

MARRYING FOR *Love*

UNMASKING
the
MARQUESS

ALLIE
KENSINGTON



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*Ardently
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UNMASKING THE MARQUESS

Book Three in Marrying for Love Regency Romance Series

by Allie Kensington

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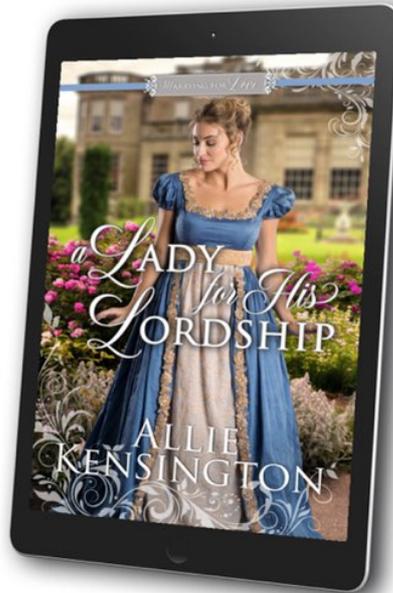
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PROLOGUE

LONDON, JANUARY 1812



An icy tension hung in the air as Robert Cavendish, the Marquess of Pembroke, eyed his uncharacteristically quiet cousin from across the carriage. He rarely bet on his intuition, but this time he would have wagered that something was wrong. Jeremy Cavendish was not only Robert's cousin, but his closest friend and confidant since childhood. Jeremy was light-hearted and always full of information and conversation, yet a deafening silence had permeated their journey from Kent to London.

Robert only recalled two other times when Jeremy had remained quiet for so long. The last time was when Robert had learned of his own parents' deaths overseas. Even in his darkest moments, Jeremy had not tried to cheer him up with words. He had only sat in stoic silence, much like he was now. Robert had relied on Jeremy's constant, silent support. It had helped him through the hours and the days that had followed. Robert shook his head.

Surely, nothing so bad as that moment had happened to Jeremy. When Jeremy had said that the business that took him to London in the middle of the winter was urgent, Robert had not hesitated when he'd asked for Robert's company on the journey.

“Is there something on your mind?” Robert asked. When he received no answer, he pressed on. “Is everything all right?”

Jeremy, who’d been staring out the carriage window, focused on Robert. He looked weary. “There is much on my mind, but I can do nothing about it at present.”

“Is there something I can help you with? I am here to help you, cousin.”

Jeremy seemed to force a smile. “Having you accompany me is more help than you realize. I confess, coming into Town is not my preferred place to be in the winter. But we are almost there.”

Robert looked out the window, not recognizing this part of Town as anything spectacular. “Do you have business at your club?”

Jeremy shook his head. “No, but I do need to meet with a few people on an urgent matter of business. You will come with me, will you not?” There was a nervous tone in his voice, as if he were truly concerned that Robert would abandon him.

“Since when do you need me for moral support?” Robert asked. “I am usually the one who wants you around for such things.”

Jeremy shrugged noncommittally. “I usually do not need you for moral support, but today it is necessary.”

Robert nodded. “Then, of course, I will come with you. It is why you asked me on the journey, after all.” It couldn’t have been to discuss anything else that was pressing on his mind, as Jeremy had stayed silent for most of the ride.

The carriage finally pulled to a stop in front of a large, imposing building. Its gleaming white marble facade stood out

against the darkening grey winter sky; its tall columns, standing like proud guards at either side of the entrance, gave the building an air of grandeur and elegance.

Robert followed Jeremy up the snowy steps toward the large double mahogany doors. On either side of the doorway stood two bronze statues of lions, their tails held high and proud in a defiant stance, ready to protect the building's inhabitants from intruders.

Jeremy knocked on the door, and they were both immediately admitted inside.

The large entrance hall was ornately decorated with paintings, the finest chandeliers, and luxurious furniture. The intricately designed marble floors ushered them forward.

They were led into a large room with a vaulted ceiling, but where the furniture was sparse compared to the large entry way they'd come through. The walls were covered in large portraits and tapestries, all depicting scenes from London's past. In the center of the room was an enormous fireplace with a roaring fire, providing a warm and inviting atmosphere. A large desk sat at one end of the room. A few plain chairs sat in front of it. The man behind the desk had a curly powdered wig on, though it was hardly the fashion anymore. He pushed his round spectacles higher on his nose when he looked up from his papers.

Robert hung back, not wanting to intrude on Jeremy's private business, but the man who'd brought them into the room ushered him forward. As there was no other seat in the room, Robert took the chair that was next to his cousin.

"Ah, Cavendish, I see you have done your job," the man in the wig said in a squeaky voice.

Jeremy looked sheepish as he glanced at Robert. He nodded at the man. “I did as you asked.”

“Excellent,” the man said. “And I assume you did not tell him anything?”

Jeremy shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Those were my orders. I followed orders, Mr. Douglas.”

Robert looked at the two men. He assumed his commanding voice, like one his father—God rest his soul, and his mother’s—used to use when he was a boy. “What is going on, Jeremy?”

“I do not think you meant to do it.” Jeremy winced when he looked at Robert. “But I had my orders—”

“You have been sending letters to France, and one of them almost went through,” the old man cut off Jeremy before he could finish his sentence.

Robert squinted. “What do you mean? One of them *almost* went through? I thought they were *all* going through.” He looked at his cousin, his best friend, and his confidant. “You told me you were delivering them to your ship.” Jeremy had been personally collecting all of Robert’s letters bound across the Channel to France for the last eighteen months, since his parents were killed by Napoleon. His uncle and cousin were in the shipping business.

Jeremy swallowed. “It was not a lie. I have delivered all your letters to my ship as promised. You assumed that meant I would see to their arrival in France.” He shook his head.

Robert’s jaw dropped. “So this is why I have not received any letters back from my mother’s family. None of them are aware I have been writing to them? You deceived me.”

“I am sorry, Robert.” Jeremy shook his head, not looking Robert in the eye.

Mr. Douglas picked up a paper from his desk and held it in the air. “Your cousin has been watching you, but he failed to catch *this* letter.”

Shock hit Robert in the face like a frigid splash of water. “How did *you* get my letter?”

“How many more letters have you posted without the help of your cousin?” Mr. Douglas’s voice was tense, but he did not answer Robert’s question.

“I do not understand. I posted it when I was visiting a friend in the country not even a week ago. How do you have it?” Something was not adding up. He looked at his cousin, but Jeremy did not meet his eye.

“I have little patience for this, Cavendish,” Mr. Douglas said, looking at Robert.

“The name is Lord Pembroke,” Robert said, assuming his title of marquess with more air than he normally would.

“You will find that war does not distinguish between the ranks. High and low positions all bleed the same on the battlefield. Answer my question. How many letters have you posted?”

Robert blinked. “I cannot remember another time that I posted a letter outside the ones I gave to Jeremy. I knew he was not going to be sailing for a while and wanted it to still be in transit. But none of this should matter *to you*. It is my personal correspondence—to my *family*.”

Mr. Douglas shook his head. He moved his hands in an absent-minded way, spinning a large gold ring with a red jewel

in it around his finger. “That is where you are wrong. You have been trying to communicate with France.”

“My mother’s family lives in France. I cannot help that.”

“No, I suppose you cannot.” For a brief moment, a look of sorrow appeared on Mr. Douglas’s face. “But that does not change the fact that we are at war with France.”

“We are at war with *Napoleon*,” Robert shot back. “I hardly think it is necessary to condemn the entire country.”

“Nevertheless, any message relayed across the Channel bound for a country we are at war with is a matter of the Crown.”

“I do not think he is guilty of any treason, Mr. Douglas. I can vouch for my cousin,” Jeremy stammered.

“Treason?” Robert practically yelled the word. Was this why his cousin had been silent on their journey from Kent? Dread filled him. “I am not guilty of treason. I simply wish for news from my family. Surely, you can understand that. You have seen my letters. You know they contain nothing of consequence for the safety of the Crown.”

Mr. Douglas held up a hand to Robert, but addressed Jeremy. “If we thought that Lord Pembroke was guilty of any treason, we would not be having this conversation right now.” He turned to Robert. “However, you are to cease trying to contact anyone in France, or you will be looked at as a suspect. We have a precarious situation on our hands.”

“It is because of Napoleon that my parents are dead. I wanted to see if there was a way to help my family that is in France.”

“And yet, contacting them will not help you, and could endanger our country.”

Robert turned to Jeremy, realizing something for the first time. “You work with the War Office?”

Jeremy looked at Mr. Douglas before answering. “I do.”

“How long have you worked for them?” Robert asked.

Mr. Douglas answered for Jeremy. “How long he has been involved with the effort is not relevant to you. We must all guard information, especially during this difficult time. The only timing you need to worry about is your own and how long you will be helping in the effort.”

“I do not understand,” Robert said.

“We did not just bring you in to ask you about letters, though the one we received from the post in the country was disconcerting. We have a role for you to play this Season.”

“The *whole* season? Mr. Douglas, I do not think that is wise,” Jeremy said.

Mr. Douglas waved his hand dismissively. “Your cousin is a marquess. One of our agents just had their identity compromised. We need someone working in the higher circles of Society. The drop we have at the Masquerade Ball will be simple.”

“He cannot become so deeply involved,” Jeremy blurted out. “Your parents would not want this for you. They would not want you risking your life and your safety like this. Your parents would have me killed if they found out you have joined the effort.”

“My parents are dead, Jeremy.” He looked between the two men, and something clicked inside of him. “Wait a minute. Aren’t my parents dead?” Something was not right about this situation.

Jeremy covered his face with his hands. “I meant they would kill me if they knew.”

“Tell me what I do not know. I am not leaving this room until I have answers. I am going to fight whether I go through the War Office or not. Perhaps I will charter a ship to France, and—”

“You would ruin everything we have been working so hard for,” Mr. Douglas snapped. “Surely you cannot be serious.”

“Then let me help you. It would be much more convenient for both of us.”

“This is not a good idea,” Jeremy said.

“Why not?” Robert asked. “I can help.”

Mr. Douglas raised his voice. “The safety of your parents revolves around us not giving way to suspicion.”

“What do you mean, *their* safety? They are dead.”

Mr. Douglas sighed, and Jeremy covered his face again. “Your parents are not dead. They are very much alive. But your constant letter-writing could have jeopardized their safety, given away their location.”

“My parents are alive. In France?” Robert whispered, not daring to hope, not daring to believe.

“Your parents are alive,” Mr. Douglas sighed out the answer. “They are safe at present.”

Robert’s eyes narrowed on his cousin. “You knew this all along, and you did not tell me?”

Jeremy looked up, but was not able to answer before someone else stepped into the room—Jeremy’s father, Harold Cavendish.

“Do not blame your cousin,” Harold said. “Both of us made a promise to your parents to keep you and your sister safe.”

“Uncle? How are you here?” It seemed every minute there would be a new shock to Robert’s system. “You are connected to the War Office, too? You also know that my parents are alive?”

“I know this is a lot to take in.” Harold walked forward until he rounded the desk and stood next to Mr. Douglas.

“But this whole time I have thought them dead.” Napoleon had killed his parents. That is what he knew. That is what he had been told. It was what had been said during the funeral service. He turned toward his uncle. “You were there. You grieved for them too.”

“And under no current circumstance must that change. They must remain dead in the eyes of the public, in the eyes of the law, and to the knowledge of our enemies.”

“Are you going to forbid me from helping with the war effort?”

Harold sighed. “I do not like it. And I am not happy with the way these events have unfolded today. I should have been informed of this before now.”

Mr. Douglas shrugged. “It was not your call to make, Cavendish. Your nephew sent the entire office in a panic because of his thoughtless act.” He held up the letter. “This nearly blew all of our cover.”

“He did not know,” Harold defended.

“And that is exactly the problem. By bringing him in, he will no longer be a liability where we must waste precious resources to keep him in line.” Mr. Douglas gestured to

Jeremy. "I have authority from those above me to make the assignment."

"I promised his parents I would look after him."

"And this is a way we can fulfill that promise, by keeping him close," Mr. Douglas said.

"I do not need your permission, Uncle. I can make my own decision. I do not need protection," Robert said, not knowing what he was getting himself into. The fire that had been building inside Robert for a long time seemed to roar to life.

"You may not need protection, but what of your sister?" Harold did not give Robert a chance to respond, but he turned to the man next to him. "Douglas, I urge you to reconsider this madness. His parents were wanted by Napoleon himself. They are only safe at the moment because they are presumed dead. Would there not be some concern for their family? Of Robert and his sister. They would have targets on their backs."

"We all have a target on us for helping in this cause. But if we ever hope to bring Robert's parents home safely, we need more resources. Who better than the son to help the father?"

"You can get my parents home? Safely? I am helping. I want to help. I need to help." Robert jumped from his chair, nearly knocking it over.

Harold put his hands in the air. "Consider what you are saying, Robert. You are the marquess now. You must take care."

Robert shrugged off the statement. "My father was a marquess too. And look what happened. I want to help with this endeavor." He paused. His words were not resonating with either his uncle or his cousin. He needed to come at this from a new angle. "I want to help, and I will find a way to help."

A battle of wills were fighting through the looks between Mr. Douglas, Harold, and Jeremy.

Finally, Harold sighed. “You are a grown man, Robert. You can make your own choice in this matter. But I urge you to contemplate the course before you.”

“Uncle, if my helping in this endeavor can bring my parents home safely, then I want to be part of it.”

Mr. Douglas smiled. “It is settled. We will brief you on your mission.”

Harold shook his head. “If Robert is determined to work for the War Office, then he must be privy to at least a partial summary regarding his parents.”

Mr. Douglas squinted. “Very well. You may tell him.”

