baxter, Gilbert expected them to have the same confused expression he knew was on his face, but instead he found his brothers were proudly nodding in his direction.

Would their pride extend to graciousness once they knew what he planned for the evening? Knowing he couldn’t allow his sisters-in-law to secure dances for him, he slowly came to the decision to reveal his plans. He might end the evening with a reputation as a flirt, but he had decided this was the only way to secure Miss Davenport’s hand in marriage.



EVERY ROOM AT SEFTON HALL WAS OVERCROWDED AND HOT, but Gilbert was not dissuaded. He had secured the first two dances of the evening with Miss Davenport, and he planned to find her before the first was announced. If he was lucky, he’d have a few moments to converse with her before lining up in the queue.

Squeezing past throngs of guests, Gilbert did his best not to touch anyone for fear of giving insult. He held his breath and sucked in his already thin frame as he narrowly avoided

being stepped on by a lady with dark blue peacock feathers delicately arranged in her coiffure. "Pardon me, ma'am."

With a dip of her head and a bright red blush on her face, the woman quickly stepped out of his way and rejoined the group from which she'd momentarily stepped away. Locating Miss Davenport seemed nearly impossible until he squeezed past another group and found her standing next to her parents.

Miss Davenport was a sight of perfection from the sparkle in her hair, the blush upon her cheeks, down to the beauty of her gown. He'd never seen a woman so perfectly situated in such a crowded atmosphere. Ignoring the laughter of a large group behind him, Gilbert stepped forward and dipped his head.

"Miss Davenport." He didn't address her parents as they were animatedly engaged in a conversation with a large group. He was thankful to find Miss Davenport standing two steps away from the throng. "You are lovely this evening."

"You are too kind, Mr. Fernley."

"I could use a drink before the first dance starts. Will you join me?"

As she accepted his arm, Gilbert led Miss Davenport toward the refreshment table. Nervously he considered the many rehearsed conversations approved by Society, but he wanted to speak of more than the state of the roads.

With a glass of raspberry cordial for each of them, Gilbert led Miss Davenport toward a corner. He took a sip and considered starting out with mundane conversation to get her speaking. But to his surprise, Miss Davenport spoke first.

With a playful twinkle in her eyes, Miss Davenport asked the last question he'd expected. "Have you found the leisure time you expected upon your arrival in London?"

Laughing at her cheeky question, Gilbert shook his head. "Not even close to what I wanted. I must admit, my expectations were rather low."

"London is the place to go if you are in want of excitement and late nights. Do you wish you had stayed in Yorkshire?"

Days before, Gilbert would have answered in the affirmative. But now that he'd spent a small amount of time in Miss Davenport's presence, he was thankful his family had pushed him to accompany them to London. "Not at all. Although I do believe Baxter would prefer to have a quieter houseguest."

"You are unusually loud?"

"Only when I pace the hallways at night."

Miss Davenport took a sip from her glass as her eyebrows rose in surprise. "You struggle to sleep?"

"For many years now. My thoughts will not settle, and I am unfortunately plagued by everything I did not accomplish that day."

"How awful."

Gilbert was ready to admit it wasn't horrible having extra hours added to his day, but the compassion on Miss Davenport's face convinced him to accept her sympathies. "It is rather trying."

"You must be constantly exhausted."

"I do my best not to show weakness." Gilbert made a cake out of himself as he peered around the room. His actions pulled a laugh from Miss Davenport. "A single man of limited means cannot allow Society's matriarchs to see anything is amiss. With another mark against me, I would be ousted from every party and barred from pursuing women with a generous dowry."

"Another mark? What is your first unpardonable attribute?"

"I shall never admit it." Gilbert took her empty glass and placed it on a side table. Extending his arm, he led Miss Davenport out of the crush and heat of the party to the veranda.

"Whyever not?" Her frown was marred by the twinkling of humor in her eyes and the twitching of her lips.

“It is a widely accepted truth that if a lady does not see your faults, there is little reason to point them out to her.”

Miss Davenport’s laughter rang across the veranda out to a small garden maze. It seemed they were the only two to take advantage of the outdoor space so early in the evening. Gilbert didn’t mind. Leading her to the edge, he rested against the cool marble as he steadied his stance with his hands on the railing.

“How preposterous! I will discover your secret before too long. Do you not think it a better choice to tell me this very instant?”

With an attempt at ridiculousness, which seemed appropriate for the moment, Gilbert tilted his head and gave his best seductive gaze. He kept it vicariously and pure, his intentions always above reproach. “If you do not already know my failing in the eyes of Society, then you may never discover it.”

Miss Davenport placed her hand on his shoulder. The closeness sent a shiver of excitement down his arm. In the distance violins, cellos, and other instruments sparked to life, reminding him that he’d secured the first two dances with the lady standing before him. Taking the opportunity to secure Miss Davenport’s attention for as long as possible, Gilbert chose to defy decorum as he led her down the stairs and out into the garden. He’d pondered upon this moment for the last few hours knowing this might be the one chance he had to win her heart. Without a destination in mind, Gilbert silently walked next to Miss Davenport. Rocks and gravel scratched against their shoes, making it the only sound to disturb the night air. The comfort of walking next to a lady without speaking did not go unnoticed. In fact, Gilbert was so fascinated by their closeness that he put all other concerns from his mind and allowed his motive of securing happiness for both of them to be his only objective for the evening.

Chapter Twenty-One

Eliza blushed as she followed Mr. Fernley into the garden. She knew it was unwise to follow a man into the shrubbery, but she wanted nothing more than an evening of comfortable conversation and laughter. Certain Mr. Fernley could provide both without injuring her reputation, she placed her trust in him.

Guilt for her erstwhile thefts assaulted her mind as she stepped lightly down the marble stairs. The garden was well lit for an evening of lighthearted conversations and marriage proposals. She didn't plan to receive the latter, at least not with Mr. Fernley. His station was far above her. Not only because his late father had been an earl, but she considered him above her in every aspect of goodness. She would indulge her heart and then refuse any future offers of dancing, courtship, and marriage that might result from the evening.

With her hands tightly grasped in front of her, she tried not to smile too broadly. It was best to keep a bit of intrigue between them, even if her stomach was fluttering like a kaleidoscope of butterflies had taken flight. "Mr. Fernley, do you plan to stay in London long? I heard there was talk of everyone leaving early."

"I think we have discovered a way to catch the Beau Monde Phantom, so there is no reason for anyone to leave before the season concludes."

"Oh?" Her heart nearly stopped when he mentioned the thief.

Mr. Fernley partially turned toward her and quickly nodded his head, catching her attention and pulling her thoughts back to him. “I promised you I would never bore you with conversation about the Phantom again. So, I will stop right there.”

“I wish you luck in your endeavor.” If she hadn’t wished him well, it might cause him to become suspicious. If she encouraged him to speak of the thefts after she’d made such a bold statement before, he would certainly find it suspicious, so she made a mental note to inform the duchess when next she saw her.

“Hopefully the phantom will be brought to justice this very evening.”

“I trust you will see to it.”

“I have a different initiative this night. I will leave the thief to others.”

Eliza smiled and stopped walking. “You are right. I have heard much talk of the matchmaking ploy Adelia and Lady Grafton have concocted. It has gained notice.”

“I had not realized there was so much gossip focused on my search for a wife. Very well, what are they saying?”

Eliza was a little confused by Gilbert’s flirtatious conversation, but she enjoyed it quite a lot. Unable to hide a grin, she realized there was something grand about this evening, and she wanted to cherish each moment. “There are far too many matriarchs who believe your sisters have the right idea. In fact, the chatter at every ball or party I’ve recently attended has had more than one conversation focused on how your sisters successfully convinced you to allow their matchmaking. Desperate mothers with daughters of marriageable age and especially those who are nearly on the shelf believe if more men would place their futures in the hands of capable women, we would not have to hold illustrious balls and garden parties to marry off the young. Instead, we could hold parties based solely upon renewing friendships.”

“A lovely thought. Although, most men do not want their faults discussed by well-intentioned matchmakers. Some believe it is best to hide their true natures until after the vows are made.”

“Are you admitting to feeling this way? Is your unpardonable fault hidden and waiting to be announced once you have made your vows?” Eliza hoped to wiggle the information out of Mr. Fernley. It was not fair for a man to admit to having a fault and then to purposefully hide it from a lady.

Mr. Fernley laughed, and then furrowed his brow conspiratorially. “Are you hinting for me to divulge my secrets?”

Biting her bottom lip, Eliza nodded her head and demurred. Looking away from him, she noticed a private section of shrubbery that would conceal them from prying eyes. She wanted this time with Mr. Fernley to never end, and so she took hold of his arm and pulled him farther down the path. “You, sir, are teasing me.”

“It is not as exciting as you might believe.”

“Then tell me and release me from my curiosity.”

“When I say the words, you will wonder how you hadn’t already figured it out.”

Eliza squealed and tugged on his arm once more. “You are stalling.”

“Very well.” Mr. Fernley pulled her to a stop standing directly in front of her. A blush crept into her cheeks as she peered into his earnest expression. As his lips parted, she waited for the secret to spill from his mouth. When he spoke, it was barely above a whisper. “I am the fourth son of seven and have nothing to recommend me to a beautiful lady.”

Shyly, Eliza stepped closer to him. “I disagree. You have kindness, which is a rare quality amongst our peers.”

“Kindness can only take a man so far. There are other qualities which recommend a man.”

“Such as?”

“Financial security for a wife and future children.”

“Do not men rely upon a dowry?”

“Not all women are blessed to have a generous sum.”

Eliza boldly reached forward and pulled at the lapels on his coat. When he looked down at her hands, she instantly released her hold. She turned her back to him and nervously continued speaking. “You have a profession that should provide.”

“True. But my regular life is not filled with balls and parties every night. I spend most of my time serving people and in deep reflection as I prepare sermons. It could cause a lady who appreciates London to become bored. Eventually, she would want to escape back to the halls of Almack’s and more fashionable Society.”

Turning back to him, she needed him to know she was not the sort of woman who would abandon a husband and their life together for such simple luxuries as parties. She didn’t even enjoy the season. “Not every lady prefers such a life. I, for one, dislike London. I prefer to live in the country. Even Bath is too chaotic for me.”

She knew it wasn’t wise to encourage him, but the cool spring night and the music in the background unsettled her convictions to make this a final farewell. As she slowly met his piercing gaze, she lost her ability to think rationally. Was it the flirtatious way he spoke to her that evening that had dulled her reasoning and allowed her to completely lose her heart to him as they stood in the gardens of Sefton House?

“Miss Davenport, we should...”

Eliza stepped a little closer, causing Mr. Fernley to pause. She already knew he wanted to take her back to the ballroom, but she wanted to distract him from the pursuit. As a proper gentleman, he would stand up with her for two dances and then find other women to dance with. But she had already decided this was her one night to let go of her guilt and

indulge in the warmth of the man who could have made her dreams a reality.

As he inhaled to finish his statement, Eliza again stepped closer, this time closing the distance between them so that even a thin book could not pass between their faces. Kissing was a different experience when she wasn't held hostage by the grip of a rake. Mr. Fernley responded to her nearness by lifting her chin and gently brushing his lips across hers. Eliza's heart fluttered as the warmth of his breath rested on her satisfied lips.

"Eliza, you are the most handsome woman of my acquaintance." He didn't allow her to respond as he gently pressed his lips to hers once more. She wanted him to know she appreciated his compliment, and so she sighed with longing and increased her grip on his lapels as she pulled closer.

Kissing was not the indulgence she'd expected for her evening in the shrubbery, but it was far lovelier than anything she'd ever experienced. Mr. Fernley tasted like raspberries and he smelt of peppermint. She'd never drink another raspberry cordial or use peppermint oil without remembering the moment she'd finally understood that love was not merely an emotion. Love could only be defined with the knowledge that she was with a person who wanted to care for her. Someone who had her best interests at heart. Someone who would accept her no matter what she'd done.

Holding onto the lapels of Mr. Fernley's suit coat, Eliza's thoughts froze. Would Mr. Fernley love her if he knew she was the infamous thief terrorizing the *ton*? Would he forgive her?

Pulling back from his embrace, Eliza licked her lips and took a shaky step away. She couldn't allow him to pull her back. Nor did she trust herself to think she wouldn't indulge once more. "Mr. Fernley." She was out of breath as she tried to think of an apology. What excuse could she give for her behavior? "I am quite overwhelmed with the beauty of the evening."

Mr. Fernley's face was bright red. She thought it a charming reaction. It was far more pleasurable than the lust she'd seen when Lord Wigtown had assaulted her lips.

Winded, and backing away from her, Mr. Fernley checked the surrounding area for intruders. "Forgive me, Miss Davenport. I will return you to your parents."

"Before we leave our seclusion..." Eliza left her words hanging between them, deciding her actions would suffice for what she would have said. Stepping forward she took hold of his lapels to smooth them out. Rumpled clothing along with newly kissed lips would alert everyone at the gathering to what had occurred in the shrubbery.

As she placed her hand on his chest to finish the job, Eliza glanced up to see the longing in Mr. Fernley's eyes. He had enjoyed the tenderness between them, and his expression pulled her toward him once more. This time the kiss was more than a slight brush of their lips.

Eliza enjoyed kissing Mr. Fernley much more than she'd thought possible.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Eliza knew she was tempting fate by doing the duchess's bidding, but what other choice did she have? She made excuses about needing the privacy of the resting room to escape Adelia and Lady Grafton upon reentering the ballroom. They would want to know everything that had occurred in the garden, but those stolen moments were for her and Mr. Fernley to remember.

The warmth of his kiss still tingled upon her lips as she followed the duchess's detailed instructions and slipped up the back staircase that was used by the servants. She would have to be quick if she wanted to retrieve the sapphire stick pin from Lady Sefton's dressing room. It wouldn't be long before Adelia or Lady Grafton went to the resting room in search of her.

A shiver ran down her back, and the hair on her arms stood on end as she entered the darkened hallway. No one was nearby, yet her senses were telling her to go back down the stairs and forget about the stick pin. Due to the trembling in her hands, Eliza decided it was best to forgo lighting a candle.

Under the cover of darkness, Eliza stepped on the tips of her toes down the long hallway, counting each door until she found the seventh on the right. As a silent warning went off in her head, she checked the hallway behind her to make certain no one had followed out the servant's door. She couldn't see much of anything in the distance since she didn't have a candle. Listening for any noise, Eliza convinced herself she was completely alone.

During the other thefts she'd had second thoughts, but this time was different. Her entire body was telling her to turn around and leave the stick pin alone. Pushing past the sickness building in her stomach, Eliza knew she would face consequences if she didn't retrieve the trinket. The duchess was already angry over the snuffbox.

Convincing herself to stay the course, Eliza reached forward and turned the doorknob. Now that she had made the decision to follow through, she pushed her fears to the back of her mind and decided the theft was best done in a rush.

The duchess claimed the pin was located on Lady Sefton's side table in a silver jewelry box. Since it was made from silver, the casing was much heavier than Eliza expected, but not so heavy she couldn't remove it and use the light of the moon to shed light upon her search. Eliza quickly searched through a pile of necklaces, bracelets, and earbobs before locating the thin sapphire stick pin. Lifting her skirt, she pinned it inside her hidden pocket. She was placing the box on the table once more when a man reached out and took hold of her arm.

"May I assume you are the Beau Monde Phantom?"

Startled, Eliza yelped like a little puppy and then clamped her mouth shut so no one would hear her distress. In her haste to pull away, she slammed the silver box at the man's head with enough force that he stumbled backward. As he fell to the ground, Eliza was pulled with him, but she easily scrambled away as his hand released her arm.

"No!" Eliza gulped as she waited for the man to grab hold of her once more. When he stayed motionless on the floor, she crawled toward him to assess the damage.

He had fallen close enough to the window that the moon shone down upon his face revealing his identity. Eliza clasped a hand over her mouth as she cried out once more. This time it wasn't a shriek of alarm for being caught. This time it was a strained cry of love. "Gilbert!"

Reaching out to touch his face where she'd hit him, her fingers slipped as they met with a sticky liquid. She muffled

another scream with her upper arm as she pulled her hand away and found her glove was wet with blood.