Harold took a deep breath. “Your father was a spy for the Crown. It was a very convenient assignment. Your mother is French and as he had done business there for years, it was not suspicious for him to be seen in France. He and your mother often visited, and this gave the perfect cover to send our messages abroad to those sympathetic to Britain in France. Tensions were high during their last trip over, so they went into hiding. The information we received was short, and the details were under the strictest scrutiny. Shortly after we received word from them, a village where they had stayed was burned, likely a targeted attack on your parents. Your parents were pronounced dead from the attack.”

“Surely troops can rescue them. If they are no longer targets—”

“They are no longer targets, only because they are presumed dead. If that changes, it could affect the entire landscape of the war.”

“So what am I supposed to do? How can I help here?”

“It is against my better judgment to allow you to help at all.”

“I am capable of helping.”

“It is not your capability for the task, it is the promise I made to your parents. Both Jeremy and I swore to them we would protect you and your sister from involvement.”

“And you have kept that promise,” Robert soothed. “But I am the one choosing this.”

Harold looked at Mr. Douglas. “You must not let on that you know of your parents. You must carry on as usual. Especially with your sister coming out in Society this Season. Situations even in the War Office are precarious.”

“I swear it.”

Mr. Douglas rubbed at his chin. “Having a new operative that is not openly known in the War Office could be of use to us. It might help us catch the mole faster.”

Harold nodded. “I was thinking the same thing. It might be fortuitous that his offer comes at such a moment, with the Season starting in less than two months. He will mingle with the Peerage, and we will not introduce him to anyone else in the War Office.”

“There is a mole?” Robert asked.

The others in the room nodded.

His uncle spoke again. “The War Office has had several leaks over the last couple of months. It is why we are taking extra precautions in passing information covertly. We do not know how it is happening, but information is getting out about our plans for attack. What should be surprise attacks are now

being expected by the opposition. We were surprised when they knew our plans—plans that were safely guarded. We have a few leads, but it is likely a staff member of a sloppy operative.”

Mr. Douglas said, “But if you were to investigate and see what you could find while you are at parties and balls, that information could be most useful. We have a list of the families that have ties to France or relatives with a tie. You can start with that.”

Robert nodded. “Shall I return to the country before the Season?”

Mr. Douglas shook his head. “Now that you are here, you might as well establish your appearance so that you are not a suspect. Keep your eyes open and your ears to the ground. Mentions of Napoleon, France, or anything related to the war could be essential. We will communicate by sealed note and runners. I do not want you coming to the War Office again personally. Many do not know our headquarters’ location, but those who do will recognize you as a new face around here.”

“I understand. I look forward to helping.”

Mr. Douglas held up a letter. “You can start tomorrow at the Twelfth Night Masquerade Ball. We are down an operative this week, and we need this delivered. Think of it as a trial run.” He folded the letter and then sealed the crease with wax before handing the parchment to Robert.

“How will I recognize the operative?” Robert asked, his mind spinning with excitement.

“You will not. You will leave it tucked into a book in the library.”

Robert blinked. “I just choose a book?”

Mr. Douglas shook his head. “It will be the book that is on the table, next to a wingback chair. Place it in the leather-bound volume before midnight. Do not wait to see who retrieves the note. Once you have made the drop, make your exit from the masquerade.”

“That sounds simple enough.”

Mr. Douglas twisted the quill in his hand. “It may sound simple, but this is of utmost importance. You are not to draw attention to yourself. You must act the part of any other guest. Do not lurk next to the library until it is time for you to make the drop. Dance and mingle as you would at any other party.”

Jeremy smirked. “That might take more acting skills than you are capable of, cousin.”

“How amusing you think so.” Robert thought about what he needed to do. Dance, drop the note into a book, and leave. It was very straightforward, except ... “I do not have a costume,” he said.

“You are about the same build as the man who was supposed to make the drop. I will see that his costume is delivered to your townhome in the morning.”

Robert turned to his cousin. “Will you be joining me at the Masquerade?”

Jeremy shook his head. “That is not my mission. I will have a different mission I must do tomorrow night.”

Mr. Douglas turned the paper over in his hand. “If you cannot do this job ...”

“I can do it.” He would do it for his parents and to help in the effort to overthrow Napoleon.

Jeremy walked out with Robert. When the door was closed, he heaved a breath. “Robert, I hope you know from the depths of my sincerity that I wanted to tell you about your parents. We had a promise to keep, my father and I, but it was difficult to keep this from you.”

Robert nodded, putting a hand on his cousin’s shoulder. “I know you and your father did what you thought was best, and I do not hold you in contempt for that decision. I had no idea my father was a spy, or that he would take on such a dangerous role as a marquess. But I do feel that I want to help in this effort, however I can.”



ROBERT DISCREETLY GLANCED AT HIS POCKET WATCH AFTER dancing at the Masquerade Ball. He only had a quarter of an hour to complete his mission. Patrons in lavish costumes filled the entire room. He had danced three separate sets amid the crush.

Exiting the ballroom proved challenging, but he finally made his way out to the corridor and toward the library. In contrast to the boisterous laughter and music in the ballroom, the deserted library was quiet, and only the candle flames danced. How fortunate could he get? He strode with purpose to the table with two volumes on it. He sat down in the chair, picked up the book, and thumbed through the pages. After a moment of pretending to read it, he slipped the folded parchment between the pages and replaced the book on the table.

He exited the library and curiosity consumed him. A rush of excitement filled him at completing his mission, but was he leaving too soon? Should he wait to make sure that someone

picked it up? No, he should not do that. But part of him was curious to see who would retrieve it.

What did the missive say? He had not been tempted to break the seal and read it himself. Mr. Douglas did not seem like the sort of person who would forgive such a breach of trust. But wouldn't Mr. Douglas appreciate knowing that his note made it into the right hands?

Robert glanced one last time through the open library door. He knew he could not wait for the operative. Mr. Douglas had given him his instructions, and he would follow them. He looked toward the book on the table one last time.

“What appears so interesting in the library?” a female voice asked behind him.

An icy feeling slid down Robert's back. Why hadn't he left immediately? “I was—I was ...” He heard more people coming down the corridor. Getting caught by a beautiful young lady in a mask was one thing, but a crowd of people? He should not be waiting around.

In his panic, he did the only thing he could think of. In one smooth motion, Robert wrapped his arms around the woman and pulled her close to him. As the group of people came closer, he pressed his lips to the woman's, kissing her with fervor and passion, hoping to keep her from giving him away.

She tensed, then her lips softened against his. He pulled her closer to him, angling himself so they were in a little alcove outside the library. Her dainty fingers squeezed against his forearms. For a moment he was wrapped up in the kiss, not remembering what had prompted the sudden connection with this beautiful stranger. Being caught and reported to the War Office would be more incriminating than a stolen kiss in the hallway.

He kept his lips on hers, barely allowing her time to catch her breath before he placed another kiss on her lips. His fingers caressed the back of her neck, up to the curls atop her head. He distantly heard a pin dropping from her hair.

As the general commotion in the corridor died down, Robert sensed the party had moved into the library, and his heart sped up. He lightened his kisses, pulling away slowly. The woman's eyes fluttered open under her mask, but in the shadows he could not quite tell the exact color of her light eyes.

She drew in a slow breath. "I had not expected that," she said, a lovely smile on her lips.

Nor had he. But he did not have time to be affected by it. He had completed his mission, and he needed to leave. He smiled at her. This was the easiest mission he could have imagined. And he had stolen a kiss in the bargain. He brushed the curl of hair that was slightly tangled in her mask. "Thank you, my dear. It is too bad we do not have time for introductions. You have been the most helpful diversion. I do love the smell of vanilla and cinnamon. It is a favorite combination of mine."

The woman did not move from her spot. He gave her a hasty bow and made his way quickly down the corridor and out of the Masquerade. As he rode away, he smiled. He had not expected to enjoy helping the War Office as much as he did.

CHAPTER ONE

LONDON SEASON, SPRING 1812



Lady Cassandra Berkeley—beautiful, intelligent, and wealthy—never expected to attend a third London Season for herself. She smiled politely over her tea as she sat in her drawing room, playing hostess to her few other friends who had made it to their third Season without current matrimonial prospects.

“Did you hear that another robbery occurred?” Miss Delacroise fanned her face rapidly. “How exciting.”

“Exciting? It is terrifying. And to think it happened adjacent to where all of us were at the ball last week. It is highly disconcerting,” Miss Abbott said.

“What do you say, Lady Cassandra? Is it terrifying or exciting to have a thief so close?” Miss Delacroise kept her fan waving at a steady beat.

Cassandra set down her cup on her saucer, putting on an air of indifference. “I think speculation has been filling up the gossip channels, making it impossible to receive information of any value about the Season before us.” She took another sip of tea, secretly hoping the topic of the thief would continue.

Aside from thinking about her marriage prospects, two other mysterious men had invaded her every waking thoughts.

The thief, forefront in the papers and the gossip circles, seemed to capture everyone's attention, and Cassandra was no exception. She had read and reread each article about the thief on almost a daily basis, looking for clues and connections between the different targets. The thief had been on her mind constantly since she'd first heard of him three months ago when she'd last been in Town.

The second mystery man that had been on her mind for the same last three months was the man she had never found again at the Masquerade, after he had kissed her in the corridor. It was the only thought that tore her attention away from the intrigue of the thief. Her heart raced when she thought of the masked man and the way he'd kissed her. He was most certainly a rake. And a scoundrel. Her brother had warned her about such men for the past two Seasons.

Now, in her third Season, she was determined to focus on finding a suitable match. She did not regret her sacrifice during the previous two Seasons. After all, her first Season was delayed and thrown into disarray after the death of her father. Her second Season had held more promise, but it seemed her suitors were intimidated by her brother acting as her chaperone for part of her Season. Her brother, the Duke of Cheshire, could be a formidable force.

The stolen kiss permeated her thoughts again, transporting her from her drawing room to the corridor and its many alcoves. She did not know his name, or what he looked like, thanks to the mask he'd worn, but she knew he must a rake. No gentleman would know how to kiss so well. And no lady should spend so much time thinking about a rake either.

Her friends laughed around her, bringing her attention back to the present moment. She blinked. "What did I miss?"

“Daydreaming about the thief again, were you? You did not even realize we were speaking to you for a full minute.”

Cassandra smiled. “My mind wandered. I apologize. What were you speaking of before?”

“We were wondering what the thief wears when he steals the jewels.”

“And does he steal the jewels from people or scour the entire house for them?”

“Wouldn’t it be exciting to find the thief?”

Cassandra let the memory of the masked man go, turning her attention to the thief. “He must wear a disguise, so no one will recognize him.”

“I suppose we will have to look for everyone in disguises now.” Miss Abbott shuddered. “And beware of them.”

“Or confront them.” Miss Delacroise wiggled her eyebrows.

“He probably wears black, so he can blend into the shadows,” Cassandra said.

Miss Delacroise clapped her hands triumphantly. “What did I say? I told you she had thought more about the thief.” The other two shared a private joke.

“It is difficult to think of anything else when the thief is the only topic of conversation anyone speaks of.”

Miss Abbott sniffed. “Let us change the subject then. How are your prospects coming along for this Season?”

Miss Delacroise smiled widely. “Papa has decided that I should be married by the end of this Season. If I do not get an offer myself, he will arrange a match for me.”

“So, will you look for a match yourself to avoid an arranged marriage?” Cassandra asked.

Miss Delacroise shrugged. “Papa will probably do a better job than I will be able to myself. Why would I put in so much work to get a husband when I can enjoy the entire Season unattached and still marry at the end of it?”

“But what about love?” Cassandra asked.

Both Miss Abbott and Miss Delacroise laughed.

“All of us are in our third London Season,” Miss Abbott stated the obvious. “Surely, you have given up on such a silly notion as love, have you not? I shall be happy if I marry at all. Both of my two younger sisters want their turn in London Society. I will not get a fourth Season, unless I play chaperone for one of them.”

Miss Delacroise turned to Cassandra. “What about you, Lady Cassandra? Is there someone who has already caught your eye in the last week since the Season started?”

Heat spread onto her cheeks as the memory of the kiss resurfaced. Her lips tingled every time she’d relived the moment. She shook her head, willing the thoughts to subside. She would not fall for a rake, especially one she had never met, and one that only looked at her as a helpful diversion. “No one in the last week. But at tomorrow’s ball I am going to be introduced to everyone, and dance every dance. I do not want to wait the entire Season.” She wanted to be front and center, especially since she would be competing with the first and second-year girls this year.

CHAPTER TWO



Lady Cassandra walked into the ball with purpose. She would not compare the heights of everyone she danced with now to the rake who had kissed her. But if she happened to notice, then she would congratulate herself for being observant. During her first year in Society, she had not worried about keeping track of gentlemen. She'd only kept track of those she'd danced with. This year, her list was even more refined. She had studied the Peerage list, noting all the eligible gentlemen that were in London this Season. She wanted to be a little more strategic about the way she met people. After all, the way she had gone about the previous two Seasons had not helped her much. Her brother James had pointed out the gentlemen she was not to form attachments with. That amounted to half of the eligible ones, and she had mostly listened to her brother then.

With introductions a plenty, and a renewal of old acquaintances, she danced with Lord Worthen, Lord Stantington, and Lord Beauchamp. Her brother James did not approve of Lord Worthen. Her brother was not in a good humor when he had learned that Lord Worthen had paid her particular attention, but as he had not made her an offer of marriage last Season, it had all come to naught.

Something solidified in her mind, and she realized how much like her brother she was. James had often surprised her by the way he had gone about choosing his dance partners, complaining that the ton was always the same. And yet, here she was making the same observation. Only it had not felt like this a year ago, during her second Season, when a world of possibilities had seemed open to her.

It was no secret that Cassandra had a considerable dowry of fifty thousand pounds. It could make her a target for potential fortune hunters, and so she'd decided long ago to only encourage gentlemen whose financial standing was solvent. As a woman, it was the only way she could justify making a love match work. After all, if the gentleman was financially independent, her dowry would not overshadow his motives.

It almost felt petty the way she gathered gossip about the gentlemen she danced with, and yet, she could not think of a better way to go about it. She had used her brother's solicitor a few times to gain information, but James always seemed to know about those conversations and would discourage her from the gentlemen she asked after, even when she had not even formed any attachment to them. She loved her older brother dearly, but she was extremely grateful her mother could come with her this year to London as her chaperone, instead of being under the scrutinizing watch of her brother again this Season.

Miss Abbott joined Cassandra after one of the dances. "It is quite the crush tonight, is it not?"

"Quite," Cassandra said. "Shall we have some refreshment? I could use a glass of punch."

Miss Abbott agreed, and the two made their way over to the table. “Do you think the thief is here?” she asked, with a note of trepidation in her voice.

Cassandra smiled. She’d been remembering the Masquerade and the handsome stranger—at least she assumed he was handsome—who’d kissed her in the corridor. “I suppose if anything goes missing tonight, we will know for sure tomorrow.” She surveyed the room, wondering if any of the gentlemen she’d met or danced with were the thief.

Miss Delacroise came over with Miss Harrington. They each took a glass of punch and formed a circle close to the tables. “Did you hear? Tonight’s ball has drawn everyone out.”

“Rumor has it that some have come specifically to see if there will be a theft,” Miss Harrington said. “Even Lord Pembroke is here tonight.”

“The Marquess of Pembroke?” Miss Abbott asked.

Miss Harrington nodded. “The very same. From what I hear, he is a very eligible bachelor.”

“Yes, but why has he come? I suppose he is out of mourning now.” Miss Delacroise took a sip of her punch.

“His sister Miss Cavendish was presented at court this Season. She’s dancing over there with Lord Ramsgrave.” Miss Harrington indicated the line she was in with an expert flick of her fan.

“That explains why he is here then,” Cassandra said. “He’s never shown much interest in Society before now.”

“Do you know what he looks like?” Miss Abbott asked.

Miss Harrington shook her head. “I have never seen him before. He was not in Town last Season for any of the social

events.”

“I believe he attended our first Season,” Miss Delacroise said. “My cousin is an acquaintance of his. But you would likely not remember him anyhow, Miss Harrington, as he was only an earl then.”

Miss Harrington grinned. “You are right. I would not have paid any attention to him as an earl. But as a marquess ... that changes things, now does it not?”

Cassandra smiled. “Earl or Marquess, either are very acceptable titles, and both of them would elevate your station.”

“It makes no difference to you, Cassandra, because you are a duke’s daughter. Unless you marry a duke or a prince, titles would mean little to you,” Miss Harrington laughed at the joke.

“That is true,” Cassandra acknowledged. She was not one for seeking out others in such a manner.

Miss Delacroise surveyed the room. “I, for one, want to meet the Marquess. There is so much mystery about him. In fact, I think we should all play a little game right now.”

“What sort of game? Please say it does not involve looking for a thief,” Miss Abbott said, looking concerned.

“Not the thief, just a game of seek and find. Whoever finds the Marquess of Pembroke tonight and dances with him is declared the winner,” Miss Delacroise announced.

“How do you propose we do that? No one knows what he looks like. How are we to prove we have danced with him?” Miss Harrington asked.

Miss Delacroise tapped her chin. “That will be up to each individual player.”

“I am sure the Master of Ceremonies will introduce you,” Cassandra said.

“That is an excellent idea. Shall we all go together?” Miss Abbott asked.

“If we all meet him together, there will be no winner,” Miss Harrington said.

Miss Delacroise smiled. “Whoever he dances with first, shall be declared the winner.”

Both Miss Abbott and Miss Harrington agreed with the plan straightaway, but Cassandra put her untouched punch down on a table. “The three of you go. I shall watch from here and cheer you on. May the most deserving of you win your prize.”

“Suit yourself,” Miss Delacroise said. She linked arms with her two companions and disappeared into the crush.

Cassandra picked up her glass of punch again, not wanting to drink the sour concoction, but knowing that at least the appearance of drinking it gave her something to do. She surveyed the crush, feeling very alone in a room full of people. She should have joined in the silly intrigue. It would have given her something to do.

“I see your friends decided to go on a hunt without you,” a deep voice said quietly next to her.

She glanced at the man who was next to her. She did not know who he was, and speaking back to him would be highly improper. Instead of acknowledging his statement, she put the glass of punch to her lips and forced herself to drink some of the sour liquid down. She couldn't help the pucker that squeezed in her cheeks and throat.

The man next to her gave a soft laugh. “Forgive me for saying so, but you intrigue me. Why did you not want to be declared the winner?”

Cassandra’s eyes widened. “You were eavesdropping on our private conversation? How impertinent.”

The man’s dark eyes danced with mirth. “At the level you were speaking, it was hardly eavesdropping. I wonder that the entire crush did not hear the gossip.”

Cassandra lifted her chin into the air and, though she knew she would regret it, she took another sip of the punch. She scanned the crush, but she did not see her friends. Surely, there were some other friends or acquaintances she could join, and extract herself from this conversation with a man she did not know. “Thank you for the reminder. In the future, I am sure we will not speak so openly next to the punch bowl. If you will excuse me, I should be going.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I wonder why you do not wish to join in with your friends.”

Her jaw dropped open. The man was handsome, to be sure, but his manners were lacking. “We have not been properly introduced. Continuing to carry on a conversation is highly improper.”

“And here I was, about to help you win at your game.” He smirked at her with an irritating superiority.

“It is not *my* game,” she declared. “And just how had you planned to help me win the game?”

He smiled. “I would have you introduced to Lord Pembroke, of course.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, surveying the dark stranger, but before she could answer, he stepped over to Lord

Beauchamp.

“Beauchamp, are you acquainted with this young lady?” he asked.

Lord Beauchamp smiled at Cassandra. “With Lady Cassandra, why, of course I am. Everyone here knows Lady Cassandra.”

“Would you do me the honor of introducing me to her? We have not officially met, and it would be *highly improper* for me to ask this lovely woman to dance when we are not acquainted.”

Lord Beauchamp nodded. “Of course. That is no trouble at all. Robert Cavendish, Marquess of Pembroke, this is Lady Cassandra Berkeley, the duke of Cheshire’s sister. Lady Cassandra, the Marquess of Pembroke, Lord Pembroke.”

He bowed elegantly, that same smirk upon his lips.

Cassandra dropped into a slow curtsy and wanted to melt into the floor. She tried to keep her composure, but a tingling sensation swept through the back of her neck and across her face. Of course, the man who they had been gossiping about was the man who had eavesdropped on their conversation. Cassandra swallowed hard as heat rushed to her cheeks.

The marquess locked eyes with Cassandra but addressed his friend. “Thank you, Beauchamp. You have been most helpful.”

“Anytime, Pembroke,” Lord Beauchamp said, patting Lord Pembroke on the shoulder before he left the two of them alone.

The Marquess of Pembroke grinned widely at Cassandra. “And now, if you would care to join me for the next dance, I will help you secure your victory, m’lady.”

Cassandra's face burned, but she took his outstretched arm, and he escorted her onto the dance floor. She took a steadying breath. It would take all of her energy to not make more of a fool out of herself than she already had.

"What game are you playing at, m'lord?" she asked when they started dancing.

"No game, m'lady. Only securing your own victory, though you were uninterested in playing the game with your friends." His tone was light, his dancing skills expert.

There was something he was not saying, and curiosity won in the battle of wills. Her heart raced. "But why help me win? I was the one who *was not* interested in finding you. You have at least three other prospective dance partners who specifically wanted to find you. Why help me?"

"Perhaps I am curious to know why you did not want to play. What have you against me that you should not wish to meet me?" A dark eyebrow lifted, hiding behind the waves of the dark hair falling across his forehead.

She swallowed. "It wasn't that I did not want to meet you. Only it seemed an unfair sport." She circled around him.

"The *ton* would likely disagree. Is not that exactly what these events are for? To trap others, to form attachments."

"I was not trying to form an attachment when I was talking with my friends. But I will admit I was curious about you."

"What were you curious about?" He lifted his eyebrows again, waiting for her to continue. There was something about the engaging way he looked at her. It was slightly unnerving.

"Nothing as frivolous as you might guess from my conversation with my friends. This is not my first Season in

London. I was simply wondering how you are doing, and how you are coping this Season.”

“I suppose I am coping as well as anyone who is being sought after,” he said with a wry smile.

“I meant ... about losing your parents.”

Lord Pembroke’s features slackened, but he said nothing.

Cassandra blew out a breath. She had already admitted the hard topic, so she might as well continue. “I-my mama is still with me, but I lost my papa a few years ago. I suppose that is why I did not go looking for you. I imagine it is hard on you and on your sister, being in London and navigating the Season without them. It took my brother some time before he could settle into his new role as the duke. Sometimes I still wonder if he is entirely comfortable with it, though it has been a few years. I imagine the last thing you want is a bunch of silly women chasing after you at social gatherings.”

CHAPTER THREE



Robert looked at Lady Cassandra dancing opposite him, trying to figure her out. What did she mean by bringing all of this up in a ballroom? He'd asked her why she'd been curious, but he had not expected this as a response.

He measured his words carefully before responding. "London is definitely different without my parents. I still feel their loss keenly." It was still the truth, in a manner of speaking. London was different without them. He felt their loss, but that had been overshadowed with hope over the last couple of months since learning his parents were not dead. Having his parents remain very much alive, hiding in France, had inspired excitement within him. But it was an excitement he could not share. He'd had to work extra hard at remembering his parents were a somber topic with everyone, aside from his uncle and cousin.

"I am sorry to hear it. It is most difficult indeed for longer than one would think. I still miss my papa every day," she said sympathetically.

"I am sorry for your loss as well," he said to Lady Cassandra. "I remember my father always spoke highly of yours."

She smiled, blinking away some of the emotion. “I apologize, m’lord. I am afraid I will turn into a water pot if we continue on with this conversation. Shall we speak of something happier? Do you have grand plans for the Season?”

“I am still trying to figure out how to navigate my ... new life ... and my new station. It seems to consume me. But I plan to be more involved in the social side of the Season this year, as it is my sister’s first year.” He smiled, pleased that his answers were convincing to even his own ears. He had grand plans, but they all revolved around the War Office and helping find the mole who had been stealing secrets and alerting the enemies of their battle plans.

Even now, he was waiting to retrieve a note. He had a precise window of time to locate the instructions being left to him, and to pen a response. A rush filled him, and his heart beat faster. Espionage over the last few months was what he’d looked forward to every day. When it came to the Season, and participating in it, it was nothing more than a cover.

Lady Cassandra’s green eyes seemed to shine in the candlelight. “Of course that is your focus,” she said in such a compassionate tone. “I should not have asked the way I did.”

“Lady Cassandra,” he said her name, drawing her attention to his eyes. “Your question did not offend me. I am touched that you are so caring to a stranger about such difficult topics.” He wished he could explain that he did not need her sympathy or her condolences, because his parents were alive. But he could not say that. Not to her. Not to anyone.

“Is your sister enjoying her Season so far?” she asked him.

He nodded. “So far, she seems to be.”

“I imagine it would be very difficult for her to be without her mother during the Season.”

“I believe she is coping as best she can, but you are likely right. My aunt and uncle and cousin are also with us in Town, and my aunt is taking on the role of chaperone for most of the events.”

“Aunts make far better chaperones than older brothers, to be sure.” Lady Cassandra’s eyes widened as she finished her sentence.

Robert held in a laugh, and the motion took effort. How long had it been since he’d had the desire to truly laugh? “You give your opinions rather decidedly, don’t you?”

“I apologize, again, m’lord. I meant no offense. It is my own personal experience speaking. My brother was my chaperone for much of last Season.”

“You believe he is the reason you are here for another Season? He scared off all your suitors?”

She gave him a demure smile that looked effortless and must have taken time to practice. “Something like that, m’lord. I cannot say for certain if it was the brother in him, or his title of duke, that was most intimidating, but either way, brothers are a force to be reckoned with. And you are in a similar position, being both a brother and possessing a high-ranking title. If you are anything like my brother, I should send my condolences now to your sister.”

He chuckled lightly, holding back from laughing too loudly as they moved through their dance. “Poor Rosalie, indeed.”

“Perhaps with your aunt as chaperone, she will fare well this Season,” Lady Cassandra said.

“One can only hope.” The dance stepped called for them to circle around others before joining hands and continuing down the line. When they were back together again, he said, “Tell me of your plans this Season, Lady Cassandra. What other victories do you hope for, now that you will be declared the *winner* of tonight’s ball?”

She shook her head slightly, but there was a small smile on her face. “You tease me, m’lord. I have no other games or victories planned.”

“You are dancing during the London Season. Have I been away too long? I assumed this was still the Marriage Mart?”

She ducked her head. “It is still called that, Lord Pembroke. It is one thing to socialize among the ton, and quite another to talk about one’s expectations for the Season, especially to a stranger.”

“A stranger? We have been introduced and been conversing for nearly a quarter of an hour. Not to mention, I was privy to you and your friend’s game. You can hardly consider me a stranger.”

She laughed. “I shall discuss nothing in front of you again, m’lord. You will only use it against me.”

The dance ended, and Robert squeezed her gloved fingers. “Lady Cassandra, you misrepresent my intentions. I did not use the information against you. I simply used it to my advantage to secure a dance with you. Perhaps we both won something.”

She blinked, her mouth opening and closing before she said, “I thank you for the dance, Lord Pembroke.”