“Fernley, are you in here?” Another man’s voice rang out from the room Mr. Fernley had been in before entering Lady Sefton’s bedchamber.

Panicking, Eliza removed both her gloves and stuffed them down the front of her dress. She didn’t have time for an apology, but she wasn’t thinking clearly. “I am so sorry. I never meant for this to happen.”

She had to believe he would recover, otherwise she would never have been able to leave him lying on the floor. As the other man’s footfalls neared the open door between the two rooms, Eliza ran for the door she’d previously entered. She didn’t stop to check her surroundings before exiting into the hall. Nor did she check for servants upon the stairs as she barreled back down the way she’d entered, twisting her ankle as she went.

Tears sprang to her eyes as she took the door out to the grounds, instead of the door that would lead her into the hall. She limped until she found a place to sit and bury her head in her hands. Her shoulders shook as the sobs released and her thoughts went back to Mr. Fernley’s motionless body lying on the floor. In her haste to escape, she’d forgotten to check if he was still breathing.

Eliza knew she must stop shrieking into her skirts before she was caught and questioned. She forced herself to think rationally, to calm her nerves. When she was finally breathing normal and no longer gasping for air, she heard the commotion and realized no one had noticed her.

Women were calling out for their daughters and sons. Running footfalls from all corners of the gardens sounded around her as everyone ran to find out what had happened. Eliza seemed to be the only person not racing toward the veranda. A wave of nausea went through her body as she realized her lack of response to the situation would make her a suspect. She already knew what had happened, but no one knew she was the one who had caused the ruckus.

Forcing her body up from the ground, Eliza followed the others by running back toward the house. She winced each time her injured ankle took her weight. But she had to push forward and join the turmoil. She didn't need to worry about the tears on her face as several women were red faced and hysterically swooning. Men were calling out for the Beau Monde Phantom to be brought to justice while servants were supplying smelling salts to those who had lost consciousness and those who were threatening to faint.

Eliza searched the room for her parents, but she couldn't see them from her position near the back of the room. Falling against the wall, Eliza wiped her tears away as a hand gripped her upper arm and pulled her into an embrace. Wrapped in her mother's arms, Eliza acted as though she hadn't any idea what had happened. "Mama, what is the trouble?"

"The Beau Monde Phantom has struck again."

Eliza whimpered. Did anyone know about Mr. Fernley and if he still lived? "What?"

"There is no need to worry. Your father will send for us as soon as our carriage is at the door."

"How does everyone know it is the Phantom?"

"I cannot say the terrible words. Do not ask me to tell you what has happened. That poor man."

"Oh, no!" Eliza couldn't help the tears or the sobs as she thought of Mr. Fernley still lying on the floor.

"Dearest, there is no reason to worry yourself."

It took all Eliza's self-control not to break down and sob as she waited for the carriage. She searched the hall for Adelia or any of Mr. Fernley's family, but none of them were standing about uselessly waiting in the hall like she and her mother were doing with the rest of the guests.

When their carriage arrived at the door, Eliza followed her mother out, her heart breaking at the thought of Mr. Fernley lying dead on the floor of Lady Sefton's bedchamber. She needed answers but didn't know how to ask the right questions and so she waited.

“The thief will hang for this crime.” Her father’s statement shattered the silence much sooner than she’d expected.

“Abner, this is not an appropriate topic of conversation.” Her mother’s admonition did nothing to quell Eliza’s need for the facts.

Pressing her father to speak, she inquired feigning as little knowledge on the topic as possible. “The gallows? What did the thief do that was so different from the last crimes?”

Her father didn’t hold back. Instead, he slammed in hand against his leg as he vented. “Lud! He nearly killed a man. Probably would have finished the job if Lord Sefton had not interrupted the fiend.”

“Someone was injured?”

“Mr. Fernley. The one who has paid special attention to you, Eliza. Poor man nearly lost his life this night. I dare say he will not be dancing for quite some time. If we are lucky, when he finally wakes, he can tell us who the Phantom is, and we can put this trouble to rest.”

“When he wakes? How badly is he injured?”

Her father pointed to the area Eliza knew had sustained the damage from the silver jewelry box causing her mother to clear her throat. The only time her mother made such ghastly sounds was when she was warning her husband not to give details. “A spot of trouble on his head. I am confident the surgeon will patch him up and send him back to Grafton House this evening.”

Her mother tried to soften the information with a cherry response. “We must visit Grafton House in the morning. I am certain a bundle of flowers will brighten Mr. Fernley’s day and put him on a path to healing.”

Eliza gave a non-committal smile to her mother while nodding her head. She wanted nothing more than to visit Mr. Fernley and yet, she didn’t want to see his horrified glare when he named her as the Beau Monde Phantom.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The sunlight shining through the window was too bright, causing Gilbert to shield his eyes as he endured endless questions that all came down to the same point. He wished the constables, his brothers, and the other men working to catch the thief would stop asking what he had seen, who he had seen, and what had happened. He might have seen the Beau Monde Phantom, but he couldn't remember. "The last memory I have is of no use to this council. I apologize for not remembering."

Phineas put his hand on Gilbert's shoulder. "There is no need for an apology. You need rest."

Gilbert was still a bit shaky when standing on his own. As Phineas pulled him to his feet, he allowed his brother to assist him out to the waiting carriage. His bed at Grafton House would be a welcome reprieve from the events of the previous night.

"What is the last thing you remember?" Phineas pulled the shades in the carriage, so Gilbert didn't have to hide his eyes.

Gilbert waved his hand to warn his brother off. The headache was too piercing for any questions at that time. "Not now, Phineas."

His last memories, before waking at Lord Sefton's home with a bandage on his head and a headache to match the severity of his wound, was Miss Eliza Davenport. Her face had wafted in and out of his dreams causing the admiration he had for her to only grow deeper.

Moreover, his mind replayed a vivid dream where he had kissed Miss Davenport. It felt more like a lovely memory, but each time he thought about, he didn't know if it had happened or if it was simply a dream.

“Baxter and I will not stop until we have found this phantom thief. He will pay for what he has done. It nearly killed Gigi when she saw you unconscious.”

“Oh? How is mother faring this morning?”

“She is recovered. When I assured her you would be home this morning, she rallied and ate her morning meal with Baxter and me.”

Heat rose in Gilbert's neck as he tried to make his next question sound like mere curiosity. “Was anyone else concerned about my condition?”

Phineas chuckled and punched Gilbert in the arm. Gilbert winced and rubbed the spot while Phineas apologized. “Sorry about that. I did see Miss Davenport was out of sorts. Tear-stained cheeks and full of concern.”

“Are you certain the tears were not for fear of the thief? Miss Davenport despises any conversation surrounding the thefts.”

“I personally witnessed her distress. I think you may reasonably expect to receive well wishes from the Davenports.” As the carriage came to a slow stop, Phineas peered out the curtains and then quickly patted them down once more. “Perhaps much sooner than you expected.”

“What?”

Phineas pointed toward the window. “Miss Davenport and her mother are standing on the doorstep to Grafton House.”

“At this very moment?” Horrified, Gilbert moved the curtains to check and instantly regretted it as the sun caused a blinding pain to erupt in his head. He sat back against the cushion and squeezed his eyes shut. “I will trust you on that.”

“Gilbert, what happened last night between you and Miss Davenport? You were in the garden far past the first two

dances with her. Adelia and Briar were quite put out with arranging dances for you.”

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders. “Truthfully, I have no idea. My last non-convoluted memory was speaking with Miss Davenport at the confectionary shop. After that, it was either a wonderful dream or something altogether much more lovely.”

“Most likely the former. You are far too vicarly for you own good.”

“I will take that under advisement.”

“See that you do.”

Gilbert shielded his eyes as he exited the carriage and slowly walked up the steps of Grafton House. He wanted to go in and visit with Miss Davenport, but his head was aching. Instead, he asked Phineas to help him to his bedchamber where he could recover without the chatter and pleasantries of morning visits. As they walked past the morning room, he realized his decision was the best possible choice he could have made. The room was filled with visitors, far too many for his current headache.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Did the Beau Monde Phantom steal anything from Lord and Lady Sefton? Or did Mr. Fernley stop the culprit before the theft occurred?” Duchess Dorset’s question caused a hush to settle upon the occupants of the morning room at Grafton House.

Eliza had been surprised to find the duchess sitting in the armchair nearest the Dowager Countess Grafton, but it seemed most of the ladies from the previous night were visiting at this same time, and so she simply found a spare chair and settled in for the duration of the conversation.

“According to the *Morning Post*, a sapphire stick pin is missing,” Adelia responded.

Miss Killian spoke next. “It is terrible. What will become of our time in London if we cannot trust our valuables to be safe? It will be difficult to secure a husband.”

Mrs. Killian patted her daughter’s hand. “We are leaving for the country as soon as our staff has packed our belongings. I will not continue fearing for our lives. This fiend must be stopped.”

Eliza chanced a glance toward Duchess Dorset to find her lips pulled into a satisfied grin. For the first time since she’d found herself caught in a web of deceit, she wanted to honestly and truly discover what purpose the duchess had for these thefts. Was the duke struggling financially? It was possible he’d made a poor investment. Was this simply a game to the duchess? She seemed to enjoy the disruption the thefts had caused. Did she find the fear her friends were under

exhilarating? Or was it possible the duchess was planning something more devious?

Eliza dipped her head to focus on her hands as she noticed the duchess's attention had turned back to her. She didn't dare look into the woman's eyes for fear of what she would see. Was the duchess angry for the trouble she'd caused? She'd brought further attention on the thefts, which couldn't bode well for the duchess's plans.

Mrs. Gladstone spoke above the whispered chatter in the room, bringing Eliza's attention back to the overall conversation. "My husband admitted he is part of a league of gentleman determined to snuff out the Beau Monde Phantom. This was the first of many parties at which they plan to stand guard. I for one will not allow my husband to participate if Mr. Fernley's injuries are an indication of the Phantom's strength and lack of decency."

Eliza hadn't considered anyone would be watching for the thief. But this new knowledge told her they had finally passed the threshold of greed. The duchess must see how dangerous it was to proceed. She would hopefully be able to hand the stick pin over this week and convince the duchess their arrangement was over.

"We must not be deterred in our pursuit of justice. It is possible Mr. Fernley can now identify the culprit. No one need worry about leaving town." Duchess Dorset's call for justice caused Eliza the squirm in her seat. Not only did she have to contend with the fear that Mr. Fernley could identify her as the thief, but she didn't need the duchess encouraging these women to join in the search.

She was ready to jump out of her seat and walk home when the Dowager Countess asked the question for which Eliza had been waiting. She hadn't noticed Mr. Phineas Fernley had entered the room, but she was pleased to see him.

"Phineas, did you bring your brother home?"

"He is resting in his bedchamber."

“That is wonderful news.” Duchess Dorset’s pleasure sounded genuine. Eliza might be the only one in the room who knew the truth about the woman’s evil tendencies. “Was he able to identify the thief?”

Eliza’s heart stopped beating as she waited for Mr. Phineas Fernley to answer the duchess’s question. It was very possible that her name would become a hiss and a byword in every parlor across England by supper.

“I am afraid not. The last memory he has is of visiting a confectionary shop early yesterday.”

Her heart leapt for joy upon hearing what he said, and then it instantly fell as she realized he had forgotten about their stolen moments in the garden. She tried to convince herself it was better that he didn’t remember any of it, but the comfort of not being named the Beau Monde Phantom could not be outdone by the sadness of knowing Mr. Fernley might never remember how he’d kissed her so gently it had made her toes curl and her stomach flutter.

By the time she and her mother were leaving Grafton House, Eliza was emotionally spent. She wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and spend the rest of the day thinking about Mr. Fernley and what could have been. Eliza was nearly to her carriage when Duchess Dorset approached.

“Eliza, we have not spoken in ages. Ride with me. I am passing Davenport House on my way out of this part of town.”

Before she could answer, her mother had accepted the duchess’s offer. It was fortuitous that Eliza had pinned the sapphire stick pin in her reticule the previous night. She slowly followed the duchess to her carriage. When the carriage leapt forward, Eliza dug into her reticule and extracted the pin.

“I never imagined you could overpower a man. Well done, *pet.*”

“It is too dangerous to continue. We must end this now.”

The duchess examined the pin before tucking it away in her reticule. “I think not. You have shown yourself to be a

trusted ally. I have no doubt you will be a bit more careful on your next outing.”

“Your grace...”

Holding up her hand to stop Eliza’s next words, the duchess shook her head. “I will hear no more refusals. You have yet to bring the snuffbox to me. I expect you will not disappoint me further.”

As the carriage stopped in front of Davenport House, Eliza left the duchess behind. She ran up to her bedchamber and sequestered herself for the rest of the day. Although she knew Mr. Fernley was home with his family and on his way to recovery, it did nothing to calm her nerves. She had never hit anyone as she had the previous night. She never wanted to attack another person again.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Gilbert's head had healed as much as it needed so he could reenter Society. Although he still couldn't remember what had happened after he left the confectionary shop, he was certain the dreams he had of Miss Davenport were an indication that she would be an integral part of his future.

He had two objectives for that evening. The first was to discover if he had kissed Miss Eliza Davenport. His mind had played out a scenario where they had spent the evening in each other's company. The dream expanded to the moment he'd found the Beau Monde Phantom next to Lady Sefton's bed. His mind had somehow imposed Miss Davenport's face on the culprit, which obviously told him she was part of his every thought. Thankfully, he had left her with her parents before taking his shift as watchman.

The second objective was to find the Beau Monde Phantom before anyone else was injured, or worse, killed. He had little desire for someone else to experience a head wound. He had surmised that the thief was either a very violent fiend, or he had successfully surprised the man and suffered the consequences of that moment. He hoped, more than anything, that the phantom had not meant to kill him. An accident was forgivable.

"I hope you do not plan to join the men in their secretive work to find the Beau Monde Phantom." Gigi gave him the motherly look she'd given when he had found himself in trouble as a child. He hadn't expected to receive such censure this night.

“We have left him out of the rotation.” Baxter hadn’t given Gilbert a choice in the matter. He’d assigned the men in pairs and given himself two shifts.

“I would like to participate.” It went against his morals to sit back and allow others to endanger themselves while he sipped cordial and nibbled on fairy cakes.

Phineas argued. “The surgeon has prohibited you from participating in dancing or anything strenuous. In fact, the only thing you are permitted to do this evening is gossip.”

Gilbert winced at the thought. His mother and sisters-in-law laughed at the lightheartedness. He would have to obey or suffer the indignation of his family. “Fine,” Gilbert said as he held his arm out for Gigi. “Then I will find a way to make merry while you discover who is behind the thefts.”

Phineas patted Gilbert on the back. “I do not think your evening will be too boring. You could slip out into the grounds with Miss Davenport once more.”

Heat rose in Gilbert’s neck. “Did that happen?”

“You will have to ask the lady for details. We were not privy to those stolen moments.”

Gilbert looked to Adelia. “Has she confided in you about that night?”

Adelia shook her head. “Eliza Davenport ignored all my questions and refused to satisfy my curiosity. It was quite rude. Although, I forgave her instantly as she inquired in detail about your condition.”

He smiled broadly, tugged at his waistcoat, and set his attention on the carriage pulling up in front of the house. “Very well. I will enjoy my evening with a beautiful woman while the rest of the men risk their lives.”

“There is no need for dramatics.” Gigi squeezed his arm as he escorted her to the carriage. “You have one job this evening. Secure Miss Davenport’s favor.”

As they rode toward the ball at Lord and Lady Halstead’s home, Gilbert wanted an update on everything he’d missed

while in recovery. “What items have gone missing since the Sefton’s party?”

“Nothing.” Baxter spoke with a matter-of-fact tone that left no argument. “The last theft was Lady Sefton’s sapphire stick pin. It seems the culprit has gone soft since the encounter with you.”

“Odd, do you not think?” Phineas said.

“Not exactly,” Gilbert responded. “Perhaps the culprit is a bit shaken.”

“What do you mean?” Baxter asked.

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders. “I cannot say for certain, but an inkling of memory tells me we are searching for a woman.”

“Seems highly unlikely,” Phineas responded.