“I look forward to dancing with you again in the future,” he said, as he escorted her off the dance floor. He had never

felt so comfortable with anyone while dancing. Lady Cassandra had certainly put him at ease.

Her fingers tensed under his. “I believe I have made quite the fool of myself in your presence today.”

“I do not remember it that way. You are most ... intriguing, Lady Cassandra.”

“My mama is over there,” she said, nodding to a group of mothers and chaperones gathered together.

He escorted her to her mama, instead of to the punch table where she'd been before the dance.

Lady Cassandra made the introduction of her mama to him. He bowed, finally dropping Lady Cassandra's arm.

The dowager duchess looked at him appraisingly, with the same bright eyes Lady Cassandra possessed. “I have heard your sister is out this year, as your mourning is over.”

Robert nodded. In the last eighteen months, he had forgotten just how quickly news traveled around London. It seemed that everyone knew everything before the conversation even began. “That is correct.”

The duchess's features softened. “We are, of course, very sorry for your loss. It is hard indeed to lose the ones we love.”

Robert cleared his throat. “It is.”

The duchess looked between her daughter and Robert. “We are having a small family dinner with a few of our closest friends in three days' time. If you are available, we should enjoy having you and your sister join our party.”

Robert thanked the duchess. “That is most kind of you, but my aunt, uncle, and cousin are also staying with me at my London house. I should not be able to leave them as a host.”

And he was not sure what assignments he would have from the War Office three days from now. It was a never-ending pattern of instruction and then action.

“Of course, the invitation extends to any that are staying with you. I shall give cook the number of extra people, and it will not be a problem.” She said it with a tone that commanded presence. She was not the type of woman that would take no for an answer.

“We are five. And thank you so much for your generosity in inviting us.” He would figure out a way to get his assignments done so that they did not conflict with the dinner party.

“It is our pleasure,” the dowager said.

He smiled. “I will see both of you at dinner. Lady Cassandra, thank you again for the most enjoyable dance.”

She gave him a demure smile. “Thank you, Lord Pembroke.”

He bowed to them both and then exited the room to retrieve his next assignment.

CHAPTER FOUR



Cassandra sat next to Miss Harrington the next evening. They waited for the musicale to start as everyone around them took their places.

“I still cannot believe you found Lord Pembroke last night, and you never introduced the rest of us to him,” Miss Harrington said.

“I was not trying to keep it a secret. He all but disappeared after he danced with me. Not that I was trying to keep track of him,” Cassandra added hastily. “He must have gone to the card rooms, or the supper room early.”

“Was he devastatingly handsome?” she asked.

Cassandra blushed. She noticed how very handsome he was since he’d started talking to her. “Yes, he is very handsome.”

Miss Harrington smiled. “I met someone last night while searching for Lord Pembroke.”

“Who did you meet?”

“His name is Gregory Langley, the Earl of Waterford. Lord Waterford was everything wonderful. He called on me this morning, and we had a lovely interlude. He brought me flowers and told me I was beautiful.”

“Did you dance with him?”

“Oh yes. For an entire set. He said he would ask me for a third if it did not look too scandalous. Imagine that.”

“Be careful,” Cassandra cautioned. “London is full of rakes.”

“I doubt a rake would bring me flowers and stay for half an hour at my house.”

“It is best to be on guard about such things,” Cassandra said.

Miss Harrington only laughed. “You act as if being courted were a dangerous thing.”

“Sometimes it can be dangerous, very dangerous,” Cassandra said, thinking back to the previous summer when her dear friend Mary Hartley had been courted by a dangerous man.

“Dangerous? It is not as if I am fighting *Napoleon*.” She lowered her voice. “There is no sense in worrying over *me*. He has declared that he wants to court me. Would a rake do that?”

A rake would likely do anything they wanted to. They were unpredictable ... and such good kissers. Cassandra shook her head, ridding the thought from her brain for the evening.

Miss Harrington took that as Cassandra’s answer and smiled triumphantly.

“Lady Cassandra, how do you do?” Lord Pembroke bowed.

Cassandra’s heart tripped a little as she stared into the marquess’s eyes. “Good evening, Lord Pembroke. I am well, thank you. I did not know you would be in attendance tonight. I thought you were leaving the chaperone duties to your aunt.”

He nodded. "I am, but my sister is playing tonight, and I wanted to come and see her. May I present her to you? Rosalie, this is Lady Cassandra Berkeley. Lady Cassandra, my sister, Lady Rosalie Cavendish."

They each curtsied, then Cassandra introduced the marquess and his sister to Miss Harrington.

Lady Rosalie gave a small curtsy. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I hear we will become better acquainted with you this week. My brother says we are to dine at your house in a couple of days."

"That is correct. I look forward to spending time with you," Cassandra said.

"The musicale is about to start," Lord Pembroke said. "I shall watch you from the back, Rosalie, and let you sit up front with the rest of the young ladies who will be playing."

Lady Rosalie nodded, looking a little unsure, but took a seat next to Cassandra. Cassandra let her gaze wander back to where Lord Pembroke stood when the musicale began. His smile was pleasant, but not like the one that she'd drawn out of him when they'd first met. The young ladies who were in their first Season performed first, and then the rest of the young women were scattered throughout the rest of the program.

After the first three performances, Lady Rosalie approached the pianoforte, and Cassandra glanced at Lord Pembroke again. His features suddenly sparked to life, making it seem as if his features before were hidden under a mask that she could not read. A determination filled Cassandra. She wanted him to look at her differently than any of the others who were playing Bach and Schumann.

Sure enough, when Lady Rosalie sat down and the next debutante played, his face was again a pleasant expression, but showed no genuine enjoyment. She had her challenge for the evening, and so she focused all of her attentions forward, trying to think of a different song than she had anticipated. There was already enough Bach in the room, and though she loved the Minuet she had chosen, it would not be the first time someone had changed their mind right before playing.

Cassandra sat on the pianoforte, glancing only briefly around the room before playing, hoping to see the spark in Lord Pembroke that no other debutante procured. But he was not standing where he had been. Momentarily thrown off, she blinked and quickly glanced in the direction where he had been, scanning the rows of gentlemen who were seated. Perhaps he had found a seat.

She ran her fingers over the notes and then played a lively piece by Haydn. Having not prepared to play it, she was pleasantly surprised that her fingers only slipped twice on the wrong notes. And to think she had spent all week perfecting a piece she hadn't even played. Feeling the success of her performance, she stood and received her applause, giving a slight curtsy to the room.

She stole a glance toward the back of the room where Lord Pembroke had been, and to the surrounding seats, but did not see him anywhere. Disappointment ran through her. She had wanted him to see her play, had hoped for the smile that he'd given her as they had danced together the night before.

During the rest of the performances, Cassandra kept her gaze on the pianoforte, politely clapping after each song. She resisted the urge to turn around and look for Lord Pembroke

again. He was not in the room, and she wouldn't continually look around, hoping he had seen her performance.

As the performance ended, Lady Rosalie stood. "Thank you for allowing me to sit next to you during the musicale."

Cassandra smiled at the marquess's sister. "Of course. You are welcome to join us any time."

Miss Harrington stood. "It was so nice meeting you, Lady Rosalie."

"It was nice meeting both of you," Lady Rosalie said sincerely. "If you will excuse me for a few moments, there is someone I must speak to." Lady Rosalie turned and joined a few of the debutantes a few paces away.

Miss Harrington took out her fan and waved it slowly in front of her face. She dropped her voice, speaking in French, as they used to do when they were talking of gentlemen. "*And where has the gentleman gone, do you suppose? I thought he would be next to you the entire evening.*"

Cassandra replied in French. "*It is a mystery indeed.*" And one that she likely would not spend much thought on. She had other things occupying her mind. "Did you see the paper this morning? The thief has stolen jewels and more bank notes. He robbed the house where the ball was and another house on the same street, all in one night."

Miss Harrington smiled. "Wouldn't it be exciting to dance with a thief at the ball? Or be his supper companion?"

Cassandra blinked. "I doubt the thief has much time for dancing. No doubt he does not stay to socialize."

Several young bucks wandered among the crowd, congratulating each debutante on their playing.

Miss Harrington spoke in French again. *“Do not look now, but it appears that now that the music is done for the evening, the real entertainment has started. Who do you think will be the first young woman to fall for the lavish praise?”*

Cassandra smiled. *“The woman in light green, Miss Pergot. She will likely think the praise is sincere. She was one of the best tonight.”*

The Earl of Waterford came over and spoke to Miss Harrington, and Cassandra tried to ascertain if the earl was being sincere with Miss Harrington, but perhaps it was too early in the Season to tell.

Cassandra greeted several others in the room, congratulating them on their performances and graciously accepting their return praise. A few gentlemen came up to Cassandra, but none caught her eye as she politely accepted their compliments and agreed to having them call on her later in the week.

Cassandra turned when she heard Lady Rosalie’s voice close to her.

“Brother, wasn’t it a splendid evening?” Lady Rosalie asked as Lord Pembroke approached.

Cassandra’s pulse quickened as Lord Pembroke made eye contact with her. He smiled with such ease.

He gave a slight bow to her, then he turned and smiled broadly at his sister. “That it was. You play so lovely, and I enjoyed every piece equally.”

Cassandra laughed at the absurd phrase, and then covered her mouth with her fan when Lord Pembroke raised an eyebrow at her. “Apologies, but you cannot have enjoyed

every piece equally.” After all, he had easily missed half of the performances, if not more.

Lord Pembroke’s eyes danced with amusement and a hint of a challenge. “And why is that, Lady Cassandra?”

“Equally, m’lord takes into account a lot of comparison, or no comparison at all. For instance, to the discerning ear pieces were played at all different levels. Are they all equal?”

Lord Pembroke rewarded her with a smile that seemed to break through the mask he had worn at the beginning of the musicale. “You interpret my meaning that all skill levels are the same?”

“That is what equally means, m’lord.”

“Yes, but I did not say I enjoyed the *skill level* of all equally. I said I enjoyed every *piece* equally. There is a difference, however slight.”

“So your comment does not mean much at all, then, does it?”

Lord Pembroke’s lips twitched. “It means I had an enjoyable evening without the constraint of picking each and every piece and its performer apart.”

“Touché, Lord Pembroke. You are an exception among the men here who have come to see the abilities of each woman and to compare them with scrutiny.”

He took a small step toward her, bending his head closer to her. “It looks as if I have won our little battle of wits,” he said in a hushed tone. “Perhaps that is fitting, since I helped you win your little game yesterday.”

Cassandra was enlivened by the verbal fencing match between herself and Lord Pembroke. “Last night I only won

because I was not trying to win, and you were eavesdropping. How did you win tonight?”

“By being diplomatic, and not calling out the perfections of performers against the imperfections of others.”

Cassandra smiled. “All diplomacy aside, how did you enjoy my playing of Bach?”

“I cannot imagine anyone playing it better.”

Cassandra’s breath caught in her throat. He said all the right things, in all the right ways. Her heart seemed to skip inside of her for a moment. Then she remembered he had not been there to watch her. He was giving her the same praise that the eager young men were giving to the first-year debutantes. “You liked my take on such a classic? You do not think Bach’s Minuet is overdone at functions like these?” She kept her eyes locked on his, being drawn in. Would he admit that he had not been in the room? Or had she been mistaken, and perhaps he had actually found a seat in the middle of the musicale.

He straightened his jacket, the only tell that he was nervous. “You played the Minuet wonderfully, and you know it. I shall be disappointed if you do not play at every musicale in a similar fashion. Bach is always a classic.”

“That is kind of you to say, m’lord.” Cassandra could not keep a smile from spreading across her lips. He had said all the right things to her, but she had played Haydn instead of Bach, and a gentleman would most certainly know the difference. Interesting.



“YOU ARE SLIGHTLY OBSESSIVE ABOUT WHAT THE *TON* THINKS of you,” William Berkeley, Cassandra’s younger brother, said to her the next morning as she read through the paper at breakfast.

“I want to know what everyone thought of the *musicale*. That is not a crime,” Cassandra said, with her chin in the air.

“It is not a crime, but it appears you are equally interested in London’s thief as well,” he said, pulling the paper from her and reading the headline at the top of the page. “*A Thief on the rise in High Society.*” He raised an eyebrow. “It looks like someone is making a debut.” He lifted the paper in front of his face and continued reading. “*Several break-ins since Christmas originally appeared to be unconnected until recently, when it was learned that the thief may be after more than just heirloom jewels and other valuables. Several aristocratic families, none of whom want their names appearing in the papers at this time, have reported the same missing item. While not of specific intrinsic value, the thief looks as if he may be targeting the wealthy in Society, not only for their jewels but for their seal.*” William looked up from the paper. “What rubbish. It does not mention how many families this includes. Perhaps only two families have had missing seals, likely misplaced or simply forgotten in their country homes.”

Cassandra pulled the paper back. She would be more careful in the future and not read at the table about the thief, but at this moment she needed to downplay her interest in such an intrigue. Though the *ton* referred to it on a regular basis, trying to piece it together from the newspaper was not something a gently bred woman in her third London Season should concern herself with. “If you will notice *under* that article is one of much more pressing interest.” And thankfully

she had scanned the information on Society before she'd started reading about the mysterious thief. *"Musical at the Foster's was a Success. Everyone who is anyone attended the musicale, dressed in their finest. Several young women gave their debut performance officially beginning the Season on a musical note. While several in their first year played well, those with more experience around the ton showed a surprising amount of skill."* She stopped reading, not wanting to focus on the words written about her.

William put his fork down. "That cannot be all it says. Weren't you looking for information about yourself?"

"It is there," Cassandra said, wondering only for a moment if Lord Pembroke took his mornings to read the paper.

William scanned the paper until he found what he was looking for and cleared his throat. *"One would think Lady Cassandra Berkeley's performance would have been just as delightful as her previous two Seasons were. After seeing the variety of the performers before her, she chose to pass on Bach's Minuet 1 and instead played the more difficult piano concerto by Haydn. Her performance surprised the audience and was likely done to garner more attention, as this is her third Season. Though not flawless, Lady Cassandra's performance was an excellent effort for changing the repertoire on such short notice. Other performers mused that Lady Cassandra never had any intentions of playing Bach, as was originally stated in the programme. If this is true, she has earned the conversations about her, which was likely her desire this entire time."*

William folded the paper, putting it back on the table. "Did you plan to change songs ahead of time?"

“Of course not,” Lady Cassandra said. “You have heard me practicing the Minuet all week.”

William’s lips twitched. “Do they have it right in the paper? Were you only looking to upstage the first-year debutantes by not admitting what you had secretly hoped to play?”

“That you can ask such a question of me is quite intolerable,” Cassandra said with a grin. “I do not need to stoop to such tricks to be noticed by Society. I did not feel in the mood to play Bach when it was my turn.”

“How many others played Bach before you?”

“Six, I think,” she said.

“Then it appears you made an excellent decision. Take care though. Not all gossip is good gossip. You do not want to be in the papers if everything they say about you is negative, regardless of whether it is true.”

“I am not the one writing the columns. I cannot help what they say about me,” she said.

“That is true,” William said.

Edward, Cassandra’s other younger brother, and William’s twin, came into the room. Her sister, Lizzie, followed behind Edward. Lizzie was not out in Society yet. She exchanged greetings with both of them, then Cassandra excused herself, discreetly taking the paper with her.

She spent the rest of the morning rereading about the thief. To not arouse too much suspicion, she first cut out the article about the musicale, and placed it on a pile of other similar Society gossip. Then she cut out the article involving the thief and put it in the growing stack of similar articles.

Many of the thefts took place during parties, though some were not actually reported until days after the events. Cassandra opened up her writing desk, sharpened a quill, and began writing. She crossed every theft with the social events that happened during the same week.

Some details between the Masquerade and the time she arrived back in London for the Season were speculation. James had been in Town for a portion of that time, but he had not kept every newspaper during those three months. Matching up the thief with the event was a relatively simple task, even if it took the whole of her morning.

But was there an actual connection? A social event where a crush of people gathered would be an ideal time to steal something, but wouldn't it also make it more dangerous because there were more people that could catch a thief at any moment?

Unbidden to her mind came the black-masked man who had kissed her. He had seemed rather startled that she was in the corridor. Could he be a thief? Or more specifically, *the* thief? She let her imagination run wild for only a few moments. Was it possible that there was a theft on the night of the Masquerade? Her heart pounded, and she searched through the papers until she found what she was looking for.

CHAPTER FIVE



Robert paced in his library as he thought about tonight's upcoming dinner engagement at the Duke of Cheshire's manor. Jeremy had briefed him, similar to other times, but tonight's assignment was not sitting well with him. The debriefing took most of the morning and then his cousin spent the rest of the afternoon relaying all of Robert's information through the proper channels to the War Office. It was time-consuming, but Robert had to believe that he was doing the service that his country most needed right now.

"Stop pacing. You are making me nervous," Jeremy said, lounging in a wingback chair, sitting much too comfortably for Robert's liking. It was insufferable.

"How can you remain so perpetually calm? You put on an air as if you do not have a care in the world."

Jeremy tilted his head. "For starters, I do not pace the floor as if I am trying to wear it down. Pacing leads to agitation. You have spent the last three months going through information like this. The procedure is similar. Look for clues in the study. Check to see if the seal is there. Check any letters you come across. It should not take long. Tonight will be no different."

Robert sighed. “I beg to differ. I have never spied on someone above my station. Espionage is starting to feel like it oversteps the bounds of propriety.”

Jeremy laughed. “Starting to feel like that, is it? You have only just started in this business. And you are the one who wanted in. Helping in this effort is not without its risks.”

Robert blew out a breath. “Spying on the duke though? He is a powerful man in Lords. It feels like I am stealing secrets.”

“You are *uncovering* secrets that are essential to the Crown. You are not stealing secrets for the pleasure of it. There is a difference, cousin.”

Robert scuffed his boot against the hardwood floor, but it did not have the effect of being in the country in the summer when a plume of dirt would rise into the air. “I understand that, but when the invitation was extended to me, I had no thought of spying, only enjoying the society of the duke and his family for the evening.”

Jeremy sat up straighter. “You want to *enjoy* Society? You are an imposter. My real cousin would never say such things.”

Robert blew out a breath. “I used to though, before my parents ... well ... before I thought my parents were ...” He let the words trail off, not wanting to admit the words aloud. He had been sworn to secrecy to keep the news from his sister, and he could not risk those words being overheard.

Jeremy nodded. “It is rough luck. I cannot make any promises about your parents. I have no authority to speak for the War Office.”

Robert nodded. “I understand that, but is there a chance that their situation could change?” If his parents could hide from Napoleon, surely, they would be able to sneak out of

France undetected, wouldn't they? Where could they be that they were still safe? His mind spun over the options, but he could never settle on anything conclusive.

“It is hard to say, Robert. We are in a tricky spot right now with the mole. While you have been doing your investigating, I have been doing my own. We had to send the Beau Street Runners after a few suspects, but they were only petty thieves. I shall not get into the particulars about it.” He straightened his lapels. “But you want to focus on Society, truly?”

Robert shrugged nonchalantly. “With my sister out in Society, I find I have a desire to be there as well.”

Jeremy nodded. “Perhaps someone has caught your eye?”

Lady Cassandra's face immediately appeared in his mind. “No, it is not like that. I haven't been around enough of Society to form an attachment to anyone.”

Jeremy stood up, facing Robert directly. “Cousin, you have improved over the past few months, but you are still a terrible liar. I can tell you have someone in mind.” Jeremy was quiet for a moment, but when Robert did not fill in any of the gaps, Jeremy snapped his fingers. “Right, she is going to be at dinner tonight. That is why you are having a hard time focusing. It is all making sense now.”

Robert took a small step backwards. “No, there is no attachment between myself and Lady Cassandra. She has been at every function since I arrived, that is all. She is ... amusing and witty.”

“Lady Cassandra? The duke's sister? I thought you said she was the one who was speaking French at the musicale.” Jeremy frowned.

“She was, but the conversation was unimportant.”

Jeremy stood and began pacing. “How do you know that the conversation was unimportant?”

“Because she was speaking to one of her friends about, well, I cannot quite remember the exact phrases at this point.”

“You said they had mentioned the war and Napoleon,” Jeremy countered.

Robert rolled his eyes. “Everyone speaks of the war in some fashion or another. Most mention Napoleon. If that was the requirement of when to pay attention to conversations, I should need three dozen more ears to pick up on everything.”

“But not all of them speak in French when they are talking about the war. Robert, you must see that you can not defend her or her family. You have no proof that they are *not* involved,” Jeremy said. “Just because she is beautiful does not mean she is guiltless. You barely know her, and you do not know her family well at all. But perhaps you can find out the information tonight. That is the goal, is it not? Tonight you will ascertain if her family is tangled up with the mole and a supporter of Napoleon.”

Robert felt the truth of his cousin’s words. He hadn’t known Lady Cassandra long, and he did not know her well. He wanted to believe the best in others, but he could not let his interest in her cloud his judgment. “She does not seem like the type of person to be involved. I do not want them to be connected to this,” Robert said with open vulnerability.

Jeremy put a hand on Robert’s shoulder. “You still have much to learn, if you think that. None of us *want* any of our friends or family or countrymen to be connected with this. We are in a precarious situation. The reality is there are traitors in our country, and those traitors may also be in the Peerage. Treason is a serious crime. The War Office has been most clear

on this topic. When there is cause to question, everyone is to be treated like a suspect, even if you fancy a growing attachment to someone. The Duke of Cheshire and his family must be scrutinized like the others, especially since you overheard Lady Cassandra speaking of the war in French.”

“I know that, and I will respect the wisdom of the War Office. But I do not believe they are culpable.”

Jeremy sighed. “All you can do is uncover the information. Everyone’s choices in this are their own.”

“And if she or her family are involved?” He asked the question, though he already knew what would happen to them. They’d be charged with treason and hung for their crimes.

Jeremy looked toward the window and blew out a breath. “Then we alert the War Office, and they will take care of the rest.” Jeremy turned back toward Robert. “And if they are not involved, wouldn’t you want to have that assurance sooner rather than later?”

Robert nodded. “I would rather know, I suppose. The logistics are not coming together for me. We are not attending a large party tonight, with multiple rooms opened for guests. It is a small dinner party with only a few families. I can hardly leave the festivities without detection.”

“You are right. We shall think of something. Perhaps when the ladies retire, you will make your excuses. That should buy you time before the rest of the party realizes you are missing. I can stand guard. Even an intimate dinner party with the duke and his family will still be at least two dozen people. That should suffice to keep a cover. This will be the same kind of operation as at the Montgomery’s. This is why you are so valuable to the War Office. On my own, I never would have procured an invitation to dine with the duke and his family.”

Robert could see the wisdom in the War Office wanting him to help. His motive at the time was to fill a void before he knew his parents were, in fact, still alive. But now, after a few months of the same thing, he wondered if he would be more useful fighting his way through France and picking up the trail of where his parents were hidden.

Surely, if his parents knew he was looking for them, they would make themselves known, wouldn't they? But he did not know where to start. They could be anywhere. Perhaps staying connected to the War Office was the fastest way to see his parents again. And the sooner they found the mole who'd been leaking important war strategies to the enemy, the sooner the War Office could devote their attentions to bringing his parents home safely.

Robert straightened his dinner jacket, trying to compose himself and disconnect from the work he had to focus on tonight. Everyone was a suspect, and the Duke of Cheshire and his family were not exempt. They may not have looked into the family yet, had Lady Cassandra not been speaking in French. He had a job to do, and he would do his job, even if that meant trying to find evidence to incriminate the most amusing woman he'd met in London.



FALSTED MANOR, THE DUKE OF CHESHIRE'S LONDON HOME, was everything immaculate and ostentatious, and Robert felt completely at ease during the dinner. He held his own, sitting close to the duke, talking with his family and the other friends in the party. He kept a sharp eye out for anything unusual at the table, but everything seemed to be in order. He listened to the conversations for any coded language, but detected none.

Lady Cassandra was at the other end of the table, and that was advantageous. It helped Robert focus throughout the meal. He had not said more than a dozen words to her when he arrived. He had a mission to accomplish, and he needed to keep that in the forefront of his mind. There would be plenty of time to talk with her once he had proved that her family was not involved with France.

After dinner, the ladies retired to the drawing room, and Robert gave his excuses when the men sat down for port. It was almost too easy the way he slipped down the corridor without detection, past the drawing room, and into the duke's library.

CHAPTER SIX



Cassandra had only stepped into the drawing room when she'd heard Lord Pembroke making an excuse to leave the dining room. Curiosity piqued inside her. Why was the marquess choosing to leave now? Surely, he would not leave the party before she gave him a good set down on the differences between Bach and Haydn.

As the women in the group gathered together, Cassandra slowly edged toward the other drawing room door, cracking it open in time to see Lord Pembroke's coat at the other end of the hall. He was entering her brother's library, which was nowhere close to the chamber pot.

She closed the door undetected and headed toward her mother. Something must be done. Her heart leapt, and she thought of her strategy quickly. "Mama, I fear I have a headache. I think I should go lay down for a little while."

Her mother looked at her, then nodded. "Of course, my dear. If you feel better, please join us again. I know there are several here who would love to hear you play."

Cassandra smiled at her mother, then walked at a sedate pace toward the door and let herself out into the corridor. Instead of heading directly into the duke's library, she went into the small family sitting room just next door. No candles lit

the space, but Cassandra knew her way was clear if she stayed walking in a straight path to the end of the room.

Once she was next to the old tapestry, she carefully lifted a corner and found the latch. Praying that she did not make too much noise, she pulled the tapestry aside and slid into the space between the two rooms. The corner of the tapestry in the library illuminated the edge of the wall.

As a young child, she could move from the tapestry to behind the draperies with little effort, but she had not used the space in years. She picked up her skirts in her left hand and slowly moved the tapestry with her right.

The sound of rustling papers filled her ears as she quickly ducked behind the curtains, pulling them back to see Lord Pembroke sitting at her brother's desk. She put a hand over her mouth, a physical reminder for her to stay silent and hidden. Her heart thumped wildly. What was Lord Pembroke up to?

She observed him for a moment. He was ... reading the paper? Well, it was not exactly the full paper, just the remains of the paper. She had delivered them back to her brother as more of a joke. He'd likely already read the paper before she'd been able to get her hands on them. The Duke of Cheshire had not seemed to mind that she had taken care to cut out articles about herself. At least that was the pretense she had used for taking a few extra articles about the thief at the same time. Hopefully, her brother wouldn't care about that either.

Lord Pembroke held up the papers, studying the empty holes she had made before replacing them onto the stack. How odd to take a break from port to come and read the paper. She could not see his face, only a little more of his profile when he had turned toward the light to look at the papers.

He picked up the letters stacked upon the desk and glanced through them. A warning went off in her head. Glancing through a cut-up stack of articles was one thing, but searching someone's personal correspondence was quite a different matter. What could he be so interested in? He twirled the wax seal around in his hand and set it on the stack of letters.

He fished out something from the inside of his pocket and laid it carefully on one of the papers. He scooted his chair back and began trying all the drawers on her brother's desk. The first was unlocked. Cassandra smiled. He had chosen the drawer with the blank sheets inside of it.

Lord Pembroke took his time examining the blank sheets. He took out a few, held them up to the light, and then replaced them in the drawer. He opened two more drawers before he pulled on one that was locked. Picking something up off the desk, he started picking the lock.