“Yet is it not strange that every one of the thefts has been an item used by females? A diamond bracelet, a ballerina figurine, a diamond ring, and a sapphire stick pin. And to top it off, I keep having dreams of having interrupted a woman in Lady Sefton’s chambers. It is very unsettling.” As Gilbert finished speaking, his thoughts trailed off to the dream he’d woken from hours before. Miss Davenport’s face had been on his mind, but he knew he’d witnessed a woman in that chamber.

“You forgot to mention Eloise Haversham’s little black book,” Phineas said.

“I thought they found that tucked into the sofa,” Baxter replied. “We cannot count that as a theft since it was later found.”

“Too true,” Phineas responded. “Your supposition does make sense, Gilbert. Why have we not realized it is likely a female before now?”

As the carriage came to a stop, Gilbert looked to his brothers. “There was no reason to believe a lady would be responsible for the thefts. But I am certain it was a woman. I just can’t remember anything beyond that.”

Gilbert thought his mother and sisters had been discussing the ball and their plans for the evening, but found they were engrossed in the conversation when Briar spoke. “A woman would have found herself in great distress after beating a man in the head. I could barely look at your wound for days without feeling ill. There was far too much blood.”

“I agree.” Adelia flicked her wrist, releasing her fan so she could wave it in the warmth of the coach. “Such a sight would have been ghastly to view. I cannot imagine a woman in that situation leaving the scene unphased.”

Gilbert firmly agreed. “It would certainly be a reason for the thefts to have stopped. Perhaps the men will not be risking their lives this evening. Very well, you have convinced me that a nighttime stroll is far more preferable than sitting in the upstairs rooms awaiting a phantom that might not arrive.”

As they entered the ballroom, Gilbert looked to the queue of dancers and noted Miss Davenport was matched with Mr. Billingsley. He thought it best to wait for the dance to end on the sidelines near Mr. and Mrs. Davenport. Once Billingsley escorted Miss Davenport back to her parents, he could strike up a conversation.

His plan was perfect, except once Billingsley was finished, he delivered her to Lord Wigtown, who then delivered her to Mr. Argyle. His night could not get worse, and so Gilbert decided to leave the heat of the ballroom to those who didn't have a headache.

It might have been the warmth of the night, or the continual up and down movements of the dancers, or it might also have been the music that had caused his headache, he didn't know. All he knew was the continual rubbing of his head was doing little good.

Finding a bench in the gardens, Gilbert rested his head in his hands. He'd been a fool to think Miss Davenport would wait and hold up a wall while he recovered from his wounds. She'd found more dance partners during his convalescence than she'd had all season. Had she not complained about a lack of attention?

Gilbert massaged his head, careful to stay away from the wound still healing on the left side. He wasn't ready to give up on Miss Davenport. He simply had to adjust his expectations. The thought of it made his chest burn with the now too familiar ache. He hadn't expected this night to be filled with anxious panic. Lifting his head so he could calmly breathe and think about something other than the loneliness he felt, all rational thought left as he found Miss Davenport standing in front of him.

"I wanted to inquire after your health, Mr. Fernley. My mother and I have visited Grafton House three times since you were attacked, but you have not been at home to visitors."

Gilbert held his hand over his heart as the distress of seconds before melted away. He found the racing in his chest was no longer painful. Instead, it was exhilarating. He stood and pointed to the empty spot on the bench beside him. "Please sit with me."

"I was surprised to find you were here this evening."

"The surgeon thought it best to keep me home until the wound was closed. I admit, rejoining Society tonight might have been a bit early."

"Are you unwell?"

"A mild headache."

"You should find a quiet place to rest." As she said the words, a blush instantly spread across her cheeks. Closing her eyes, she sighed with embarrassment. "You were in a private spot until I interrupted. I will leave you to recover."

"Please do not leave." Gilbert held out his hand to stop any movement.

"If you insist."

"I do."

Miss Davenport nodded. "Have you remembered anything from the Sefton's party?"

Gilbert shook his head. "Unfortunately, it is all a jumble. I doubt my mind will ever make sense of those hours."

“I am sorry to hear it. You must feel lost.”

“I did, until now.” Gilbert shouldn’t have been so forward, but he was tired of dancing around matters of the heart. If the wound on his head told him anything, it was that life was far too short and precious to allow opportunities to go to waste.

“What do you mean?”

“Have you ever felt your chest tighten with so much force that you do not know if you can continue breathing?”

Miss Davenport shook her head. “I am not certain I know what you mean.”

“When it happens, my entire body goes weak, and my legs threaten to collapse from my weight.”

“How frightening.”

“When you approached me moments ago, I was struggling to control the pressure in my chest. One look at your beautiful smile and the scent of the lemon fragrance in your hair completely alleviated the anxious symptoms.”

“I did not know you suffered so greatly. Is there nothing you can do?”

Gilbert smiled and looked to his hands. “The physician in Yorkshire prescribed rest and relaxation. So, my family decided the obvious solution was to play matchmaker.”

Miss Davenport’s face lit up with her laughter. “They are terrible for doing so.”

“I originally thought as much. But not anymore.”

“What has changed your opinion?”

“You have.” Gilbert reached out and ran his thumb along her jaw. When she didn’t move away, he scooted closer. “Please allow me to tell you how fervently my heart yearns for you.” Gilbert leaned toward her and lifted one of the loose locks of her hair lying on her shoulder. An instant thrill ran through his gloved hand and landed in his chest. His voice caught as he continued to speak the words he’d wanted to say from the moment he’d realized he was in love with her. “My

heart cannot take another beat without knowing if you would do me the honor of being my wife.”

When he finished speaking, he lifted his eyes to see if his declaration had brought her joy. To his overwhelming uncertainty, he found tears rolling down her pink cheeks as she fought for the words to answer his question.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eliza couldn't accept a proposal from Mr. Fernley. Not only was she a thief, which made marriage to a vicar laughable, but she was under the power of Duchess Dorset and Lord Wigtown, and she had attacked the very man who had just offered marriage. How could she accept his love when she'd nearly killed him?

Fighting for the words to break Mr. Fernley's heart, Eliza allowed tears to drip from her eyes as she considered the possibility of rejecting his offer. She would injure the man she loved, but it was in his best interest to marry a woman less entangled. Marriage was difficult enough without the added stress of deception.

Considering herself, Eliza knew rejecting Mr. Fernley would be akin to opening her chest and ripping out her heart. She couldn't refuse him without causing herself severe disappointment. The beautiful words he'd spoken and the kisses they'd shared had proven that love could be beautiful with the right person.

Looking into Mr. Fernley's tortured blue eyes, she knew the delay in her response was sending a message of refusal. She had to make the decision. There was no time to wait. She had to tell him of the deception she'd perpetrated, admit to the thefts, and assure him that he would find a more suitable match. But she couldn't say the words. Slightly bowing her head, her focus fell upon his lips, bringing back the moments they'd shared in the shrubbery.

She compared his soft, sweet kisses to the slobbery kiss of Lord Wigtown. When Mr. Fernley had kissed her, he had been

respectful and she hadn't feared for her virtue. The terrible moments with Lord Wigtown had left her bruised, uncomfortable, and unworthy of love.

Knowing there would never be another man she loved as much as she did Mr. Fernley, Eliza opened her mouth to respond. Loving another person meant doing what was best for them. She would find the words to refuse him without causing pain. She would find a match suitable to his profession and play matchmaker as his sisters were doing. Everything would work out for the best, if only she could force her tongue to speak the words, she knew she should say.

As her lips parted, she meant to refuse his offer but found her tongue and her heart were focused on the same outcome and her mind couldn't override her response. "Yes, Mr. Fernley, I will marry you."

Before she could confide her guilt about the thefts, Mr. Fernley pulled her to her feet and lifted her from the ground. Eliza laughed as they twirled, and then he pulled her into his embrace for another heart-melting kiss.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“You will wear the carpet out if you continue to pace in such a manner.”

Eliza turned to see her mother had joined her in the parlor without making a sound. She didn't stop pacing, nor did she release the tight clasp of her hands. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to see you are nervously anticipating your father's answer to Mr. Fernley.”

“You do not think he will refuse over the lack of a title. As the fourth son of a late earl, he has a small inheritance, but he has a suitable profession as a vicar and can make a comfortable life for us.” Eliza was of two minds. She wanted to point out every flaw Mr. Fernley had in the hope that her father would refuse the marriage. This would alleviate her need to tell him of the thefts. But she also wanted her parents to accept the proposal and allow her to marry Mr. Fernley. This would resolve the longing in her heart. “None of it matters to me. He has virtues far above any man I have ever known. He is respectful. Ponderous. Gentle. Admirable.”

“You will know soon enough. You are aware that your father hoped for a match with Lord Wigtown.”

Eliza stopped pacing and glared at her mother. “Why would you remind me of that odious man in this beautiful moment?”

“I only hope you are not disappointed if your father seeks for you to marry for prestige instead of love.”

“Lord Wigtown has not made an offer.”

“No. And I have discussed the situation with your father. If you are in love with Mr. Fernley, then he must be the proper choice. I do think a vicar fits your temperament much better than the earl.”

“Oh, dear!” Eliza couldn’t admit her guilt to her mother, but she was a better suit for the devious rake, Lord Wigtown.

“Sit down. You are making me nervous, and I have nothing to fret.”

Eliza moved to an armchair. She thought about gathering her embroidery project but decided against it. In her current state of nervousness, she’d tangle the thread. Clenching the arms of the chair, Eliza continued speaking to point out more reasons that would make this marriage unacceptable. “Mr. Fernley resides in Yorkshire. It is quite the distance from our family residence in Bath. We will see each other but once a year, if not less. Father cannot think that a suitable choice.”

“Your grandfather, aunts, uncles, and cousins are in Edinburgh most of the year. Your father has traveled to see them, as you well know. Yorkshire is not far out of the way.”

Her mother had made a sensible point. Finding another reason to hope for an engagement, Eliza added more qualities she loved about Gilbert. “Mr. Fernley has the most handsome blue eyes, much like the ocean. Have you noticed?”

An indulgent smile spread across her mother’s face. “I had not noticed.”

“If father does not agree to the match, I think I will die of a broken heart.” She couldn’t imagine marrying anyone other than Gilbert Fernley. But even as she said the words, she knew she must hold onto hope that her father wanted a title in the family. With Lord Wigtown, she would be a countess and eventually a duchess, which would favor a rise in their social standing. She didn’t care for the title. She hated Lord Wigtown and would suffer greatly if married to him. She simply didn’t want to confess her thievery to Mr. Fernley.

Eliza had spent the entire night tossing and turning, wrapping her bedclothes around her legs as she considered the moment Mr. Fernley discovered her secret. Would he no longer love her? Would he break their engagement and leave her ruined? There was no way of knowing how he would react, and so it would be easier for her father to put an end to the possibility of an engagement.

Unable to sit any longer, Eliza stood and continued pacing through the room. She crossed in front of the fireplace three times before the door to her father's den opened. She heard the tone of casual conversation as her father and Mr. Fernley neared the parlor. Turning toward the doors, she waited with her hands clenched in fists at her sides. This was the moment that would break her heart. No matter the outcome, she had an unpleasant future before her.

As the door to the parlor opened, Eliza stood without moving. Nervous, frightened, unsure of what the following days would bring, they were all emotions she held inside while fighting the need to cry.

“Dearest, you and our daughter have a wedding to organize. I trust you can manage the arrangements?” Her father looked pleasant. Happy. Sincere. It was more than she could have hoped for and everything she truly wanted.

“I believe we can complete them in time to have the ceremony before the end of the season,” her mother responded.

Eliza looked between her parents to ensure she'd understood them correctly. Both smiled in her direction, which told her she was successfully engaged to Mr. Fernley. She did her best to thank her father. She kissed him on the cheek, kissed her mother's cheek, and then turned to her fiancé.

Before any banns were read and preparations were made, she would have to tell him she was the infamous Beau Monde Phantom.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Eliza meant to confide in Gilbert each time they were given ten minutes alone in the parlor to visit, but as they spoke about wedding plans and their future, she forgot about the needed confession.

Each time she saw him, she planned to pull him aside and confess her treachery, but instead she found herself lost in Gilbert's eyes and his affectionate kisses. When Gilbert posted the banns, Eliza knew she must make a confession. The banns would be read in the parish where she'd grown up and in Gilbert's parish, yet her thoughts would not form clearly enough, and her tongue seemed tied in knots.

The best time to confess would have been when he'd recounted the failed attempt to capture the thief at Lord and Lady Sefton's ball. She'd nearly swooned as he'd told her of his dreams of seeing her in Lady Sefton's bedchamber. But the fact that nearly the entire *ton* had taken part in the plot to monitor the upstairs rooms at Sefton Hall had left her reeling and nearly falling apart. Thankfully she had been able to avoid suspicion as she'd claimed her unease had been due to the injuries Gilbert had sustained. She was still very unsettled by her actions that night, and therefore she hadn't needed to fabricate any emotions.

As she walked through Hyde Park on Gilbert's arm, Eliza wondered if this was the right moment to speak to him about her guilt. She nearly spoke his name, to gain his attention, but stopped herself as he spoke first.

"Archie and Rosalind will arrive in town next week, which will give them an opportunity to rest before the wedding. I

know you and Rosalind will become fast friends. She is much like Adelia and Briar.”

“I will be very happy to meet Archie and Rosalind. Will all your brothers be in attendance?”

“I have not heard from Cornelius. He is on assignment with the military and at times it is difficult to correspond with him.”

“I see. Is he in France or in the Americas?”

Gilbert lovingly squeezed her arm and smiled down at her. “I do not know. He is very secretive about his work.”

“Does this bother you?” Eliza loved watching his face as he considered each of her questions. His emotions were never hidden, and she could see in this instance he worried about his brother.

“It should not bother me. He is dedicated to crown and country, and his service is an innate part of who he is.”

“It is the same for you, I believe. You thrive when you are serving a congregation.”

“Very true.”

She and Gilbert walked along one of the paths in Hyde Park in companionable silence while birds chirped in the trees overhanging their walkway. She watched as creatures scurried across the greenery and carriages made the rounds on Rotten Row just as she had a few short weeks previously with Lord Wigtown. A heaviness settled in the pit of her stomach as she thought of the earl and the time they’d spent in Hyde Park.

Turning to Gilbert, she knew it was time to confide in him. He loved her. That wouldn’t change from her confession. Taking a deep breath, Eliza spoke. “Gilbert?”

“Yes?”

She paused and pulled him off to the side so other patrons of the park could continue walking without having to divert around them. “Honesty in a relationship is important to me.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.”

Eliza dipped her head, unable to look at him. She didn't want to see the bright light of love turn dark for even an instant as she spilled her secrets. "Do you ever wish you could take foolish actions back?"

"Certainly, I do." Gilbert placed his hand under her chin, lifting her head so he could look at her. "Regrets are a part of life. They plague us at the most inopportune moments. Do not let the past haunt your future."

Eliza smiled and nodded her head. "I wish it were so simple."

"I have seen discontentment in your eyes since I first arrived in London. Is there nothing I can do to remove your worries?"

He was too perfect. Too kind. And yet he was exactly who she wanted to marry. It was no wonder she'd thrown herself into an engagement with a man she was wholly unequal to in every way. Pushing her emotions to the deepest corner of her heart, Eliza tried to speak but found her voice would not work. Her mouth was open, but nothing came out.

"Miss Davenport and Mr. Fernley, how lovely to see you on the promenade." The silky tone of Duchess Dorset's greeting covered Eliza's hesitation enough that Gilbert didn't notice she'd been flummoxed.

Gilbert dipped his head in acknowledgement of the duchess, and then he addressed the duke. "Dorset, how good of you and your wife to stop and visit with us."

Throughout her dealings with the duchess, Eliza had never met the duke. She curtsied and then took hold of Gilbert's arm. She didn't want to stay near the duchess longer than was necessary.

"Dorset, you have not met my *pet*, Miss Davenport." The duchess placed an overly dramatic hand on Eliza's arm and then pulled her into an uncomfortable embrace. "I must wish you great joy. News of your engagement reached me this very morning."

Eliza shuddered at the duchess's clear reminder of their agreement. The term *pet* was not an endearment between them. She acknowledged the duke as he spoke pleasantries toward her. Upon first acquaintance, he didn't seem a terrible man, but she had yet to know him well.

"Dorset, you and Mr. Fernley should walk ahead of Eliza and myself. We have much to chat about. Wedding plans and the sort of which men do not converse." The drip of disdain in the duchess's voice caused Eliza severe distress. Marriage to Gilbert should have alleviated the need for her to associate with the duchess further.

As the duchess pulled her back, Eliza watched Gilbert and Duke Dorset as they slowly continued onto the promenade. Steeling herself for the moment the duchess would make her demands, Eliza closed her eyes.

"What are you playing at, Eliza?"

"I do not know what you mean."

"It seems you have failed to understand the nature of our agreement. The power to end it lies with me. You were not approved to enter an engagement."

Eliza turned away from the duchess to ensure they would not be overheard. "I refuse to be a part of anymore thefts. Gilbert and the other men of the *ton* have set a trap to discover the thief. The game is over." She may not be able to correct her mistakes, but she didn't want to bring more shame into the situation by having to answer to an investigator. She also didn't want Gilbert to hear about her deception from someone like the duchess. She would be the one to tell him of her folly.

The duchess raised a hand to her, but she didn't follow through with the threat once she saw Eliza flinch. It had been an involuntary action, much like a frightened child conditioned to hide when a bully entered a room. "Secure the snuffbox, and in two days' time, you will meet with me at our usual spot. If you fail to complete this task, I will destroy your happiness by whispering your secrets to Lady Pipperton. She would devour you with scandal upon finding out you are not only the

Beau Monde Phantom, but that you sat in a sequestered carriage with a rake in this very park.”

Eliza stopped walking. She couldn't move her legs for the weight of fear keeping her in her place. “There is nothing more you can do to ruin me. I plan to tell Mr. Fernley of my actions. He is a loving and forgiving man.”

“Mr. Gilbert Fernley may forgive you the oversight of propriety, but what would the Earl of Grafton say about his brother marrying a thief?”

“Lord Grafton is a good man.”

“And the constables?”

“You would implicate yourself along with me. It is a poor threat.”

“I wonder what Mr. Gilbert Fernley will say as the constables take you into custody in the hours between committing yourself to him for life and your wedding tour?”

Eliza's face involuntarily contorted into a pained frown as she fought the need to cry. She looked away from the duchess to stem the flow of tears building behind her eyes. Her voice shook as she whispered, loud enough for only the duchess to hear. “What do I have to do to be released from your grasp?”

“Two more favors will be enough to earn my silence. The snuffbox is the first. The second is Lady Adelia's emerald necklace. Present the necklace by the end of the month and I will have no reason to send the constables after you.”

Taking a step away from the duchess, Eliza needed a moment and a bit of distance to comprehend the request. Theft from people she didn't have a connection to had plagued her conscience, but taking an item from her friend would be far worse.

“I cannot. You will have to find another person to assist you.”

The duchess tapped Eliza's nose and altered her voice like one would when speaking to a small child. “Aren't you feisty, my little pet.”

The unflattering description left her further unsettled. Feisty was not the word she would use to describe her mood. The future she dreamed of having with Gilbert was still too fragile to upset it with the duchess's vitriol. Admitting her guilt and asking for forgiveness was much different than turning herself into the law. If she ended up in prison, it would cause irreparable damage to her marriage.

Against her better judgement, Eliza nodded in agreement. She would fulfill these last two requests and then free herself from the duchess. "Will you give me your word, as a lady, that I will be released from this arrangement?"

The duchess put her hand over her heart. "I swear upon my dear mama's future grave that I will never make another request of you after I receive the emerald necklace."

Accepting the duchess's word as a vow, Eliza rejoined Gilbert and said farewell to the duke and duchess.



THE WALK TO LORD TOWNSEND'S SEEMED TO TAKE LESS TIME than it should have, but only because Eliza was preoccupied with dread. She didn't want to take the snuffbox. She wanted her life to go back to the pitiful existence it had been before she'd agreed to help the duchess, but with the caveat of still falling in love with Gilbert.

Gilbert was now the only reason she wanted to exist in this world of fashion and overstuffed ballrooms. Her life, as his wife, would be more than she deserved. If the duchess kept her word and stayed silent on the thefts, Eliza would be a dutiful wife and spend the rest of her life in penance by serving the parishioners in Yorkshire.

As she neared Townsend's home, the door opened and an elegant man wearing a bold burgundy coat with a u-shape cut-in stepped out, with walking stick and gloves in hand. Distracted by the handsome man before her, Eliza missed her footing and tumbled to the ground.

The rush of footsteps from Lord Townsend and his outstretched hand put a blush on Eliza's cheeks. She couldn't help comparing Lord Townsend's light hair, that matched the sun's rays, with Gilbert's dark brown. She preferred the latter but couldn't help admiring the former for the similarities his eyes and the shape of his face had to her fiancé. "Miss, are you injured?"

"A little." Eliza accepted his hand and found her footing. Brushing the dirt off her dress, she was pained to notice a rip in the hem. "Oh, dear. I have made a mess of my outing."

Lord Townsend's attention turned to her hemline, and then back to her face. "I do not believe we have been introduced. I am Arthur Beckwith, the Earl of Townsend."

"Miss Eliza Davenport." Before she could apologize for behaving so irrationally in front of him, Mr. Townsend's eyes narrowed in examination making her believe he recognized her name.

"Are you the Miss Davenport who is engaged to my cousin, Mr. Gilbert Fernley?"

"Your cousin?"

"Yes, my mother and his father were siblings. Both are long gone from this world, but we do meet often. I received word of an engagement party only yesterday."

Eliza stilled her nerves and pressed her hands against her middle. "Yes, I admit you are correct. Mr. Fernley and I are to be married before the end of the season."

"Then our meeting was fortuitous!"

"How can you say so? I feel as though I have made a ninny of myself. If fate caused my slipper to snag on an uneven spot of earth, then I have no need for it."

Lord Townsend laughed and held his arm out for her to take hold. "Fate does cause a spot of trouble, occasionally. Let me assist you by having a maid fetch water. You will find my home most delightful for a rest."

"I could not impose."

“Do not think of leaving in this state. I will have a carriage brought around to deliver you back to your home.”

“Thank you, my lord.” She couldn’t have asked for a better way to gain access to Lord Townsend’s home. This alone should have encouraged her in the task ahead, but it only pained her sensibilities further. Improving her ability to steal from people was not something she should find admirable.

“I am sorry I cannot escort you home. I am already running dreadfully late to an appointment. But my staff will ensure your safety.”

Again, she was very thankful but now she found herself in Lord Townsend’s debt. With a slight bend of her knees, she winced at the inevitable cuts and torn skin that had resulted from falling upon the ground.

Lord Townsend noticed the reaction and assisted her to a chair while instructing the butler. “Find Mrs. Beasley and have her attend to Miss Davenport’s injuries. When she is rested and has had refreshment, assist her into a carriage and see she arrives home in safety.”

The servants set about their tasks while Eliza sat in an elaborately decorated hallway waiting for the housekeeper. The walls were ornamented with artwork of beautiful buildings adorned with flowerpots and brightly colored petals hanging from windows. The flowers jumped off the canvas, making her believe she could pluck a petal from each one. Unable to stop herself, Eliza pointed to the nearest gold framed painting. “Where can one find such beauty?”

Lord Townsend turned from the exit and walked back to where she sat. His pride was evident as he straightened his posture to stand a bit taller before answering. “My sister is an accomplished artist. She discovers small villages filled with beauty and somehow transfers it onto the canvas. This is near our home in the Cotswolds.”

“How very lovely.” Eliza found she instantly admired Lord Townsend. He showed a genuine pride in his sister’s accomplishments, which made him likable. Unfortunately for

her, she was not there to find a new friend or to discover a future cousin.

“I will leave you to the care of my staff. I am sorry to leave so suddenly.”

Eliza blushed. “There is no need to concern yourself, my lord. Thank you for your kind assistance.”

As soon as Lord Townsend had closed the door behind him, Eliza found she was utterly alone. For one tasked with thievery, she should consider it a blessing. Putting aside her dismay and guilt, she took a quick look about. She discovered the morning room was through the door directly across from where she sat. She only needed a short time to look about to discover the desired item. Although her injuries stung, Eliza bounded into the room and searched about until she spotted the silver ruby-encrusted snuffbox. It sat plainly on a side table near a window.

She had nothing to leave in return, and so she swiped the trinket and hid it in her reticule. The weight tugged on her arm as heavily as the burden she currently carried on her shoulders. She was sitting in a strained position on the chair once more when the butler and housekeeper reentered the hallway a few minutes later.

Eliza didn't feel the full force of guilt until she was safely deposited in Lord Townsend's carriage. He'd been quite generous. His staff had been gracious and helpful while bandaging her wounds. By that evening, as Eliza stood in the ballroom at another Society function, she was surprised as Lord Townsend requested she save him the Scottish reel. She decided it was only due to his relation to Gilbert. Otherwise, he would have completely forgotten she existed.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Eliza wiped sweat from her forehead as she waited for Duchess Dorset's carriage to stop. The story of the missing snuffbox had hit the papers that very morning, and Eliza wanted the stolen item out of her possession without delay. Before the footman could lower himself down from the back of the carriage, Eliza stepped forward and opened the door.

"Your grace." Reaching into her reticule, she took the snuffbox out and placed it on the carriage seat. "This ends our arrangement. You and Lord Wigtown may go back to your lives, as I plan to do the same."

A hand reached out and pulled her against the opening of the carriage, causing her to lose footing and tumble onto the footstep as her eyes met Lord Wigtown's. "Your engagement party will give you the perfect opportunity to steal the necklace. Once you bring it to us, you are free to find happiness."

Wigtown didn't wait for her response. He threw her backward, and the carriage started forward, throwing dirt at her as she landed on the cobblestones. Eliza glared at the carriage until it was out of sight. Moaning as she stood, Eliza rubbed her backside where she'd hit the ground. She didn't have time to commiserate over her injuries. She had less than an hour before she and her mother needed to leave Davenport House to meet Adelia, Lady Grafton, and the Dowager Countess Grafton at the modiste.



“ELIZA, HAVE YOU BEEN CRYING?” ADELIA PULLED ELIZA away from the bolts of fabric and the rest of the women to whisper her question.

Knowing it was the easiest secret to part with, Eliza nodded. “A little.”

“Why? Are you having second thoughts?”

Eliza let out a humorless laugh and then wiped at the tears stinging her eyes. If only she could confess and lay the burden on someone else, but there was no one who could understand the constant fear in which she lived. At any moment, the duchess or Wigtown could go to the constable and turn her in for theft. With their money and titles, they would successfully pin this entire operation on her.

To say she'd had second thoughts would not be dishonest. She was up to her fifth time of reconsidering. If she ended the engagement before too many plans were made, she might be able to stop the onslaught of speculation. Even though she knew it must be done, she couldn't commit to breaking both her heart and Gilbert's.

“Never. I only fear there is so much to do and not enough time to complete it before our wedding.”

“You have more people helping you than you realize. And once Rosalind has arrived from Scotland, she will help as well. There is no need to worry.”

Gathering her emotions and pushing them down to where she could bury her doubts, she decided to put all her efforts into planning the wedding. “You are right. Thank you, Adelia.”

Adelia put her arm through Eliza's and pulled her back to the bolts of linens. “Put a smile on your face and be thankful you are not in Gilbert's position this morning.”

“Oh? What is he doing?”

“Negotiations with your father.”

Eliza put a hand over her mouth. “Perhaps I should be nearby to ensure my father does not swindle Gilbert out of a proper dowry.”

“Baxter and Phineas gave him pointers over the morning meal. Phineas had to deal with my father, and, well, we all know how that ended.” Adelia pursed her lips and tilted them to the side to emphasize the deceptions her father had perpetrated on her and Phineas.

“You are right. I do not think I have anything to worry about. My father is not as skilled as yours when it comes to negotiations. But I do want Gilbert to receive everything he can for a dowry.” Feeling woefully unworthy of her fiancé, Eliza hoped the monetary compensation would make up for the moment Gilbert discovered he’d married the Beau Monde Phantom.

As they settled next to her mother and the Dowager Countess Grafton, Eliza slipped her fingers under a loose end of a light pink muslin. It was very pretty. With a few embellishments, it could make for a lovely dress.

“What color of fabric do you want for your wedding gown?” Her mother held up three choices: robin egg blue, white, and emerald. The green fabric reminded her of the duchess’s request for Adelia’s necklace. Momentarily lost in her thoughts, Eliza didn’t respond.

Assuming the silence was due to her dislike of the fabric choices, Adelia quickly filled the silence. “There are other fabrics to choose from, dearest. You do not have to accept one of those.”

The dowager countess held up two of her choices. She didn’t care for either of them. But the gold muslin sent a flurry of ideas and brushed away any thought of the emerald necklace. The gold looked far too regal for a normal person. It was a better fit for a princess. But the idea of a sheer gold embroidered overlay on white muslin took hold in her mind,

and she knew that was what she wanted to wear when she married Gilbert Fernley.

Once she made that decision and had picked the embroidery pattern for the mantua-maker, the purchase of her wedding clothes went much smoother. With a visit to the milliners scheduled for the following week, Eliza was certain her mother would spend every pound in the family coffers before the wedding arrived. It was possible there would be nothing left for her dowry in the end. But the planning and discussion of a wedding made her happier than she'd been in many years.

She was ready to leave the shops and spend the next three weeks before her wedding rushing to prepare everything else that must be accomplished when her mother pointed out a jeweler.

“You must see to an engagement gift for Mr. Fernley.”

Eliza knew it was customary to give a small gift, but she didn't know what was best. “What did you give father upon your engagement?”

“We were in far different circumstances than you are. It might be best to ask Lady Adelia or Lady Grafton about the gifts they gave.”

Knowing Adelia hadn't had a traditional engagement, Eliza looked to Lady Grafton. “What would you suggest for an engagement gift?”

“I gave Lord Grafton a miniature I'd commissioned before leaving Boston. It was important to me because the portrait was painted in my childhood home. That added to the sentimentality of the gift.”

Sitting for a miniature while preparing for her engagement party and a wedding seemed overwhelming. “If I already had a portrait painted, it would make sense. But since I do not, is there something reasonable I could purchase?”

“Let us take a moment at the jeweler. You could purchase a ring to add a lock of your hair.” Adelia said.

Nervously, Eliza agreed and followed the ladies to the jeweler. Everything she did for this wedding seemed to add to her growing concern about honesty. Giving a ring with her hair entwined seemed much more intimate than a miniature. She loved Gilbert, so the intimacy merely put a blush in her cheeks. Her worry was more about the hypocrisy of claiming his heart while burdened with a destructive secret.

Looking down at the options before her, she knew a gold band with a glass casing to display her hair was the perfect gift. She allowed the jeweler to release her hair from her coiffure so he could section off a portion that would not be missed. With the quick skill of one who had learned from years in the industry, the jeweler set a small portion of her hair in a plait and then took up a pair of scissors to snip the strands free.

It took less than an hour to choose a gift and have it prepared and wrapped. As her mother settled the debt, Eliza held tightly to the smallest package she'd acquired that day. Before she presented it to Gilbert, she reminded herself, she would have to make her confession.

Chapter Thirty

It was easy to forget about the thefts she'd perpetrated now that fewer parties were being held. Eliza hadn't seen Duchess Dorset or Lord Wigtown since she'd given them the snuffbox the previous week.

She spent her evenings at Grafton House planning the wedding with her mother and the women in Gilbert's family, which gave her more than enough time to speak with her fiancé, yet she always seemed to push the guilt away and rationalize her decision not to speak about the thefts when he gazed lovingly at her.

One of the duties of a bride that she was not particularly fond of was writing out invitations. If her parents hadn't been trying to impress the echelons of Society, there would be far fewer invitations to post. But they'd included every person of importance. Massaging her wrist as she finished the latest invitation, Eliza took a moment to lean back in her chair and relax.

"How many more must we write out?" Eliza looked to her mother for the answer and received an impatient glare in return.

"If we each do our part, it will not take long." Her mother was never one to complain about a task.