Cassandra's breathing came faster, her pulse matching speed. Clearly, she had seen enough to know that Lord Pembroke had nefarious intentions. But what could she do in this precarious situation? For the present, she had to make sure that Lord Pembroke did not find the valuables.

Lord Pembroke wiped his brow, trying again at the lock, and letting out a small chuckle when he'd finally engaged the lock.

Cassandra could not suppress the grin that stole across her face. He had opened up another drawer that held blank paper, but this one also secretly held all of her father's most prized artifacts underneath a false bottom of the drawer.

Lord Pembroke repeated the steps he'd done before with the blank paper, then took the entire stack out and knocked softly on the bottom of the drawer. He then moved to his

knees, looking under the drawer. He knew about the secret drawer. But how could he? Unless he was ... *the thief*.

Cassandra's heart pounded faster. She needed to go for help. She had already stayed too long. She needed to alert the household, but she could not let him get into that drawer. It was some of her father's favorites. And they were hidden for a reason.

Lord Pembroke climbed further underneath the desk, pushed the secret button, and released the latch without the key. He wiggled the false bottom of the drawer open and took out a carved jade elephant. He studied it as if he were evaluating the price it could be fenced for, looking over every detail.

Cassandra threw caution to the wind. If she'd learned anything from the news articles she'd read about the thief, it was that there was never a trail to follow. She could not leave through the secret passageway and alert her brother, who was back in the dining room. Interrupting the men's port would be seen as scandalous, even if she had a good reason. Lord Pembroke had clearly chosen his moment well. But she would not let such a thief steal from her family. She would protect her family from such looting, and she was going to give the man a set down.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't scream and alert the entire household to your crimes?" Cassandra said, stepping out from behind the curtains.

Lord Pembroke started. Turning toward her, his hands trembled. "Lady Cassandra, how did you get in here?" He almost dropped the priceless heirloom but recovered it before it landed on the ground.

“Unlike you, I know the value of stealth.” She crossed her arms and frowned, trying to appear imposing, though she felt ridiculous. “Just what exactly do you think you are doing, Lord Pembroke?”

“I was looking around—”

“I cannot believe I have been so blind. *You* are the thief! I have been watching you this whole time. I knew you were hiding something. You have been so hard to read, but I knew there was something deeper about you. It makes sense—the disappearing at events, the lies ... I should have seen it sooner.”

“I am not a thief,” he said, setting the elephant on the desk.

She arched an eyebrow. “I caught you red-handed.”

His eyes widened, fear settling between his eyebrows. “This is not what it looks like.” He held up his hands, showing his palms toward her in a sign of surrender.

Cassandra stepped closer to him, gaining confidence in her position. “Oh no? Only a thief would know how to find my brother’s secret compartment like that.”

“Unless one inherited the same desk from his father and had a fascination with the hidden mechanisms. There is another false door in that drawer too,” he said, pointing to another drawer that did, indeed, contain another hiding place.

“Knowing that does not help your case, Lord Pembroke, if that is your real name,” she said.

A small smile lifted the corner of one side of his mouth. “Lord Pembroke is my name. I inherited the title from my father.” There was sincerity in his eyes as he said the statement.

“Very well. I believe you that your name is Lord Pembroke, but you are intruding on my brother’s private space. And you expect me to believe you that you are not a thief? You took the jade elephant from her place.”

“Her place?” Lord Pembroke looked amused.

“It is a female elephant, m’lord.”

“And I shall put it back where it was.” He took up the elephant and placed it back where it had been, then he closed the secret compartment and replaced the papers.

“You did not lock it back up,” she said.

He cleared his throat. “Yes, well. Locking it up takes much more time than unlocking it.”

“You should not be on that side of my brother’s desk.”

He came around to the other side of the desk. “Is that better?”

“Tell me the truth of why you are in here,” she demanded, proud of herself for sounding like she really meant the words. She was protecting her property, and she needed him to keep talking to distract him while she could think of some way to alert her family without causing a scandal.

“I did not come to steal,” he said.

“You have already said that, but that does not answer my question. It merely misdirects it.”

“Beg pardon, m’lady. I cannot say. But I swear to you I am not a thief.”

He appeared to be telling the truth. His eyes were sincere when he said he was not the thief, and yet, without proof to the contrary, she could not believe him.

She put a hand on her hip. “You had better say. One scream will set the entire house into pandemonium, and then you will be explaining to more than myself why you are thieving from members of the Peerage.”

“Screaming would certainly not be a helpful diversion indeed,” he said.

Cassandra blinked. *A helpful diversion?* She looked into the Marquess’s eyes. Could it be? She knew that phrase, had replayed it over and over in her mind for months ...

“Am I interrupting something?” Edward asked.

Cassandra kept her gaze locked on Lord Pembroke. He seemed to plead with her. It was the moment of truth. She had caught the thief, the man who’d preoccupied her mornings reading through the paper. But she had also caught her masked rake, the man who’d filled every spare minute of her days, and invaded her dreams. Cassandra forced herself to look at her brother. She cleared her throat. “No, not at all. Just finishing a private conversation, brother. Nothing more.”

Lord Pembroke’s entire frame seemed to relax next to her.

“The door was closed,” he said firmly.

“That was my fault. I came in here looking for a quiet place to lie down. Mama was hoping I would be able to rejoin the party after I felt better.”

Edward squinted.

Cassandra laughed. “Do not be cross, Edward. Lord Pembroke was simply explaining to me why he thought Haydn was Bach when I played it the other night. As you can see, I am not harmed.”

Edward frowned. “Still, Cassandra. How would this look to the rest of our company if someone else had walked in?”

Cassandra nodded and put a hand to her head. “You are right, Edward. I should have thought about that. Likely it is due to my headache.”

“In the future, unless he is proposing to you, make sure that you keep the door open. Unless you want me to plant a facer on him. Or worse.” Edward turned to Lord Pembroke. “M’lord, we are about to finish our port and join the ladies. I trust you will not want to be missed when we rejoin the ladies.”

Lord Pembroke nodded his acknowledgment. “Of course, thank you.” He turned toward Cassandra, his eyebrows raised. “Thank you for the enlightenment on Bach and Haydn. It was most informative. Perhaps we will finish our discussion on that subject another time.” He bowed to her.

“Count on it,” she said.

Edward held the door open, waiting for Lord Pembroke to precede him out the door.

“Are you coming, Cassandra?”

“I believe I shall lie down as I had planned. My headache has become stronger.”

“Rest then,” Edward said, before closing the door behind him.

Cassandra rushed over to her brother’s desk and put everything back into its place. Then she picked up Lord Pembroke’s lock pick set and held it in between the folds of her dress. She closed up the secret passageway and then made her way to her own chambers. She would go straight to bed. Now that she knew the truth, that her rake was in fact a thief,

she would not have to feign a headache any longer. One was already settling at her temples.

CHAPTER SEVEN



“Good morning,” Cassandra said as she entered the breakfast room the next morning. Both her mother and her brother, James, were already seated at the table.

“You are looking much better,” Cassandra’s mama said to her.

Cassandra nodded. “I am feeling much better,” she admitted. She had debated for nearly a quarter of an hour if she should ask for a tray to be sent to her room. But her headache had faded and this morning she had realized she would not let Lord Pembroke affect her. He may have been the man of mystery who’d kissed her months ago, but he was also a thief. She could not think of him in any other way, and she would not stay in her room like a wilting flower because of him.

“I am finished with the paper this morning. You may cut it up to your heart’s content,” her brother James said.

“That is very kind of you, James, but I think I will skip reading it this morning.” After tossing and turning for nearly an hour, she had climbed out of bed and pulled out her trunk. Then she’d placed each and every newspaper clipping about the thief away, including the sheets of notes she had made

trying to figure out the mystery. Now that she had caught the thief, there was no need to have the reminders out.

James lifted his brows. “Are you sure you are feeling better?”

“Much better, but I do not wish to aggravate another headache by reading this morning, that is all.” And she did not want to know how many more times the thief would steal this Season, all because she’d had a moment of weakness in turning him in.

“You will be happy to know that you were very much missed last night, my darling. Everyone asked after you. Lord Pembroke especially took a keen interest in your health.” Mama said the words with a triumphant smile and then took a bite of toast.

“That is kind of him,” Cassandra answered in her politest voice. Of course, he’d ask after her. Likely, he was concerned that she would share his secret. She still had not reconciled that point. Technically, he had not pocketed anything from their house that she had seen. She’d made herself known before he had taken the jade elephant. But would that be enough evidence to accuse him? Now that the moment was not right in front of her, she was not sure if she could do anything about it. “James, what do you think of Lord Pembroke?”

James put down the correspondence he’d been reading. “What do I think of him as what? As a peer? Pembroke seems devoted to the causes he puts forward in Lords. He is still relatively new in the sphere, as he was absent during most of Lords last year. No one can blame him much for that with the death of his parents. Other than last night, I have spent little time with him socially.” James narrowed his eyes. “Why do you ask?”

Cassandra smoothed out her features, feigning nonchalance. “I was only curious.”

“Speaking of Lord Pembroke,” her mama said excitedly. “He was most disappointed to learn that your headache prevented you from playing last evening. He lamented more than once that he wanted to hear you play. Perhaps the next time you are in company with him, you will oblige him. I believe he was most interested in hearing you play Haydn.”

“What would it matter what I play? He does not know the difference between Bach and Haydn.”

James waved a dismissive hand. “That signifies nothing. Perhaps he was momentarily tongue-tied after your performance at the musicale the other night.”

Cassandra arched an eyebrow. “How unconvincing. I am sure Emma would never have endured you mistaking Mozart for Beethoven.”

James smiled. “You are quite right on that point. Thankfully, the two sound very different.”

“There is a contrast between Bach and Haydn too, if one listens carefully.” Or at all. He hadn’t listened to her play, of that she was already convinced. But what had he stolen that night? Had something gone missing during the musicale? The papers were often a couple of days behind the actual robberies, depending on when the theft was noticed. That had been one of the struggles in pinpointing the thief. The robberies had almost always happened at large gatherings where guests mingled throughout the rooms.

The dowager duchess put her fork down elegantly on her plate. “There is no need to find offense with Lord Pembroke, where offense is not intended. If he mixed up composers’

names, perhaps he was only nervous when talking to you, Cassandra. Give him the benefit of the doubt. It is clear that he has taken a particular interest in you.”

Cassandra almost snorted at her mother’s admonition, but took a bite of her food to cover it up. If he had taken an interest in her, it was only to make sure that his secret was safe. Though she had passed on the first opportunity to see the paper, curiosity niggled its way to the forefront of all her thoughts. What had he taken during the musicale? “Actually, Brother, I believe I will take the paper, if you are truly finished with it. Perhaps spending my day reading in my room will help me feel better.”

Mama blinked. “You will be rested for callers today, will you not, my dear?”

Cassandra shook her head. “I fear all the excitement will be too much for me today. I shall receive callers tomorrow.”

“Lord Pembroke planned to call on you today. You do not wish to disappoint him two days in a row, do you? Word of that will spread around the *ton* with shocking speed.”

“I shall be disappointing everyone who comes to call today, not specifically Lord Pembroke,” she said, though part of her was glad he would be wounded. She stood. “I believe I will return to my room until tea.”

“Feel better, Cassandra,” James said, looking up from his letters once again.

“Thank you, James.”

Once in her room, she pored through the entire paper. She read all the articles she was mentioned in—only three today—and she read and reread about the thief. Jewels were missing from the night of the musicale, and Cassandra’s heart sank.

She'd wanted to believe him when he'd said he was not the thief, that he had a legitimate explanation for this misunderstanding. But that desire was likely motivated by the fact that she had enjoyed his rakish kiss at the Twelfth Night Masquerade Ball. As much as she tried to separate the two sides of him, she could not. And she could not justify one side of him without justifying the other.

She did not bother cutting the articles out of this paper, but simply cast it aside. She reached under her pillows and pulled out the small tool kit. The tools of a thief. She could not keep them. It would be suspicious if her maid found them in her room. She needed to dispose of them, but how? Her mind blanked, so she did the only thing she could think of. She stuffed the pouch into her reticule. Until she knew how to dispose of them, she would not leave them lying around waiting to be found.



THE NEXT EVENING, CASSANDRA DRESSED FOR THE OPERA. SHE smoothed down the front of her champagne-colored evening gown. The dress was flattering on her. Her abigail dressed her hair with pearls and feathers, taking her time on the delicate ringlets that framed her face. Half an hour later, she came down the stairs to meet her mama and the rest of the party.

James and Emma were joining them at the theatre, and they were already assembled next to the front door, awaiting her arrival.

“Cassandra, you look beautiful,” Emma said, smiling.

“Thank you, Emma. It is always so lovely to attend the opera with you.” Cassandra remembered the first time she had

invited Emma to come to the opera and sit in their box as her particular friend. Of course, it was all because James had asked Cassandra for the favor that she had invited Emma and her cousin Mary to come with her. That one event had been very fortuitous for her brother.

During that particular opera, she had sat next to Lord Worthen. She had not been overly fond of Lord Worthen, but they had attended several events together last Season. How would it look to be the only unattached member in the duke's box, without an escort? She put on a brave face. It had been too long since she had attended the opera with her mama, and she was going to enjoy the experience.

“Shall we go?” Mama asked.

James nodded, and the butler opened the door for them. The foursome settled into the carriage, and they made their way toward the evening's entertainment.

“Who did you invite to the opera tonight, Cassandra? I know how you love inviting friends.” Emma smiled kindly.

Cassandra laughed. “William and Edward do not need me to match them up. As I have been resting since yesterday, I thought little about it.” She shrugged, not wanting to let on how missing yesterday's callers had affected her ability to be social today. If only she had received visitors, she could have found at least a few people who would have joined her in her brother's box. She held her head high. One social event that did not go her way would not break her entire Season, though she would not read about it in the paper afterward. Living it through once would be quite enough.