"I think there are far too many for us to finish this evening." Adelia pushed her chair away from the table and motioned for Eliza to follow. "I wanted to show you something."

Taking the escape, Eliza quickly followed her from the room before her mother could guilt her into staying. They rushed up the stairs and down the hall to the bedchamber Adelia occupied while at Grafton House.

As Eliza took a seat on the chair next to the dressing table, she let out an audible sigh of contentment. “I know we will have to return to the invitation soirée below, but it is a relief to have a moment to rest my hands.”

“My penmanship slipped a bit on the last one. I may have to redo it so the recipient can read the details.” Adelia laughed as she spoke, which brightened Eliza’s mood. “Since we will soon be sisters, I wanted to offer my favorite necklace for you to wear during your engagement party. It will look lovely with your eyes.”

Eliza clasped her hands together, tightening them out of nerves. She held her breath as Adelia opened the drawer of her dressing table and pulled out a gray box. As the lid slowly slid upwards, Eliza froze. Could her last assignment from the duchess be achieved with such ease?

“Is it not lovely? Phineas gave it to me soon after we arrived in England. It was his version of an engagement or wedding gift since we didn’t have the traditional reading of the banns and a large ball.”

Reaching forward to touch the object of her next theft, Eliza reverently ran her fingers across each of the emeralds. This necklace was the only way she could free herself from Duchess Dorset and Lord Wigtown. “I have never seen a match.”

“Nor will you. The emeralds came from Egypt. Phineas had them designed into the necklace.” Adelia placed the box on the table and pulled the necklace out. “Phineas is very charming. I imagine Gilbert is much the same when in private.”

“We have not exchanged our engagement gifts yet.”

“Really? Why are you waiting?”

Eliza shrugged. “There has not been enough time since we started planning a wedding, writing out invitations, and purchasing wedding clothes. Not to mention negotiations with my father on the dowry.”

“You are too generous not to mention the fascination your fiancé and his brothers have with capturing the Beau Monde Phantom. They spend every waking moment concocting new plans.”

“I did not know Gilbert was so obsessed.”

“I only hope they capture the culprit at your engagement party.”

“Pardon me?” Eliza put a hand over her chest as she realized they were planning another watch rotation.

“There is no need to concern yourself over the details. The men have promised Gigi none of the women will be interrupted. Your engagement party will go as planned. If the thief makes an appearance, the constable will have every available officer in London here to apprehend him.”

“Constables are involved?”

“I am afraid so.” Adelia waved the hand that wasn’t holding the necklace. “Let us speak of happier things.” Rising from her chair, she stepped behind Eliza and clasped the emerald necklace in place.

“Adelia, I am not certain it is wise for me to wear such an intimate item. You should wear it.”

“I want to share it with you. Our husbands are twins, after all, which will make our relationship even more special. Instead of dearest friends, we will be sisters in confidences because Phineas and Gilbert share everything.” Adelia retook her seat and then took hold of Eliza’s hand.

“You believe our relationship will be more like twin sisters?”

“I know it is silly, but it is what I hope for us.”

Eliza shook her head and squeezed Adelia’s hand. “Not at all. It is lovely to be so accepted.”

“Then you will wear the necklace?” Adelia’s plea was not necessary.

Eliza wanted to wear the necklace. But with the knowledge that she and Adelia would be closer than sisters, she wanted to protect it at all costs. “Yes, if there is an engagement party then I will wear it.”

“If? Do not be silly, Eliza. It will be here before we can finish writing the invitations to your wedding.”

Unclasping the necklace, Eliza gently placed it in the box. “Will you keep it here until that evening?”

“It will be safely tucked away in this very drawer.”

Walking back down to the drawing room to join the other women gave Eliza more than enough time to make her decision. She had delayed long enough. She could no longer plan for her wedding unless she revealed her part in the thefts.

She and Adelia had reached the bottom of the stairs as Gilbert and his brothers loudly exited a room down the hall. Adelia answered the question on the tip of her tongue. “The library. They have been planning for the capture of the Beau Monde Phantom.”

Eliza looked once more to see Lord Townsend, Mr. Dunlop, Mr. Penhale, and Lord Sefton amongst a group of constables. To her dismay, the list of men continued, her father and Lord Wigtown amongst them. A wave of nausea caused her to stumble as she took in the venerable cluster of men dedicated to discovering her identity. It wasn’t a matter of if she would be discovered and brought to justice, but when. With this many people looking for the Phantom, she was bound to be caught.

Chapter Thirty-One

“**Y**ou seem out of sorts.” Gilbert had watched Eliza for the past weeks wondering if the continued strain between them was due to the pressure of planning a wedding. Pulling her away from the men he and his brother’s had invited to the house, Gilbert led her out to the garden.

“I am a little tired. The engagement party is weighing heavily on my mind.” Eliza gave a tight-lipped smile that made him want to believe what she said, but there was something more behind her words. She seemed frightened.

Gilbert took hold of her hand and tucked it protectively through his as he led her to a private section of the garden where they could speak without interruption. The wooden bench he’d visited many times sat vacant as though it was waiting for him to share this section of the flowers and shrubbery with her.

“We have not had a moment alone for days.”

Eliza blushed as he sat next to her on the bench leaving less than a Bible’s length between them. “Gilbert, what if my mother sends a maid after us?”

“Then we will convince the maid to keep our secret.”

Eliza demurred, which managed to send his heart fluttering. As heat rose in her cheeks, he brushed his thumb across one side before leaning in for a kiss. He intended it to be gentle and short, but once his lips touched hers, he decided to do a proper job of it by putting every ounce of his admiration into the moment.

Gilbert whispered in her ear before pulling away. “I love you, Eliza. I am in agony waiting for our wedding day to arrive.”

Pressing her hand against his chest, she bit her bottom lip and smiled at him. His heart nearly melted. Never mind the darkness that had plagued his soul, he now had to worry about the woman he loved driving him to severe distraction.

“Only nineteen more days. Will you survive?” Eliza somehow inched closer to him, their legs and hips touching.

Gilbert cleared his throat. He might be a vicar by trade, but he was still a man. Having the woman he loved so close without any boundaries between them was testing his gentlemanly resolve. “Not if we continue to escape to secluded corners such as this.”

“Should we go back?”

Shaking his head, he pulled a small box from his pocket and handed it to her. “We have been engaged for a fortnight and I have yet to present you with an engagement gift.”

She pulled at the string, releasing the knot he’d tied that morning. As she lifted the lid, he watched for her reaction. It had taken a visit to nearly every jeweler in the city for him to find the perfect gift. He’d chosen a gold braided band with a delicate diamond in the center. It wasn’t large, but it had cost him dearly.

When tears fell from her eyes, Gilbert wondered if they were from joy or sadness. Had she wanted something different? “If you would prefer something else, I can return it.”

“It is lovely. Thank you.”

“I know it is not the most traditional item. The jeweler tried to convince me to remove a tooth for the ring, but I thought a diamond would be much prettier on your finger.”

“A tooth?” Eliza’s horrified, tear-stained cheeks told him he’d made the right decision. “Thank you for not presenting me with a tooth. I’d prefer they stay in your mouth.”

Gilbert chuckled and lifted her hand to kiss it before sliding the ring on her finger. “Now every man in the ballroom will know you and I are to be married.”

Eliza nudged his shoulder with hers. “I think the banns have informed anyone who might have been interested.”

“Lord Wigtown certainly seemed bothered by our engagement.” He thought back to the earlier meeting he’d just had regarding the Beau Monde Phantom, where he had been surprised to see the jealousy on Wigtown’s face. “I thought he would call me out in the meeting today.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was angry throughout the conversation. Glared in my direction more than once.”

“You have quite the imagination, Gilbert Fernley.”

“Oh?” Gilbert lifted his hand to her chin and pulled her face toward him. “Do you think so?”

“I know you do. For Lord Wigtown was only interested in my dowry.” Gilbert leaned toward her, but as his lips touched her cheek, she pushed him away. “I have a gift for you as well.”

“You do?” Gilbert watched as she fumbled with the straps of her reticule. He hadn’t expected a gift—her admiration was more than enough.

The box looked much the same as the one he’d given her. When he opened the lid, a warmth flooded his body. “I will wear it, always.”

“Before you make such a vow, I must tell you something of great importance.”

Gilbert sensed there was much more to her statement than concern over a ring with a lock of her hair, but he gave his full attention. “You may tell me anything.”

“Please withhold judgement until I have a chance to tell you everything.”

Surprised by her statement, Gilbert agreed with caution. It worried him that she would think he'd interrupt or think poorly of her. To show his support, he placed a hand over hers to find she was trembling.

"I promise."

Eliza refused to look at him by averting her head to focus on the hydrangeas. Gilbert suddenly wondered if he'd pressed her into the engagement. He was ready to interrupt the silence when he remembered she'd asked for patience. It took all his strength to sit in silence while she decided how to say the words.

"Before you arrived in London, I was less noticeable than the floorboards everyone danced upon."

Gilbert wanted to argue, but he'd witnessed the snubs and disdain thrown toward Eliza and her parents. There were those amongst the *ton* who lived in the past, when the wealthy had been the only notable people. But Gilbert knew times were changing. Titled men sought heiresses from the states and daughters of tradesmen to keep their family coffers full and their estates from falling to ruin.

He stayed silent but nodded his head, so she knew he was listening. He wanted to tell her he understood, but even his position as a fourth son didn't compare to the cruelty she would have received for being known as new money and the granddaughter of a stable master.

"Have you ever been so lonely in a crowded room that it caused you to place your trust in the wrong person?" Eliza paused so he could answer at the same moment a maid arrived in their private alcove.

"Miss Davenport, your mother is ready to leave. She said you must go with her if you want to attend the theater tonight."

"Thank you, Marie. I will join her in a moment." Eliza looked at him expectantly, and he understood she wanted him to respond.

"I do know a bit about loneliness, but not exactly the way you are describing." He thought about explaining his answer

by telling her more about the darkness he'd feared, but he didn't want her to lose the courage she'd found to confide in him. "Most importantly, I need you to know that I understand your struggle."

Eliza shook her head. "I am certain you cannot understand."

"Then help me to know what you mean."

"A promise of companionship to navigate Society and a chance at a match led me to accept her offer. If I had known what would be expected, I never would have agreed."

Gilbert wanted to understand, but he didn't. As a vicar, he saw the signs of guilt dancing across Eliza's face, but she was speaking in riddles. He understood when a confession was nearing the surface of a conversation, and so he listened intently, waiting for the right moment to calm her fears and offer loving advice.

In situations like this, he'd seen both women and men burst into tears. There were some people who held their emotions deep within and gave the hardened facts without a display. But this moment with Eliza worried him more than he wanted to admit.

He didn't need a woman who crumbled when faced with guilt, but he wanted to see more than the defeated mess before him. Everything she was saying told him she had lost hope. "You are no longer alone." He wanted the words to bring comfort, but instead they seemed to intensify her doubts.

"If you only knew what your promise entails, you would not be so quick to assure me. I have made a muddle of everything, and I have ruined any chance at a happy life for us. His continued presence is evidence that they will never release me from the agreement."

"Who?"

"Every time I turn around one of them is nearby, watching and waiting with another assignment."

For the first time since this conversation had started, Gilbert felt the blood drain from his face. Deep down he knew

what she hadn't yet said, but he needed a confirmation.

Eliza continued speaking. "The first item was a mere booklet. I convinced myself it wasn't wrong, and it was easily replaceable."

Gilbert didn't hear most of what Eliza said after admitting to stealing a notebook. That item had never been reported in the *Morning Post*. A ringing started in his ears as he received confirmation that she was the Beau Monde Phantom. She was the culprit who had attacked him and very nearly taken his life.

As Eliza stood, Gilbert couldn't bring himself to follow. His legs were flimsy much like jelly. Eliza slipped the ring off her finger and placed it back into the little box he'd given her. She set the box on the bench and stepped away. "I will inform my parents that our engagement is cancelled."

Gilbert found the strength to rise before she could leave the seclusion of the garden. Taking her hand, he pulled her toward him. He couldn't condone thievery. He believed every person was born into the world with the innate ability to distinguish right from wrong just as easily as light from darkness. Therefore, accepting an act as terrible as theft was just as wrong as committing the crime himself. He could not give any type of approval. But he loved her enough that it caused him to waver in his convictions.

Pulling her into his embrace, Gilbert held her tightly for what he feared might be the last time. "Allow me to help you, Eliza. Do not end our engagement."

Wrapping her arms around him, she held him. "I must accept responsibility for my actions. I expect nothing less than transportation to Australia."

"Do not confess. No one needs to know. If there are no more thefts, all will soon be forgotten. The *ton* is fickle minded and will find other scandals to occupy their time."

Eliza pulled away and brushed her thumb across his jaw. "I cannot ask you to be any less than who you are. You are an honest man. If I allow you to hide my secret, it will destroy

any love we share. Soon we will realize it is not enough to keep us happy with the constant threat of discovery.”

He knew she was right, but it didn't stop him from believing there had to be a solution. As she left him standing in the garden, he looked down at the ring that held her lock of hair. She hadn't asked for it back. When he found the strength, he would box it up and send it to her. Walking back to the bench to collect the engagement gift he'd toiled to purchase for her, he wished for a spark of genius to fall upon his head, but it didn't. He had no idea how to help Eliza.

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was harder for Eliza to confess to her parents than it should have been. She'd already destroyed any happiness she could possibly have with Gilbert, and now she was breaking the trust her parents had for her. Eliza made her confession and then sat on the sofa, awaiting her punishment.

"You gave the details to Mr. Fernley?" her father asked. She could see his controlled anger was near to bursting with the glowing pink in his cheeks.

"Yes, Papa. I ended our engagement as well."

Her father shook his head. She'd expected him to lose his temper and yell, but instead he looked disappointed. "I wish you would have confided in your mother and me first. I could have straightened this all out with my purse."

"Can we not do that now?" Her mother's question left Eliza wondering who these people were. They'd always told her that honesty was valued next to virtue. Silencing this problem by throwing money at it seemed to go against the ideals they'd impressed upon her.

"I wish you would allow me to confess and let me take the consequences as they come." Confession was the only way to free her from guilt. Eliza picked at the lace on her dress, wishing she was hidden away in her bedchamber.

"I will speak to Fernley. Sweetening your dowry should convince him to marry you. After that, I will speak to the constable. I will inform him of your youthful indiscretion and convince him it will never happen again."

Eliza stood, her entire body shaking in frustration. She'd made two confessions that day, and she wouldn't allow her father to sweep everything under the rug. She deserved to be punished. Moreover, she knew it was the only way to free herself from the duchess and the earl. "No, Father. I will take my punishment from both you and the law. I will pack a bag for my transportation."

"Transportation? How do you imagine living once you arrive in Australia? Who will care for you? How will you find food?" Her mother's high-pitched squeal told her this would not end as she'd imagined. Her parents would do all within their power to keep her off the boat. But Eliza wanted to go. She needed to go where the duchess and earl could not find her. They would not be able to reach her if she was on a different continent.

Her father tapped the mantle he leaned against while considering their options. When he stood tall and turned toward them, she knew he'd convinced himself of a solution. "Where are the items? If we return what was taken, the consequences will be far less dire than if you keep them."

Dipping her head and focusing on her slippers, Eliza tried to find a way to give an answer without revealing the duchess and the earl. She knew taking full responsibility wasn't her duty, but implicating titled members of the *ton* would be far worse than taking the brunt of the blame. They had connections her parents could only dream of having, and the fault would still lie solely at her feet.

"I do not."

"What have you done with them?" Her father looked ready to go in search of them himself.

"I cannot get them back." Eliza pressed her fingers against her forehead. "I have a headache and wish to lie down."

Her father's fury finally exploded as he pointed toward the door. "You will go to your bedchamber and stay within until I send for you."

Eliza nodded. "I understand you need time to consider my confession. I will do all I can to protect the family from disgrace. Perhaps it is best you disown me before I confess."

"From this moment on, you will take your meals in your room." Her father's cheeks were nearly purple as she left the parlor.

Doing exactly as she was told, Eliza went to her bedchamber without delay. She took her meals in her room without complaint and missed multiple garden parties, the theater, and balls while waiting for her father to send for her. At the end of the first week, she wondered if he would ever again allow her to leave her bedchamber.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Gilbert sat with four of his brothers, Fletcher, Archie, Phineas, and Oliver, at White's, waiting for another plotting session to locate and arrest the Beau Monde Phantom. It was a useless discussion since Gilbert was aware of the culprit's identity. Yet, he still attended while keeping the information to himself.

"You did not have to come." Phineas set a glass in front of Gilbert and poured the liquid nearly to the brim.

"It is better than sitting at home with nothing to do." Gilbert took a sip, and then pushed it away. He hadn't told anyone yet, but he planned to leave for Yorkshire the following morning. There was no reason for him to stay in town to overhear the cruel gossip surrounding himself and Eliza.

Phineas patted him on the shoulder, and then pointed to the door. "Davenport is here. You should try to speak with him. Find out if Eliza is suffering from a bout of nerves. I am certain she did not mean to end the engagement."

"I doubt it would do any good. Eliza Davenport is a fickle woman. Trust me, you dodged a bullet, Fernley." Lord Wigtown's lazy drawl caused a wave of anger to ripple through Gilbert's entire body.

"No one invited you to sit with us." Fletcher pulled the bottle of port away from Wigtown, emphasizing the desire for him to leave.

Wigtown laughed and settled in for the duration. "No need for poor manners. I simply hoped to cheer my old friend. A

broken engagement can have a lasting effect upon a man's reputation. We would not want anyone believing it is because our pious vicar is a rake."

Gilbert didn't have to respond, as his brothers rallied to his defense. He sat back and picked up his glass for another sip as he replayed the moment Eliza had ended their engagement for the millionth time. If he hadn't been in shock, he might have convinced her to tell him who was watching her. She'd said they were always nearby, watching, waiting to give her another assignment.

He had half a mind to visit Eliza and convince her to tell him who it was that frightened her, but he couldn't bring himself to spend another moment in her company. He loved her far too much to simply go back to acquaintances.

"I think I will call on Miss Davenport today. We took a ride through Hyde Park before your engagement, Fernley. Do you think she would strike up a courtship with me once more?" Wigtown's smug smile left little doubt of his expectations. He wanted Gilbert to believe he would be successful.

"We are no longer engaged. Miss Davenport may court whomever she desires." Gilbert took another sip of port as he glared at Wigtown. He didn't want the earl to believe his words had any effect.

Wigtown laughed. "Perhaps it was a vicar she could not bring herself to marry. She certainly did not mind my attentions. Rakes do have more experience in certain matters than the pious church goers. Some women are not meant to be poor in matters of finances and romance. If you give up your profession and convince Grafton to give you a larger cut from the estate, she might take you back."

Gilbert hadn't told anyone about his misgivings, but since his and Eliza's engagement had dissolved, he'd considered giving up his profession more than once. It didn't bode well for a vicar to try and convince a thief to stay silent on the matter. He was supposed to uphold truth instead of trying to bury it. Staying silent on her identity as the thief had eaten at

his insides and the familiar darkness, which he'd fought so hard to rid from his life, had started to creep back in.

"There is an available chair at the table with Mr. Davenport. You may discuss your intentions for his daughter over there." Archie made a shooing motion with his hands that might have put a smile on Gilbert's face if he weren't in a severe state of depression.

"Davenport is new money. I have no desire to speak with him about my plans for his daughter. She'll be fortunate if a man sets her up in a small home after I am finished with her."

Gilbert had heard enough. He didn't need to attend this meeting. Turning away from his brothers and Wigtown he slowly left the gathering. They could make plans for the rest of the season, but he would no longer be a part of the discussions on the Beau Monde Phantom.

Instead of taking a coach home, Gilbert decided to clear his head by walking. It was only twenty blocks, which would give him time to think over his options. If he chose to give up his profession, what would he do to earn money? He could marry Eliza and they could live off her dowry in a frugal manner to ensure they never ran short of funds, but was that the best option?

He knew Baxter would allow them house room at Primrose Hall, but it wouldn't be a place of their own. He could live in one of the tenant homes on Baxter's estate and run a farm. He wouldn't mind living the life of a farmer, but it would set his family in a difficult position. Society would frown upon the choice, and his mother and brothers would be compelled to no longer associate with them. He didn't think his family would go to such lengths, but it was a possibility he had to consider.

Ready to give up his profession, Gilbert found he was standing on the steps of Westminster Abby. Taking it as a symbol of his inner thoughts, he walked up the steps and crossed the threshold into the building that had helped solidify his religious beliefs and convince him he was on the right path in studying theology. He'd visited Westminster many times during his years at school, and it seemed only proper on the

eve of his decision to leave the profession that he visit once more.

Finding a spot to sit and reflect, Gilbert wondered how he would feel once he gave up his profession. Leaving behind his work as a vicar didn't mean he was leaving religion. It simply meant he would be adjusting his life and moving out of the vicarage. He wouldn't hold the duties of the profession any longer, which meant he would no longer preach sermons. Serving others didn't come with a calling to minister. He could still find time in his life to take charity baskets to the needy and to help patch roofs when needed. Everything would be the same, except nothing would ever be the same again.

Gilbert placed his head in his hands. He loved Eliza more than he loved his duties as a vicar, but was it possible to give up one part of himself for the other? Or could he find a way to satisfy his religious convictions while remaining true to his heart?

“I thought I would find you here.”

Gilbert didn't sit up. He would always be able to place Phineas's voice without having to look. “I wanted to be alone.”

Phineas squeezed onto the bench forcing Gilbert to scoot over to make room. “If that were true, you would not have come here.” After a few minutes of silence, Phineas continued speaking. “You have doubts.”

“Too many to speak of.”

“Then make it short. Tell me the worst of what is going on in your head.”

“I am a hypocrite and worse yet, I have no shame for my hypocrisy.”

“If you are not ashamed, then why are you sitting in Westminster Abby praying?”

Gilbert lifted his head. He hadn't thought about praying. Would God want to know he was thinking about leaving his profession? It made the situation more strained to know prayer had not been at the forefront of his mind. “I am not praying.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“What would you say if I told you I wanted to resign from my position as vicar?”

Phineas tried to hide his surprise, but his pursed lips and furrowed brow spoke volumes. “I would remind you of when we were younger and you memorized the first ten chapters of the book of Genesis in less than a week.”

“What does that prove?”

“You were born to be a vicar.”

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders. “You were born to be an archaeologist, yet you have an estate and raise cattle and sheep. Is my decision not the same?”

“I think it depends on your reasons and I have not heard anything from you that satisfies a resignation.”

Thinking he could confide in his brother without exposing Eliza as the thief, he chose his words with care. “I have known the identity of the Beau Monde Phantom for some time now, and instead of giving the information to the constables, I have allowed you, Baxter, and all our friends to continue searching. Women are in fear of attending social functions. The wealthy are blaming the serving class and treating their staff with contempt for fear that their valuables could disappear. I have the power to put an end to this fear, and yet I have kept the person’s identity hidden.”

“You must have an excellent reason. For I know you as well as I know myself, and therefore I trust your judgement.”

Gilbert let out a humorless laugh. “Trust is a virtue I do not deserve at this moment.”

“What is your reason for protecting the Phantom?”

If he revealed his reason, Phineas would know her identity. He knew his brother was trustworthy, but this was not his sin to confide. “I cannot say. But I believe the person was coerced into the thefts.”

“Then we must find a way to expose the true thief. For if Miss Davenport was manipulated, then she cannot be held

accountable.”

Gilbert closed his eyes regretting his decision of weeks before when he'd claimed it was possibly a woman. “How did you know?”

“It is the only reason you would resign your position as vicar. Love does strange things to our sensibilities.”

“Whoever it is that is pulling the strings must have requested something truly despicable. She was frightened. I have never seen her in such a state of unease.”

“Then you must discover what it is so we can set a better trap.”

Gilbert nodded. “I will do everything I can to help her.”

“You must love her quite a lot.”

“So deeply, it terrifies me to think I will never see her again.”

Phineas pulled him to his feet. “Then you must go to her home and convince her to speak with you. Get everything you can out of her, and then we can set a trap.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Eliza sat in the window seat of her bedchamber looking out at the same scene she'd viewed for the past week.

The gardener had outdone himself with the many flowers dotting the grounds. She would forever be thankful that during this time between confession and transportation that she had something other than a brick wall to look upon.

Although she washed and dressed each morning, she refused to allow the maid to pin her hair in a tight coiffure. There was little reason to endure the drudgery of hair pins poking into her scalp if she was to remain in her bedchamber.

Originally, she'd expected her father to brood for a day before allowing her access to the rest of the house, but he had been silent on the matter. It was obvious to her he needed more time to forgive her for the thefts.

Part of her days were spent in prayerful contemplation and regret for her choices. She knew it was ungrateful of her to only pray when she was in dire trouble. It didn't bode well for her that she'd completely forgotten to petition God while living through the nightmare of the previous months. This was a sin she would never confess to Gilbert. Not that she would ever see him again.

She spent most of her time thinking of Gilbert Fernley and the life she'd given up. Her dreams were filled with his blue eyes and dashing smile. There were moments she almost convinced herself he could forgive her for the deception, but when she came back to her senses, she realized it wouldn't be possible.

It was likely that Gilbert had already offered marriage to another woman. Eliza couldn't imagine him married to any of the women Adelia and Lady Grafton had chosen, but that was only because she loved him so deeply, it pained her to think he could find happiness without her.

Pressing her finger against the windowpane, she traced out an invisible heart. There would be no evidence of her broken heart for others to look upon. She would hold her emotions in until she was far away, sailing toward the bottom of the world.

Eliza pressed her head against the wall as a knock sounded on her door. "Come in."

There was no reason to look at the door. She knew the knock belonged to her maid. "Miss Davenport, your father has requested you join him in the parlor."

"Why?" After a week of lying about, she didn't have the energy to do much of anything.

"He did not inform me of his reasons. If you will allow me to style your hair, then you may go down."

Shaking her head, Eliza slowly made her way toward the door. "There is no need to do my hair. I doubt my father will allow me to leave the house."

"Miss, it would be best for you to allow me to set your hair."

"Thank you, but no. I have little hope of ever leaving my bedchamber again." Without a backward glance, Eliza set out for the parlor.

Since there was no urgency in her life, she dawdled. There was no way of knowing when her father would release her from the temporary imprisonment, so she smelled the wildflowers sitting in an antique vase on a hallway table. She ran her ungloved fingers along the decorative banister as she slowly descended the stairs into the large hallway. For a wild moment, she thought of escaping out the front doors to the world beyond. Taking a step toward the large double doors that led to a small vestibule and then out to the streets of London, she stopped as a movement from the corner of her

eyes caught her attention. Her father stood with his hands on his hips as he waited for her to notice him.

“Good evening, Papa.”

His chest rose and fell with deliberation as he let out a long-suffering sigh. Pointing toward a chair in the room, her father barked out his orders. “Are you ready to join us?”

Repentant of her thoughts of escape, Eliza dipped her head in a show of contrition. “Yes, I am.”

“Then kindly take a seat so we can discuss our options.”

As far as Eliza was concerned, there was only one option. If she wanted to be free of the duchess and the earl, she had to confess to a constable and take the resulting punishment. But instead of reminding her father of this, she wanted to hear what he had concocted. She kept her voice calm as she responded, “Very well.”

With her eyes averted from her father, she slipped into the parlor and took the nearest chair. To her surprise, she found Gilbert Fernley and her mother in the parlor as well. Her voice caught in her throat, making it impossible to speak his name. Should she go back to addressing him in a formal manner? Or could she continue to not only think of him with his first name but also use it in his presence?

“Hello.” It was the only word she managed to speak as her throat clogged with regret.

Gilbert’s tortured gaze told her he suffered as greatly as she. But his shaky voice told her she didn’t have to worry about him falling in love with another woman. He was as dedicated to her as she was to him. “Eliza, I have missed you.”

“And I you.”

“Your hair is quite lovely.”

Eliza put her hand up, pulled the unruly mess to the side, and sheepishly shrugged her shoulders. There was nothing she could do about her hair now. “I should have listened to my maid.”

Clearing his voice, her father stepped between them and blocked Eliza's view. "Mr. Fernley has some questions."

"Oh." Eliza dropped her eyes and clenched her hands. It was wrong of her to hope he would request she reconsider the engagement, but the insensible side of her dared to hope.

As her father finished crossing the room, he leaned against the mantle and stared into the empty fire grate. If Gilbert were there to ask for her hand, her parents would have left. Not daring to look at anyone, Eliza kept her eyes averted.

Gilbert walked forward and knelt before her. "When you confided in me, you mentioned that someone was always watching. I need to know who coerced you into these thefts."

She wanted to expose the duchess and the earl, but it would do little good. Daring a glance at him, she reached for his hand and then pulled hers back. She couldn't allow her heart to hope. "I am sworn to silence."

"I know you are frightened, but we can protect you. Not only do you have your father and mother, but my entire family will find a way to support the indictment of these people." Gilbert didn't hesitate as she had. He took her hands and ran his thumb along the back of her fingers.

"I wish you could be right. Whenever I think on this moment, I will remember this promise and how you were willing to do all you could to save me. But no one in this house has the power to stand up to these people."

"I do."

Eliza turned toward the door to see Lord Grafton, Mr. Phineas Fernley, and a constable waiting to be announced. She'd been prepared to admit her guilt to a constable for over a week, but now that one was standing in her home, she lost her nerve. Thinking of transportation to Australia was much different than accepting the punishment and stepping onto a boat.

Eliza turned away from their new guests as she squeezed Gilbert's hand. "Do not let the constable take me. I beg of you."

Gilbert nodded and offered a tight smile. “Trust me, I will not let anyone hurt you. But you must tell us everything.”

She gathered her thoughts as her mother ordered a tea tray and convinced everyone to take a seat. Gilbert released her hand but sat in the chair closest to her. Where to begin or how to tell her story, she truly didn't know. And so she took the simplest option and started from the moment she arrived in London to find she was the object of ridicule, which made her easy prey for Duchess Dorset and Lord Wigtown.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Gilbert refused to meet Phineas's eyes as he listened to Eliza speak of the torture she'd endured. When he'd left Phineas at Westminster Abby, it had been with the understanding that they had a shared confidence. He didn't like to think that Phineas was untrustworthy, but at the moment, seeing Baxter and the constable whom Phineas had clearly told of Eliza's situation, his thoughts settled on the term *traitor*. Phineas had betrayed their bond as twins, and no amount of pleading would ever bring Gilbert to trust him again. When it came to keeping Eliza safe and out of prison, he didn't trust anyone. Especially not Baxter.

His reasons for distrusting his eldest brother boiled down to Baxter's need for justice. Certainly, he would go after the people who had hurt Eliza, but Baxter's sense of right and wrong would include punishment for all involved. That included Eliza.

Gilbert had meant what he'd said when he'd told Eliza he would not allow her to be hurt. If necessary, he would book passage on a ship and have her out of England by morning. Of course, he would go with her. They could find happiness on the continent or in the states.

Ready to defend Eliza at every possible moment, Gilbert ran a hand through his hair as she finally said the names of the two people she feared above all others.

"The Duchess of Dorset gave each assignment, and The Earl of Wigtown was tasked with forcing my hand. Each time I asked to be released from the agreement, I was threatened and ridiculed. Not only did they threaten me, but they said my

family would suffer, and Lord Wigtown mistreated me and left me bruised. The threats increased with every manipulation. In the end, they said if I did not complete the final assignment, they would put an end to my engagement. Therefore, I chose to end it without their interference.” As she finished speaking, Eliza kept her head down like a frightened child waiting for a punishment.

Baxter cleared his throat, which sent a wave of anger through Gilbert. His family didn’t need to take control of this situation. He was capable of asking the questions. Walking back to the chair he’d recently vacated, he meant to interrupt but found he didn’t have the heart. Eliza’s cheeks were stained with tears, and instead of running an interrogation, he wanted to provide comfort.

Since Gilbert didn’t interrupt, Baxter asked his question. “What is the next item they’ve asked you to steal?”