Emma blinked. “Oh, I thought we were expecting more in our party. My apologies.”

“Not unless Charles and Mary join us,” Cassandra said, smiling.

“They may come visit us, but Charles’s father insisted they enjoy the opera from his box tonight.”

“We will have another addition to our party,” Cassandra’s mama said. “I wanted it to be a surprise, but I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you.” There was a sparkle in her mama’s eyes, and Cassandra did not like that meddling look.

“Tell me what? Who is coming?”

“Lord Pembroke has consented to join our group for the evening. He will meet us downstairs.”

Cassandra swallowed her groan. “Mama, why did you invite him?”

“As I said at breakfast, he was most sorry you were unwell. He called yesterday, and as you asked, I refused all callers for you. But he expressed his specific disappointment at not being able to finish the conversation the two of you had started on a previous occasion, and so I took the liberty of inviting him tonight.”

Cassandra wished she would have just accepted callers yesterday. It would have been much easier to give Lord Pembroke the set down she’d been composing in her head. But now all that work was for naught. She would never speak so boldly to him in public, with her family around to listen.

“He was the most charming man we had over to the house for dinner,” Emma said, then turned to her husband. “Except for you, of course, dear.”

“I quite agree. He was every bit the gentleman.”

“I feel another headache coming on, Mama,” Cassandra said, putting a hand to her temple.

“You are not getting out of this evening, Cassandra,” Mama said. “Lord Pembroke is being very attentive. You shall return some attentiveness tonight.”

“Very well, Mama. I shall not be rude to him, but I am not interested in Lord Pembroke.” Cassandra gripped her reticule. She could not leave his tool pouch in her room, so she had kept it securely in her reticule, but she had not expected to see him tonight. If she gave him back his tools, would he think that she had expected to see him, or had some hand in the evening’s scheming?

“Why ever not? He seems to like you a great deal,” Mama said.

Cassandra shrugged. “He is not the type of man I envision for myself, that is all.” She could not fall for the titled gentleman, who was a rake and a thief.

Mama raised an eyebrow, surveying her daughter. “That is not a valid reason for snubbing a peer, and one that has lost so much of his family. You will be kind to him tonight, even if you do not fancy him.”

“Yes, Mama. I will do as you wish,” Cassandra said demurely. And she would keep her promise, even if she had to sit next to the man she planned to despise for the entire opera and beyond this evening.

CHAPTER EIGHT



From the moment Robert saw Lady Cassandra enter the opera house, he knew he had made a mistake. Lady Cassandra was much too beautiful, and he would be completely distracted by her again tonight. He should not have accepted the dowager duchess's invitation, but she was not a woman to be refused, especially not with the way her eyes held compassion for him.

Yesterday, he had called on Lady Cassandra with the specific purpose of straightening things out between them during his visit. But the day had not gone as he had planned. Though the dowager explained that Lady Cassandra was not seeing any callers, he felt that the blow was aimed specifically at him.

He bowed as the duke's family approached. After exchanging pleasantries with the duke and duchess and the dowager duchess, he held his arm out for Lady Cassandra. He was more than a little surprised when she immediately took his arm.

"Do not appear so shocked," Lady Cassandra said to him quietly. "It draws much more attention."

"I confess I am shocked. I was expecting a different reception from you," he said. "I half expected the beau street

runners to descend on me en masse.”

“It is still early, Lord Pembroke. Perhaps I am saving such a moment for the second act.”

He held his composure, though he wanted to laugh at her joke. It appeared as if Lady Cassandra had not turned him into the authorities, as she’d threatened to do. But the situation was still unresolved. “Truly?”

She faced forward and only glanced in his direction. “I am not so foolish as to make a spectacle of myself in public. It would reflect poorly on me, though your actions should be known to the world. I have not figured out how to expose you publicly without damaging my own reputation.”

Her words felt like ice against his chest, but he took them in stride. He covered her gloved fingers resting on his arm with his hand and smiled as if they were having the most intriguing interlude. Her fingers tensed against his arm. “I know you think I deserve that sentiment, but if you would let me explain, you would see things much differently.”

“You already had the chance to explain, and you could not do it. Am I to expect the truth now when you have had two days to formulate a convincing lie?” She looked at him then, her bright intoxicating green eyes boring through him, challenging him, and drawing him in, in a way he had not expected.

“I did not lie to you in the library, and I have no intention of lying now.”

“But you did not share the full truth with me then, so how can I expect you to give it to me now? Threatening to alert the entire opera house will hardly be something I could follow through on.”

“Yes, that might cause quite the scandal,” he said, smiling as the image floated through his mind. “You would rival all the attention from the opera.”

“That is not saying much as no one, except for my brother and his wife, really pays attention to the opera anyhow.”

They followed the party at a sedate pace, adding space between them and the others, which allowed for a little open conversation. Robert knew that when they reached the duke’s box, it would be nigh on impossible to continue their discussion.

“Still, you said we would finish our conversation.”

“The made-up conversation we did not have about your inability to decipher the difference between Bach and Haydn? Or could it be that you never actually heard me play, as you were not standing in the room while I was at the pianoforte? Please do not pretend you found a seat in the audience.”

“I never lied about that situation,” he countered. He had only skirted around the truth, giving her compliments while not actually making it known he had not watched her. “I heard several pieces from the hallway.”

Lady Cassandra arched an eyebrow. “There was a theft on the night of the musicale. I am almost certain of it. What better cover for you.”

They passed a few others mingling, and Robert lowered his voice. “You speak very boldly about things you think you know. But you are very much mistaken, my dear. I did not steal anything that night.”

“I do not believe you.”

“I am not sure how to convince you,” he said slowly.

“You could attempt to tell the actual truth.” She speared him with a look so intense, he could almost feel it, like a physical touch.

His heart raced. He opened his mouth to speak. And then he paused. He was under strict instructions to be discreet. He could not tell her that he worked for the War Office, not without divulging much more than was necessary. His mind spun. What had he really thought to explain to her yesterday when he had called on her? How could he actually convince her that he was not a thief without betraying his purpose for being in her brother’s library? “I wish I could explain properly.”

“But you cannot do it.” She swallowed and nodded slightly, her eyes full of hurt as she closed them briefly.

Robert leaned toward Lady Cassandra, unwilling to let things stay the way they were between them. He dropped his voice. “I know you do not know me well, besides our few brief encounters, and my reputation as a gentleman, but I am begging you to listen to your own intuition. There is a part of you that believes that things are not as they seem.”

“And just how do you presume to know that, Lord Pembroke?”

“You did not turn me in that night. You could have.”

She nodded. “I could still.”

“I know you could. I know you have no reason to, but I am begging you to trust me. This is bigger than us.”

Her brows knit together, but instead of giving a promise to trust him, she only said, “This is our box. If we do not go in, my family will grow suspicious as to why we are lingering. I do not wish to give them the wrong impression.”

“Of course, Lady Cassandra.” He held the curtain wide and allowed her into the space, before joining her. His stomach was full of knots.

The duke and duchess engaged them both immediately in conversation, and though Robert did his best to pay attention to every detail and nuance, he could remember none of it when the curtain rose. Applause filled the air when the opera started.

Lady Cassandra’s fan flew wildly in front of her face, then she expertly handed him his tool set. She then dropped her fan into her lap and gave all of her attention to the opera.

“You know this takes away your leverage of turning me in.” His heart raced at the admission.

“I know that,” Lady Cassandra whispered so quietly he had had to lean toward her to hear the words. “If I am caught with your tools, it will raise suspicions I will not be able to explain away.”

“Why are you giving it back to me?”

She shook her head slightly. “I am not entirely sure, but I want to trust you. But I will be watching you. I cannot pretend to understand you in the least.”

Her message was clear, and he felt the sting from them. Since looking through the duke’s mail, he had not seen anything that would arouse suspicion of a tie to France, and he had spent yesterday and this morning checking into the duke’s background.

He spoke quietly. “Let’s say a country was at war with another country, and information was needed and lives were at stake. There are those who are needed to help acquire that information.”

She studied him. “You are a spy?”

He shushed her. “I am not saying that I am, but if I were, would not my actions be considered honorable and not treasonous?”

Surprise filled her face. “Why tell me now? After I have given your tools back to you?”

“You did not turn me in, and you certainly could have.”

Lady Cassandra nodded. “I could have.”

“Why didn’t you? After all, you still do not trust me.” It was altogether confusing, and it pulled at his heart in a way that he did not know he could feel.

Lady Cassandra bit her lip, and she looked down. “I suppose I have my reasons. Perhaps it is because I have never met a gentlemanly rake before.”

“I may be a lot of things, but a thief and a rake are not among them.”

“You cannot deny the rake part, no matter how you try.”

“Such bold accusations, Lady Cassandra,” he said, racking his brain to think what she might mean by it. Was she only trying to rile him into telling her more about the War Office? If that was her strategy, it was a good one, and just might work.

She lifted her shoulder. “I only speak of what I know, m’lord.”

She was making no sense. The opera was all but forgotten now, and he gave his full attention to her. “I am not a rake.”

The next box over made shushing noises, and Lady Cassandra glared at him, but lowered her voice and continued to talk. “M’lord, you may play word games with me all night. You may pretend not to be a thief, but you were looking for something that night.” She glanced at her family ahead of

them, then lowered her voice even further. “What were you hoping to find?”

“Secrets, m’lady. Not to steal them, just to uncover them.”

“What secrets?” she asked.

“It is complicated,” he said.

“Of course it is,” she said with exasperation.

“I am searching for the thief myself, but for a different reason than simply catching the scoundrel.”

“*You* are looking for the thief?”

Another shushing came from the box next to them.

Robert leaned closer to her ear. “Lady Cassandra, it appears there are people in the box next to us who want to watch the opera without your commentary.” Robert smiled as Lady Cassandra glared.

She leaned closer to him, her tone more hushed than before. “We are not finished with our conversation. You said you were looking for the thief. And you thought that my brother’s study might have the information you searched for?” A look of dread filled her face.

“Not precisely. I have sworn to help in the cause. We are looking into all the Peers, not just your brother. When I heard you speaking French at the musicale—”

“Eavesdropping again on a private conversation?”

“You make it sound like a terrible thing when you say it that way, but you *and* your friend were speaking in French, using Napoleon’s name, referencing the war, and alluding to danger. It all sounded highly suspicious in the middle of a musicale.”

Lady Cassandra flicked her fan, waving it violently in front of her face. “And because of *that* conversation with my friend, you suspect something nefarious of me and my family?”

“Who dares to speak perfect French with the lilting accent the way you do?”

A corner of Lady Cassandra’s mouth twitched slightly, holding back what would have been the beginnings of a smile. “*Perfect* French, m’lord? Such flatterings sound like the words of a suitor and not the accusations of a *spy*.”

He leaned back in his chair, his mouth angled closer to her ear to avoid being overheard. The scent of vanilla and cinnamon from Lady Cassandra’s hair filled his senses. The fragrance was familiar. He wanted to reach out and touch the curls that framed her face, but he refrained. “My mother is—was French,” he said, catching himself. “I can detect a perfect accent with ease.”

“Not the words of a suitor then, only the words of an expert trained in such an art.”

He was not sure why the words she spoke bothered him. He was trained, as she had presumed, from a young age to recognize the beauty in the French language, but he had to stay guarded. He could not be thrown off by this beautiful creature before him. Yet, something in the way she said the words about a suitor made him want to throw caution to the wind. Would she consider him as a suitor? She had not been interested in meeting him originally when the rest of her friends had gone searching for him. She had caught him in her brother’s study and that was not a favorable circumstance, either. There was a fire in her eyes that he wanted to capture.

“I confess I would not be a good suitor at all,” he admitted. “Words do not come easily to me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Now that I do not believe. You are a gentleman rake. You must have some flattering things to say.” Her accusation seemed to stab the air.

He shook his head. “You must have me confused with someone else,” he said softly. “I am not a rake.”

“Call it what you will, m’lord.” She pursed her lips together. Her eyes found his in the darkness, as if trying to read answers on his features. “Do you still suspect my family of helping the French?”

He shook his head. “I have no evidence that suggests it. I pray I am right on that account, but I am not allowed to rule it out completely, at least not yet.” He did not want to be taken in by the lovely Lady Cassandra. He hoped with everything in him that he was looking at the evidence objectively enough not to be fooled.

“Is that how it is normally done? You pray for your answers? I thought you hung around all the libraries looking for clues.”

“Libraries?” he asked.

“Do not pretend you do not know what I am talking about,” she said. “I have it on good authority that you started lurking around libraries, at least starting on Twelfth Night.”

At her words, the remembrance of the Masquerade Ball on Twelfth Night came into his mind—a stolen kiss and the vanilla and cinnamon scent. Reality hung between them. Lady Cassandra’s accusations about him being a rake made more sense now. It was not based on rumors in her mind at all. And she was not throwing around the accusation lightly.

He took her hand gently in his own, giving it a squeeze. Much to his surprise, she did not pull away from his touch. He drank in the familiar scent of vanilla and cinnamon again, wondering how he had missed the connection the last time they were in company together. “I cannot prove that I am not a rake. Discussing this with you so openly is quite dangerous,” he said, looking around them. No one was paying them any attention.

“And yet it is much easier to hide one’s conversation during these events. There are fewer people to overhear like there are at balls and at musicales.”

“Touché, Lady Cassandra. On the night you alluded to, I panicked. You startled me, and then I heard more people coming down the corridor. It was my first mission, and I could not be found out. But I am sorry what I did hurt you.” He had been intrigued by her from the moment he had listened to her conversation with her friends and danced with her. Knowing that she was the woman he’d also kissed changed things between them now, didn’t it? His pulse quickened at the idea. Courting Lady Cassandra would not be an unwelcome thing in his life.