Eliza turned to Gilbert as though he’d asked the question. “I could never take anything from your family. I refused to take anything from Grafton House.”

The constable tapped his graphite pen against his notepad. “You feared discovery? Your fiancé would have noticed if you were carrying an item that didn’t belong to you.”

“No.” Eliza shook her head as she answered. Instead of looking at the constable, she kept her eyes on Gilbert. He knew she was speaking directly to him. “Discovery was the least of my concerns once I knew she wanted me to take Adelia’s emerald necklace.”

Gilbert sat in the chair and leaned forward placing his elbows on his knees. “It would have been simple for you to take. Adelia planned to offer it for your use at our engagement ball.”

Eliza tilted her head and wiped at the tears that finally fell from her eyes. “She did offer it to me already. I could not take it. I wanted to be free from the duchess and the earl, so I convinced myself it would be a simple task to claim the latch on the necklace had broken, but when you gifted me the beautiful ring for our engagement, I knew I couldn’t go

through with the theft. I thought transportation would be preferable to injuring you and your family, but now that I am faced with that possibility, I find them equally unacceptable options.”

Her father stepped forward and placed his hand on her shoulder. “There must be something that can be done without condemning my daughter for this error in judgement.”

The constable sat fully against the back of his chair and sighed as he seemed to weigh the options. “The involvement of Duchess Dorset and Lord Wigtown makes things a bit messier than I originally imagined.”

Phineas stood and walked to the fireplace to lean against it as Mr. Davenport had done earlier. “They will throw money at the problem to make it go away. If necessary, we can do the same.”

The constable shook his head. “It will not be as easy for Miss Davenport to wiggle out of this mess as it will for the duchess and the earl. The *ton* has lived in fear for their possessions. The cry for action has already been made.” The constable pointed to Baxter. “Lord Grafton has been the loudest in the search for the Beau Monde Phantom.”

Eliza’s body shuddered and the blood drained from her face as the constable stated the name the newspapers had given her. Knowing she hated any conversation on the topic, Gilbert reached out to touch her hand. Even through his gloves, he could feel the clamminess of her skin.

“Then we must find a solution to ensure those responsible face justice.” Baxter’s statement put Gilbert fully on the defense.

Jumping to his feet, Gilbert was ready to fight his brother and anyone who planned to punish Eliza. “Eliza was forced into the thefts by two people who hold positions of power within our esteemed Society. There was no possible way for her to decline the offer without consequences. I will not allow whatever justice you see fit to be exercised upon her. I will leave my position as vicar of the parish in Yorkshire if

necessary, and I will take Eliza where the respected leaders of this pathetic Society can no longer injure her.”

Gilbert took a deep breath as he planned to continue yelling, but found he was at a loss for words as Baxter put a hand up to stop him. The pride and warm smile his brother gave him put him in mind of the way his father used to look at him.

Shaking the nostalgia off, Gilbert pulled Eliza to her feet. He held both her hands as he looked into her frightened eyes. “We should be married without delay. A carriage to Gretna Green will get us out of town before a magistrate can make a judgment on this case.”

Baxter placed a hand on his shoulder, but Gilbert brushed it away. “There is no need to leave town, yet. But I agree that you and Miss Davenport should be married without delay.”

“Pardon me?” Eliza asked.

“If Constable Markus agrees, I think we can clear up the true identity of the Beau Monde Phantom at your marriage celebration.”

Gilbert turned toward his brother. “Your humor needs work.”

Baxter narrowed his eyes as he folded his arms. “I am completely serious and have never been known for lightheartedness.”

Shrugging off the immediate assumptions from Baxter’s statement, Gilbert wanted to understand. He’d never been one to hastily assume the worst of others, but this was not a normal situation. He was choosing love over serving God, and it didn’t feel completely right. Somehow, he knew there had to be a way to choose both. “Then you plan to expose the duchess and the earl?”

“Now you understand.”

Gilbert didn’t fully understand the plan, but he would listen. Saving Eliza from further suffering was the only outcome he cared to discuss. When Baxter finished informing

them of the plan, Gilbert turned to Eliza. “What do you want to do?”

“It is a generous solution. Thank you, everyone, for your part in saving me,” Eliza said.

“I suppose the only decision left is to confirm that Miss Davenport and Mr. Fernley will go through with the wedding.” The constable spoke with little passion, yet his words sparked a wave of desire in Gilbert.

Turning to Eliza, Gilbert reached into his pocket and removed the little box that held the ring he’d presented to her the previous week. Unabashedly, he offered the gift once more. “Do not feel compelled to accept any part of this offer that makes you uncomfortable. My feelings are unchanged, but if your heart has moved past me, we will find a different way to free you from their hold.”

Eliza pushed the strands of hair that had fallen over her shoulder to the back as she slowly ran her finger across the top of the box. Gilbert waited, holding his breath as though allowing air to enter and exit his body would disrupt the delicate moment. He wanted everyone in the room to leave and give them a moment of privacy, but any hurried movements might cause Eliza to make a hasty decision. And so he waited, wondering if he would lose consciousness from holding his breath before she once again spoke the words to break his heart.

“Words are wholly inadequate to describe the way I feel.” Eliza tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear while she struggled to find words. Gilbert watched as she bit her lips. He was certain she would refuse him.

Time stood still as the clock on the mantle slowly ticked away the seconds. He was ready to bow out of the room and take a moment to gather his wits when Eliza closed the distance between them and placed a kiss on his cheek. “Nothing would make me happier.”

Gilbert pulled her into his embrace, ignoring everyone around them. He heard the discussion in the background, but the words made little sense in his mind as he realized nothing

mattered in that moment beyond the knowledge that Eliza had once again agreed to marry him.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Eliza touched the delicate emerald stones as Adelia helped her dress. If the elaborate plan didn't work, the necklace would be lost forever. Phineas and Adelia agreed it was worth losing to free her from the grip of the crimes she'd committed, but Eliza couldn't believe such a beautiful item would not be mourned.

"You are a beautiful bride, Eliza. Never have I seen such a delicate blush. Tell me, are you thinking of Gilbert and the gentle kiss he gave you this morning?"

"You witnessed that?" Eliza's eyes went wide as she placed her hands over her cheeks to hide the blush.

"I do hope he kisses you a little longer when the vicar pronounces you husband and wife."

"You are wicked, Adelia." Eliza watched as Adelia placed a jeweled comb in her hair. "My maid could have styled my hair and helped me dress."

"I'm afraid she planned to style your hair in the same tired coiffure she has done every day over the past few months. A lady should feel refreshed upon her wedding day."

Eliza turned to the looking glass not certain what she expected, but found she loved the new style. With a sideways plait, jewel pins, and a bun at the back, she realized Adelia was right. The new coiffure was exactly what she needed to pull her out of the past. "I look so different."

"A bride should stand out on her wedding day. But you, my dear, are glowing and nothing I have done with your hair

or clothing will match the shine of love in your eyes and cheeks.”

This time she didn't try to demur from the compliment. “I did not know I could love so deeply. Gilbert has helped me realize all the things I was fighting for amongst Society are not necessary. Having his admiration is far more important than titles and recognition.”

“I wish you had confided in me. You told me of Lord Wigtown's mistreatment, but I never imagined it was tied to the thefts. We could have saved you from this situation far sooner.”

“Now that everyone has been so kind, it is easy to see how ridiculous it was to hide what was happening. But I do not know if anyone will ever fully understand how frightened I was. I was unable to see a solution that ended without my reputation being destroyed and my family falling to ruin.”

“Once you realize you are free from their grasp, you must do what you can to forgive yourself. It will take time, but you must find a way.”

“Are you giving me permission to forget about the torture I've lived through and simply enjoy the future?”

“No, for I do not have the power to do so. You are the only one who can make that choice.”

“Do you think we will succeed?” Eliza's hopes and dreams rested upon the success of the evening.

“We must believe it will. I only wish those despicable people were not waiting in the drawing room with our family and your guests.”

Eliza dipped her head. “I can think of no other way to conclude my time in London.”

“I can think of better ways.” Gilbert stepped into the room, causing Eliza's stomach to flutter. He crossed the room and pulled her into an embrace before kissing her.

The kiss was a light brush across her lips, but it conveyed the love they shared. That was all she needed to calm her

overwrought nerves. As he released her, she turned to apologize to Adelia but found she and Gilbert were alone.

“I could not wait to see you.” Gilbert again brushed a light kiss across her lips. “I missed you.”

“We saw each other this morning. You could not have missed me yet.”

“I beg to differ, my love. For you were not wearing this lovely gown when I last saw you.”

Her dress was the perfect combination of elegance and purity. She’d chosen a white silk gown under an overlay of sheer white muslin with gold embroidery. “You truly like it?”

“I do.”

Eliza demurred, turning her head to the side before complimenting him. “You are very handsome as well.”

Gilbert adjusted his cravat as he puffed out his chest. “I had hoped you would notice.”

Laughing at his lightheartedness, Eliza knew she must bring them both back to the reality of their situation. “Are Constable Markus and his team in place?”

Her question changed Gilbert from a charming, flirtatious fiancé to the extremely serious vicar she loved. “They are hidden from sight. Lord Wigtown and Duchess Dorset have no reason to suspect this night is anything except a celebration of our union.”

Eliza nervously touched the necklace once more. “You will ensure this necklace is not lost? I will never forgive myself if it is not returned.”

“Eliza, my love, I am more concerned about you and your safety. Let us both enjoy our wedding and then make it through the business with the constable. Then we can worry over the emeralds.”

“Gilbert, before we go downstairs to lose ourselves amongst guests and intrigue, promise me that once we leave London, we will never return unless it is absolutely necessary.”

“We are of the same mind, my dear. I have never enjoyed the crowded streets, the gentleman’s clubs, and the overstuffed ballrooms. Yorkshire will be our home if you agree.”

“Most ardently!”

Gilbert pulled her toward the door. As a laugh escaped, she leaned against his chest and wrapped her arms around him. “I will never forget these last months with you. You have made me so very happy.”

“There will be many years of happiness in our future.”

She truly hoped he was right. Although she didn’t have a bad feeling about their plan, there was always the possibility that something would go wrong. She kept this worry to herself as he led her down to the drawing room. Gilbert delivered her to her father, leaving her for the last time before they would be husband and wife.

Eliza peeked into the drawing room to see their guests were seated in anticipation of the wedding ceremony. The breath caught in her chest as her eyes fell upon the back of Duchess Dorset’s elegant coiffure. “We are truly doing this?”

She wasn’t asking for a confirmation, but her father took hold of her hand and turned her toward him. “When your mother and I chose to enter Society, we never expected to receive open invitations to dine with the titled members of the Beau Monde. We hoped for that eventuality, but it wasn’t part of our dreams.”

“Yet, you have succeeded in infiltrating the upper crust.”

“To an extent, yes, I think you could say as much. But we are not accepted as equals. The situation you found yourself in this season has only intensified this reality for me. Your mother and I regret not preparing you for the games the wealthy play. We will be more vigilant with your siblings.”

Eliza dipped her head and closed her eyes. She needed to express her regret one more time before she parted from her parents’ care. “I am truly sorry, Papa.”

Her father linked her arm through his. “Enough of that. I know you are.”

“Are you sad I am not marrying for a title?”

“I think the vicar will be a generous husband. He loves you, which is more than your mother and I could ask, given our situation in Society.”

“How do you know he loves me?” Eliza knew Gilbert’s love was pure, but she wanted the validation from her father.

Clearing his throat, her father gruffly replied. “I offered to increase your dowry to compensate for the chaos of this entire ordeal. Mr. Fernley refused my offer.”

“You believe that means he loves me?”

“My dear girl, he is not marrying you for the dowry. What other reason would he have if love was not his motivation?”

“Another person might take that as an insult, but it confirms what I have seen in him. He was ready to give up his profession and life here in England to marry me. Such devotion like that can only cry out from the heart.”

“Then you are ready to marry him?”

Eliza laughed. Her worries about the duchess and the earl and the thefts completely faded away as she realized that Gilbert was standing next to the vicar, waiting for her to join him so that they could be wed for the rest of their lives.



“MRS. FERNLEY, I WANTED TO INTRODUCE YOU TO MY sister.” Eliza’s happiness increased each time someone addressed her as Mrs. Fernley. She dipped into a curtsy as Lord Townsend continued to speak. “Lady Esme Beckwith.”

She should feel a sense of shame for stealing his snuffbox, but it seemed her happiness couldn’t be ruined by anything that evening. All her fears were gone because she knew Gilbert and those who loved her would not allow the ugly situation of the Beau Monde Phantom to continue.

“I am happy to meet you.” Eliza reached out and took her hand. “I recently saw your paintings, and I adore your talent.”

“Do you paint?” Lady Esme asked.

“Not particularly well. But I do enjoy the talent of others.” Eliza exchanged a dewy-eyed gaze with Gilbert as his cousins greeted him and moved through the line of well-wishers.

With each person who greeted her, she spoke of trivial matters, knowing that from the moment she’d placed her trust in Gilbert Fernley, everything had changed for her. Yes, she’d been insecure during the weeks of their engagement which had culminated in her confession. But during that time, she’d withheld information that had bogged down her thoughts and prohibited the complete serenity she now experienced as his wife. If she had known such happiness existed, she never would have kept secrets from him.

The talisman of their union blocked the angst she usually experienced when speaking with Duchess Dorset and Lord Wigtown. When they approached, and she was able to keep her emotions under control. Eliza knew it was a blessed sign that everything would end well.

“Your graces.” Eliza dipped a curtsy and then turned to the earl. “My lord.”

Duke Dorset focused his attention on Gilbert while Duchess Dorset glided forward and took Eliza’s hands. “May I wish you great joy.”

“Thank you. I had not expected you to attend.”

“I would not have missed an event such as this. Why, it is not every day one of my *pets* finds a suitable husband. Although I was quite worried for you. I had heard a nasty little rumor that you had called off the wedding.”

“A slight misunderstanding that needed correcting.”

“I am glad to hear it.” The duchess opened her fan and vigorously waved it as she continued speaking. “We must meet up on the morrow. I want to hear all about your little wedding and plans for the future.”

“Unfortunately, I will not be able to meet with you for quite some time. Mr. Fernley and I leave for our wedding tour this very evening.”

Eliza knew she had to keep her face unreadable as she told the falsehood. Every part of the charade to expose the Beau Monde Phantom depended on her ability to convince the duchess that this night would be the only opportunity to take the necklace. As her nerves threatened to break through the peace she'd found, Eliza thought of the kisses she had shared with her husband throughout the day. A calm resettled upon her, and she silently waited for the duchess to respond.

“Then we will have to meet for tea once you are returned from your tour. How long does your husband hope to keep you from Society?”

“We will not return to London for many years, your grace. As you are aware, Mr. Fernley is the vicar in his family parish. His presence and guiding example are needed there.”

“It is not good for a newly married couple to stay out of Society so long. Convince him to return you to London directly after your wedding tour.”

Eliza knew she had to indicate that this was the only opportunity the duchess had, and so she lifted her hand and rubbed one of the emeralds on the necklace. “I do apologize for the inconvenience. Perhaps we can find a secluded spot this evening to make our farewell.”

The duchess pursed her lips and then turned to Wigtown. “What do you have to say?”

“It seems we must adjourn to the gardens. Meet us in ten minutes.”

“There is a secluded section of the garden where we will not be interrupted. As you exit the house, turn to the right and follow the path to the hydrangea. There is a bench hidden amongst the shrubbery.” Continuing the pretense of their well wishes, Eliza increased the volume of her response as she finished speaking to her very unwanted guests. “Thank you for your kind words. Mr. Fernley and I are so happy you came.”

As the duke, the duchess, and the earl left, Gilbert leaned toward her and whispered. “Were you successful, my love?”

“They want to meet in ten minutes.”

Gilbert nodded, then held his hand out and escorted Eliza to the center of the room. She knew this was the planned signal for which Lord Grafton and Phineas were waiting. Grafton pointed to the musicians, and as the first chords sounded in the room, Gilbert bowed and Eliza curtsied as they led the first quadrille of the evening.



ESCAPING THE THRONG OF GUESTS AT HER WEDDING celebration was much easier than she'd imagined. Her parents and Gilbert's family controlled the entertainment with precision, making it possible for her to slip out to the garden, and for Gilbert to join the constable and his men.

A chill ran across Eliza's neck and arms, reminding her that this wasn't a simple stroll where she could enjoy the many different flowers of Grafton House's gardens. She was on a mission to expose the Beau Monde Phantom and end the arrangement that had nearly destroyed her life.

It didn't matter that the Fernleys and her parents were convinced she had no other options. She could have declined the original invitation. All that she would have needed was a stricter sense of morality. Eliza was whispering a list of the qualities she needed to adopt as she rounded the bend and entered the seclusion of the garden.

She sat on the bench, nervously waiting for the duchess and the earl, strangely aware that Gilbert, the constable, and his men were watching every move she made. Closing her eyes, Eliza hummed a song she enjoyed playing on the violin. The result was almost instantaneous. Instead of her leg bouncing nervously, she moved her foot to the tempo of the song, effectively calming her nerves.

“Are you certain this is a private area?” Lord Wigtown growled out the question as he entered the small alcove.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Very well.” The earl peered around at each bush as though he saw someone.

Eliza chose not to make a pretense of looking at the flowers. She feared recognizing the constable or seeing a foot out of place amongst the shrubbery, which would thwart their plans. She waited until the earl turned back to her before she spoke. “Are you satisfied?”

The earl let out a long-suffering sigh. “This will have to do. Although, the duchess insists I inform you that your agreement is not finished.”

“She said if I delivered the necklace, I would be free.”

“My stepmother has changed her mind. You will have to find a way to be in town for the start of the next season.”

Eliza shook her head. “It is not possible. My husband does not care for town, and his duties would prohibit us from traveling so far.”

“Lord and Lady Grafton will be here. As a member of the House of Lords, he must be in town for the opening of parliament. If your husband refuses to attend, you will tell him Yorkshire is a bore and you would prefer the diversions London has to offer.”

Unclasping the necklace, she held it out for him. “Take it and leave Grafton House.”

Wigtown kept his hands locked behind his back. When he refused to accept the jewelry, she allowed her hand and its contents to drop to the side. The necklace dangled and hit against her skirts.

“We have not concluded our business.”

“I have nothing more to say. If you do not want the necklace, then I will return to my husband and guests.”

Wigtown's smug smile sent a chill through her body. As he wagged his finger in her face, she took a step away from him. "You are completely unskilled at negotiation. Do you not remember our ride through Hyde Park?"

Eliza shuddered. Her skin felt clammy as Wigtown's eyes went dark, reminding her of the moment he'd physically injured her. "All too well."

"You agreed to provide me with a dowry."

Eliza stepped away from him, hitting into the bench she'd sat on moments before. "I made no such promise."

"We had an understanding."

"Fortunately for me, you did not speak to my father. A proper understanding would have included respect for my family."

Wigtown reached out and picked one of the red roses lining the walkway. He twisted it between his fingers before throwing it to the ground. "Misleading an earl and a duchess will have lasting consequences. We thought you had come to your senses when you ended the engagement, but apparently you have no care for your loved ones."

"What are you saying?"

"You will return to London and continue doing our bidding through the next season, or we will arrange an accident for your vicar."

Eliza lifted the necklace to hand it to him once more. "I implore you to leave Mr. Fernley alone. Take the necklace and leave."

"It would be simple to set a fire at the church while your vicar practices his sermons." Lord Wigtown picked another rose and pulled one of the petals off just to throw it to the ground. "Carriage axles often break. Men have been known to drown in local ponds. I think that is enough to help you understand your position."

"You would not dare."

“Of course not. Yorkshire is far too primitive for me. I bring this to your attention because accidents do occur when least expected.”

Eliza tried to look around the hydrangea, but visibility was blocked by the hedges. “Where is Duchess Dorset?”

“If I do not retrieve the necklace and secure a vow that you will return to London for the fall session, Mr. Fernley will find himself in harm’s way.”

Eliza forced the necklace into the earl’s hands. “I will do all within my power to keep my loved ones safe.”

“Then we have an accord.” The earl held the necklace up and laughed with satisfaction. “Wedding tours are overrated. Cut it short and return quickly. The duchess would like you to retrieve a set of pearl earbobs from Mrs. Sinclair. Apparently, they were acquired in Paris.”

As the earl sauntered back toward the party, Eliza sat on the bench to calm her nerves. A rustle of shrubbery sounded behind her, revealing the constable and Gilbert as they stepped out of their hiding place. Running toward her husband, she threw herself into his outstretched arms. “Promise me you will be vigilant in everything you do from this moment forward. I cannot live if you are harmed.”

“There is no need to fear. They will be taken into custody, and we will be safely tucked away in our little corner of the world.”

Eliza blushed as she pulled away from Gilbert. “I cannot wait to leave London behind us. You might think the vicarage is a small place, but to me it will hold everything I love.”

“It will not be long before I take you to our home.”

Referring to the vicarage as their home made her want to leave London within the hour. But she knew there was much that still had to be done before they could leave. As she turned to go back into the house, Eliza was thankful they were alone. This allowed her to lean into her husband to place a kiss on his cheek. Anticipating her every move, Gilbert turned his head and caught her lips with his.

He kissed her and then whispered, “You were brilliant.” He kissed her again. “Fearless.”

Eliza giggled and then covered her mouth with her hand. She was horrified at the silly sound she’d made.

Fortunately for her, Gilbert was not finished. Gently kissing her hand until she removed it, he swept another light touch against her lips. “A true lady.”

Sighing with satisfaction, Eliza leaned more deeply into his embrace. For some reason she’d expected the light kisses to continue, but with his last compliment, Mr. Gilbert Fernley caught hold of her lips and showed her the truth behind his passionate declarations of love.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Gilbert rarely felt the need to jump at every sound, but this night was an exception. The wedding party was over, the last of their guests had stumbled to their carriages, and now he and Eliza had to wait.

Although his family and the Davenports stayed to hear the results of their attempt to expose the Beau Monde Phantom, Gilbert had little hope that all would be finished that evening. Deep inside, he knew it wasn't as simple as a conversation and an exchange of goods.

He'd known Lord Wigtown in his youth. The earl was slimy and devious. Wigtown had always found a way to avoid any reprimand he should have received at school and somehow constantly found himself a favorite of every professor. This easy way of manipulating people had stayed with the earl, and Gilbert worried that even with all the planning and secrecy, it was possible the earl had discovered the constable and his men. With advance knowledge of their plans, it would have been easy for the earl and duchess to throw money at the situation to make it go away.

As the door to the drawing room opened and a maid entered with a tea tray, Gilbert ran a hand through his hair out of frustration. "How long must we wait?"

Eliza placed her hand on his back. "Be patient, my love."

Her touch had a calming effect that released his anxiety for a mere moment. But even Eliza's presence couldn't stop the despair that seemed to slowly creep back into his chest as he waited to learn of their fate. He'd been sincere when choosing

Eliza over his profession, but it wouldn't be easy to leave everything he knew and loved. If they had to escape to the continent, he would do so without delay. But he would miss his family.

"I think it would be nice to host a house party in Yorkshire over the summer." Briar took a sip of tea before continuing to speak. "Who will attend?"

Baxter cleared his throat and pointedly gazed at his wife. "Are you forgetting your upcoming confinement?"

Briar laughed and brushed aside his question with a wave of her hand. "We could host a part for a fortnight. It would be a lovely send off for Adelia and myself before we enter motherhood."

Gigi passed a plate of sweets toward Mr. and Mrs. Davenport. "Do you have any other children out in Society? We would love for you to stay at Primrose Hall."

Mrs. Davenport shakily took a finger cake off the plate and then placed it on her own. "Our daughter will leave finishing school at the end of next month. Now that Eliza is married, we will allow her to make a debut. Our son is also leaving Cambridge this year. He will be expected to learn his father's trade and enter Society."

Briar smiled as though they were chatting during morning visits. "Then you all must come to Primrose Hall this summer. You will make a lovely addition to the house party."

Gigi forced a cake on Gilbert and then one on Eliza as she passed the plate of sweets to each member of the family. "We must think of an equal number of single men and women to invite. It will not do to have too many men without women. It is a constant struggle I have had with my seven sons."

Briar continued the conversation. "We must invite the Bentons."

"I agree. Audrey is such a sweet girl, and I want to see her married before she is placed on the shelf," Gigi replied.

Gilbert smiled appreciatively as he decided to eat the cake his mother had given him. He knew Briar and Gigi were

prattling on with party plans to ease the tension in the room. He hadn't realized they'd succeeded until his mother mentioned Audrey.

"I do love Audrey Benton." Both Adelia and Rosalind spoke at the same time, bringing a bout of laughter into the conversation that didn't end until the butler entered with Constable Markus by his side.

"Constable?" Eliza stood, her brow furrowed, as her hands shook. "What has happened?"

Constable Markus didn't speak as he handed his hat to the butler. When he turned back to the room of anxious people, he looked directly at Eliza. "Mrs. Fernley, the decision has been made to keep your identity silent. You were coerced into the thefts, and no one can find fault with your actions, especially after hearing the threats made toward you and Mr. Fernley this evening."

Wanting to comfort his wife, Gilbert reached out for Eliza's shaking hand. They'd prayed for this outcome on her behalf. Expecting the rest of the tale, Gilbert decided the Constable had delayed long enough. "And what of the duchess and the earl?"

"While the earl was threatening Mrs. Fernley this evening, the duchess received knowledge of our plans. She and the earl have set out for the continent. We are confident that they will be apprehended. The duke was shattered to hear that his son and wife were involved in such a dreadful scheme, which has prompted him to remove the earl's courtesy title, and he has sent a request to Parliament and the Archbishop to grant a divorce from the duchess." The constable's eyes drifted toward the tea and cakes, prompting Gilbert to invite him to take part. Once everyone was again seated, the constable continued. "It has been a busy night."

"What about the emerald necklace?" Eliza closed her eyes as she waited for the answer.

"I am afraid we have not recovered any of the stolen items. But do not fear, we have the word of the duchess's maid that

everything was in her traveling bags. We hope to find them upon apprehension of the criminals.”

Eliza put her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking. “Adelia, I cannot apologize enough for losing your necklace.”

Gilbert meant to pull her into an embrace, but Adelia was quicker. Adelia dried Eliza’s tears and forced her to lift her head. “There is no need to worry. Once Phineas knew the duchess wanted the necklace, he commissioned a forgery from a local jeweler. My emeralds are safely hidden away in my bedchamber. You gave Lord Wigtown the imposter necklace that is worth less than a pound.”

“I did?”

“Yes. Will you ever forgive me for deceiving you?”

Eliza burst into laughter, which confused Gilbert. Although Phineas and Adelia had masterfully outwitted the Beau Monde Phantom, the distress his wife had suffered upon thinking the true necklace was possibly lost forever was not a laughing matter. Gilbert didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or cry or request an apology in defense of his wife. But as he saw Eliza’s face drain of anxiety and fear and return to the serenity of hours before, he decided it was best to simply laugh along with her.

As everyone partook of the sweets, Gilbert asked one final question of the constable. “Is there any indication of the reasons the duchess and earl went to such great lengths to rob the *ton*?”

The constable nodded and finished chewing a ginger biscuit before taking a sip of tea before responding. “The maid gave us a treasure trove of information. Apparently, Duchess Dorset was bored and wanted to add a tinge of spice to the season. She had a great laugh at the expense of those who lost items. The duchess was thrilled with her ability to coerce a young lady into a life of thievery. And she thought it intriguing to dangle an offer of marriage and a title to a tradesman’s daughter only to yank it away and leave her heartbroken. The earl went along with the scheme for a laugh.”

Gilbert shook his head in disbelief. “It was all a game.”

“Quite so. A very expensive one, at that.” The Constable abruptly stood and said farewell.

When Gilbert and Eliza were finally alone, Gilbert lightly massaged her hands before lifting them to his lips and kissing her knuckles. “Eliza.” He tenderly said her name, wanting this night to last in his memories forever. He wanted this night to be remembered for the vows they’d made and the union they’d entered. They would never be able to forget the struggles that had brought them to this point, but they didn’t have to carry any of it past that night.

Eliza leaned into him. “Gilbert.”

He lifted his head and watched as the flames from the fire reflected in her eyes. She was everything he hadn’t known he wanted. How had he been so fortunate when he’d been focused on everything except for finding love? “You have saved me from the depths of darkness and endless suffering by agreeing to be my wife. How can I ever thank you?”

“It seems we have saved each other. For I could not have survived these last few days without your constant assurances and the knowledge of your love.”

“Then we can agree to forget about our time in London and focus on the future.”

Eliza shook her head. “We must never forget falling in love.”

“Did you think I meant to forget?” Gilbert pulled her fully into his embrace. “I plan to treasure each and every moment we have spent together and build upon them for the rest of our lives.”

Epilogue

Gilbert checked his notes one last time before tucking them away in his Bible. His head spun as he thought about the last time he'd stood at the pulpit to preach a sermon. Everything had gone wrong from the moment he'd stepped through the doors and taken the short walk to the podium. He only hoped the sermon he was about to preach would go well.

"Did you forget something?" Eliza's gentle arms wrapped around him from behind, and he remembered there was no need to concern himself with the past.

Months previously, he'd suffered crippling anxiety as his soul had cried out for something more than the emptiness he'd chosen. Since then, he'd found a state of happiness he'd never thought possible. The woman of his dreams was standing next to him, offering support and love.

Turning gently in her arms, Gilbert faced his wife and pulled her close. "I missed you."

Eliza laughed and went up on the tips of her toes to kiss his cheek. "We have not been apart for more than an hour since our marriage. Now that we are home, I think it will be much different. We must find a way to concede to the normalcy of life."

Dipping his head, he swept short kisses across her cheek so he could whisper in her ear. "Why can every day not be like it was on our wedding tour?"

"I will always cherish the last few weeks, but I am happy to be here at the vicarage."

Gilbert pulled back to look at her. “You do not wish to go back to lazy mornings and walks on the beach?”

“Those were lovely moments. I will always remember the beauty of the sun setting as you held me in your arms.”

“As will I.” Gilbert kissed her, then continued speaking. “I only wish life and duty would not get in the way of love. I want to kiss you on a whim. Hold you as the sun comes up each morning and forget about the expectations of my position for a little longer. Do you not want that?”

Eliza shook her head. “I want all of it. For without your profession, we would not have a home. This church and the vicarage are where we will build a life together. And that is what I want more than anything else in the world.”

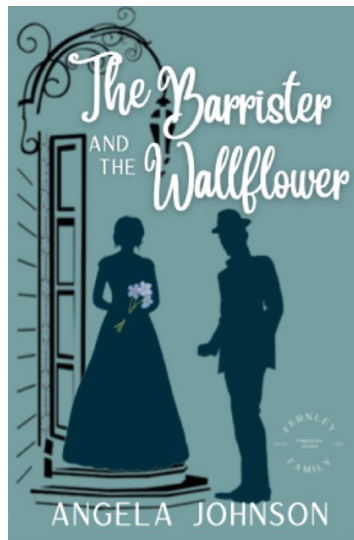
Gilbert laughed and pulled her closer. “I have no power to resist when you speak so eloquently. You have summed up everything I am feeling this morning.”

As Eliza kissed him one more time before she left him standing alone for the last moments before the service was to begin, Gilbert closed his eyes in a prayer of thanks. With Eliza as his wife, he had finally discovered what it felt like to be filled with light.

Thank you

Thank you for reading *The Vicar and the Thief*. If you enjoyed Gilbert and Eliza's story, please consider leaving a positive review.

The Next Fernley Family Adventure



Fletcher Fernley won Audrey Benton's heart without any effort, but can he keep her admiration long enough to discover if he loves her in return? Or will Audrey decide love isn't worth the heartache of always being the wallflower in Fletcher Fernley's eyes?

About the Author



Angela Johnson is an award winning editor of the 2021 Colorado Book Awards for her work on the publication *Monsters, Movies & Mayhem*. She has a love of literature and all things Regency. Traveling and reading are favorite past times and help her form ideas for writing. Angela despises the snow when it is on the road, but loves snow when it falls romantically in the perfect scene for characters to fall in love.

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