Lady Cassandra’s features smoothed out. “You did not hurt me. But I am glad we cleared up this misunderstanding. It is all forgotten now.” She turned toward the stage, signaling their conversation was finished.

They watched a few minutes of the opera before the curtain dropped at the end of Act I. As expected, the duke’s box was a flurry of visiting patrons, all wanting to make an appearance in his box. Robert watched the scene with amusement. Several young bucks sought Lady Cassandra’s attention, a bold move considering he was her escort for the

evening. And yet, she seemed to regard them with little interest. Her eyes did not seem to light up the way they did when they looked at him. He straightened in his chair at the observation.

A man with a bright waistcoat came to the box, apologized for interrupting, and then handed Robert a note. He turned the square over in his hand, noting the unmarked seal. Likely a note from the office. How was a delivery in the middle of an opera discreet?

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Lady Cassandra whispered as she waved her fan rapidly in front of her face, keeping a smile on her lips as she said the words.

His fingers itched to open it. “I do not want to draw more suspicion than needed,” he responded.

“And yet not opening it will rouse any onlooker’s curiosity more.”

He carefully broke the seal and unfolded the first flap. There was a second sealed note packaged inside the first. There was no signature, but that was to be expected. The three lines of text were instructions on when to deliver the other sealed note inside. After Robert memorized the contents, he put both the instructions and the second sealed note into his pocket. He would take care of both of them precisely five minutes after the second act began.

When the curtain rose, he looked at his pocket watch, noting the time. He kept the watch in his hand.

“Is something wrong?” Lady Cassandra whispered.

He shook his head. “I have somewhere to be in three minutes and nine seconds.”

“I should come with you. You will blend in better if we are just taking a stroll around ... where ever it is you need to go.”

He nodded. Lady Cassandra was clever. “I should not involve you in this matter. It is not your fight.”

Lady Cassandra covered her mouth, seeming to hold in her laugh. “This war is everyone’s fight, not just yours.” She straightened in her chair, smoothing out her evening gown. “Besides, you are not actually involving me at all. We are just going to get some fresh air.”

Lady Cassandra tapped the duke on the shoulder and whispered something to him. He nodded to her, and then Lady Cassandra stood. “I should like to stand and get some exercise. Shall you join me, Lord Pembroke?”

He marveled at this woman next to him, who, for all intents and purposes, had just taken all the attention herself. Because she had stood first, it looked as if she was the reason they were exiting the box, and not the other way around. It was brilliant. She made the ability to do the drop effortless. She hung on his arm, talking about the opera.

To anyone passing them, it would look as if they were in the most natural conversation about the evening. He made the drop without feeling the need to hug the walls or hurry from the scene. Lady Cassandra was masterful in the way she was so casual, greeting those who were around with swiftness and immediately starting back into talking about the opera so they would not be disturbed.

They stopped outside of the duke’s box once they had taken a sufficient walk around the theatre. “Thank you for your assistance, but I am shocked you helped me. Why did you do it?”

“I was tired of being shushed during the performance and wanted to stretch my legs. So you see, it was you who was doing me the favor by escorting me,” she said, squeezing the arm she still held onto. “And I have decided I am going to help you.”

“What do you mean? You already did.”

“I want to assist in the war effort, like you are,” she whispered.

“Are you daft? It is much too dangerous to involve you. I should not have told you any of it.”

“But you did tell me, and I want to make sure that my family’s good name is cleared from your book of suspicion.”

“It is absolutely too dangerous.”

“Was providing a way for you to leave the box without suspicion that dangerous? No, it was not.”

Lady Cassandra had a point, but he still did not like it. “What of your reputation?”

“If it clears my family name, it is worth it.” Her eyes sparkled with sincerity, and he was reminded of the first time they met in a corridor, with masks on.

He shook his head. “No, absolutely not. You cannot become involved in this.”

They stood close to each other, moving aside as a few patrons moved past them, eyeing them. “We should return to our seats. Standing just outside of our box may draw unwanted attention.”

“Thank you for allowing me to escort you. It was a helpful diversion. I could kiss you for it,” he said, teasing her. Though

he had said it in jest, he found he did not mind the idea of kissing her again, especially not after the last time.

“Oh, that is unnecessary, Lord Pembroke. I have already been thanked enough like that before.” She smiled and shook her head. “It may avoid suspicion of certain activities, m’lord, but without masks, it would certainly draw in the gossip. My brother would call you out.”

“Being called out would not be a terrible thing,” he said, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips. He kissed the back of her gloved hand. He smiled when her eyes widened, then he patted her hand that rested on his arm and moved the curtain so they could reenter the box.

They resumed sitting in their same seats at the back of the duke’s box. When a song finished and applause started, Lady Cassandra turned to him with determination written all over her face. “I shall give you one more chance to reconsider letting me assist you in this endeavor.”

“And if I do not?” Robert was amused. What could she possibly do?

“You do not think I can convince you to let me assist you?” She sighed. “Very well, Lord Pembroke. I did not want to have to do this, but you leave me no choice.”

“Do your worst, Lady Cassandra,” he said, not able to keep the smile from his lips.

Her eyes flashed with fire. “My family’s good name is at stake. A tap of my fan is all it would take to get my brother’s attention. One word to him right now, and you will be searched. And your thief tools are upon your person. It will not take much convincing to explain the circumstances under

which you were in his study.” She tilted her head ever so slightly, a small curve forming on her beautiful lips.

Robert blinked. Lady Cassandra had caught him. The tools would incriminate him, and if it was publicly done at the opera house, he would not be able to recover from it. He would become a liability to the War Office instead of an asset. “You would not dare create such a scene.”

She lifted her eyebrow, a challenge in her eyes. “Oh, wouldn’t I?” She lifted her fan toward her brother’s shoulder.

He held up his hands. “Very well,” he whispered. “You win.”

She smiled smugly. “I promise I will be useful. You can trust me.”

“It appears I have no choice. You have the upper hand in this game.”

“You will not regret it,” she whispered against his ear.

“You do not know what you are getting yourself into,” Robert said. “You very well might regret it.”

She shook her head. “I will not when you find my family guiltless.”

“Will you be in attendance at the card party tomorrow?”

“At the Montgomery’s? Of course we shall be there.”

“Meet me in the card room, and we will discuss all the particulars.”

“You have yourself a deal,” Lady Cassandra said, a look of triumph in her eyes. Then she held out her hand to him. “Partners?”

“No, we are not partners, but I will let you help, against my better judgment.”

CHAPTER NINE



Jeremy pinched the bridge of his nose, pacing back and forth in Robert's study. "You did ... what?!"

"It was not my fault," Robert said. He had just explained the whole of what took place at the opera and his conversations with Lady Cassandra. "She threatened to turn me in, after she had so kindly given me back my tools."

Jeremy took a deep breath and squinted his eyes shut. "Robert, we must discuss things like this. You do not have the authority to bring someone in to help. It was against my better judgment to let you join as it was."

"I understand that, but she only wants to clear her family's name."

Jeremy threw up his hands in exasperation. "She is still a suspect."

"I found no evidence that leads to that conclusion."

Jeremy was momentarily flustered. "You have been very much bewitched by her."

Robert rolled his eyes. It was true he found her intriguing, but Jeremy was taking this a little too far. "She may be very useful. After all, she gave me the perfect cover to get out of the box at the precise time I needed to, to make the drop. She

does not have to go on her own missions for the War Office. She simply wants to help at social functions.”

Jeremy pinched the bridge of his nose again. “And just how do you know that?”

“Call it a hunch.”

“I call it a disaster.” Jeremy pinched the bridge of his nose again, breathing deeply.

“It will not be so bad,” Robert said. “It would have been considerably much worse had she turned me in while I was a guest in the duke’s box. Imagine the scandal. I did my very best to mitigate it.”

“In the future, you are not to mention anything of the War Office to anyone.”

“Understood. I have no intention of bringing it up again.”

Jeremy grabbed Robert’s arm with a look of such seriousness. “I am serious, cousin. Involving Lady Cassandra is dangerous. I will not be telling the War Office about it, and I suggest, however you let her help, it be done with utmost discretion. Perhaps she can stand guard for you, or report on conversations she hears, but we must proceed with caution.”

“Shall we tell your father about it?”

Jeremy shook his head. “He has his own concerns right now. We must not let this information get out. Very few people know of your involvement in the War Office as it is, and I prefer to keep it that way. We have had some unusual things happening of late. And until I can get to the bottom of it, I do not want information leaking anywhere.”

“Understood,” Robert said. “So, how shall we involve her? She wants to clear her family’s name.”

Jeremy blew out a breath. “Anything she helps with must be done with your supervision. Perhaps listening to conversations will be the most useful thing she can do. Information is passed around the ballroom and gossip can be learned. Perhaps she will hear something that will be useful, something that will help us figure out how the information is transmitted.”

Robert nodded, wondering how Lady Cassandra would take the news. Would she be okay with her role in this? He would not risk her safety. It was the reason he was against involving her from the beginning. Except that she had forced his hand.

“What is that look, cousin? What are you thinking of?” Jeremy asked.

Robert shook his head. “I was recalling how perfectly Lady Cassandra set me up. I do not know if it was her intention all along to use the tools against me, but she gave them back with such ease and openness, and I did not suspect a thing by it.”

Jeremy nodded. “We must both be more vigilant. Being trapped in such a way by a woman who does not mean harm is one thing, but it is quite another if an enemy caught you that way. These are precarious times.”

“Indeed. I will not be taken in by her again. Tomorrow I will tell her so.”

“Tomorrow? Are you calling on her?”

“I told her I would. She wants to discuss our ... arrangement.”

Jeremy’s eyes widened. “Such attentions from you will certainly send a message. Perhaps that is an excellent cover.

That could work to our advantage. No one would suspect anything amiss if you were to simply further your acquaintance with her.” Jeremy snapped his fingers. “That shall be your cover.”

“I believe that is something I can handle,” Robert said. And if he could spend more time with Lady Cassandra in the process—he would not complain.



CASSANDRA WALKED FROM ONE CARD ROOM TO THE NEXT, scanning the sea of faces in each one, but still she could not find the one man she looked for. The Montgomery’s card party was well attended. Where was Lord Pembroke?

She had one more room to check and made her way toward the door when Lord Beauchamp approached her. In his blue dinner jacket with a pale green waistcoat, he was the height of fashion.

“Good evening, Lady Cassandra, you are looking well,” he said, then bowed.

“Thank you, Lord Beauchamp. It is a pleasure to see you.” She did her best to focus on the man in front of her, even as she continued to scan the room out of the corner of her eye.

“Are you looking for a spot at a table?”

Cassandra smiled, not wanting to seem impolite. “I was indeed.”

Lord Beauchamp held out his arm, and Cassandra took it, allowing him to lead her to the table in the far corner of the room. This was not ideal for Cassandra, but she would have to make the best of it.

Once they were seated, Lord Beauchamp looked behind him, following Cassandra's line of sight. "Is there something wrong?"

Cassandra smiled at Lord Beauchamp. "Nothing is wrong, m'lord. I was simply looking to see if anyone would join us so we can play a game of whist."

Lord Beauchamp took the deck from the center of the table and shuffled them. "While we wait for another couple to join us, tell me, how are you enjoying London this Season?"

"London is very nice. I am enjoying my time this Season. It has been most diverting," she said, her thoughts wandering to Lord Pembroke again. How she longed to be involved in the war effort and to speak with him about such matters that were more substantial than pleasantries about the Season.

As if thinking about him could make him appear, Lord Pembroke entered the card room. He wore a black jacket and cream breeches, with a red cravat. Cassandra's heart skipped a beat, though she tamped down the feeling, telling herself it was only because he would let her help with the war effort that excited her. It certainly had nothing to do with the fact that he looked devilishly handsome.

"Lord Beauchamp, should we ask Lord Pembroke and his sister to join us for the game?"

Lord Beauchamp nodded. "That is an excellent idea," he said, nodding at Lord Pembroke and gesturing them to their table.

Lord Pembroke and his sister Lady Rosalie walked in their direction.

Lord Beauchamp stood, and Lady Cassandra followed suit as Lady Rosalie and Lord Pembroke approached. "Good

evening,” Lord Beauchamp said, bowing to the newcomers.

The proper greetings, bows, and curtsies were exchanged.

“If you are in need of two more for your game, my sister and I would like to join you, Lord Beauchamp,” Lord Pembroke said.

“Of course, we should be delighted. Isn’t that right, Lady Cassandra?”

Lady Cassandra nodded, though she would have rather excused herself from games all together to talk with Lord Pembroke.

Lord Pembroke nodded. “Excellent.”

“Shall you be my partner, brother? We always make a great team.”

Lord Pembroke nodded at his sister, but before he could speak, Lord Beauchamp interrupted.

“I suppose it would be proper if we were to change partners, Lady Cassandra. We might be at an unfair advantage if the combination was a brother and sister team.”

She looked between the three sets of eyes watching her. She did not want to give away that she was a little more than grateful for the switch, but the way Lord Beauchamp caught Lady Rosalie’s eye, Cassandra wondered if there was another motive for the switch. Either way, it worked to her advantage. “I should be happy to be on whichever team you choose, Lord Beauchamp.”

Lord Beauchamp smiled, then clapped Lord Pembroke on the back, and moved aside to exchange chairs with him so Lord Pembroke sat opposite of Cassandra.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Lord Pembroke,” Cassandra said.

“The pleasure is all mine, I can assure you.”

Cassandra lifted an eyebrow. “Is that so? I should have thought after last night ...” She paused, not wanting to finish her sentence with others listening in. “That is, I was not sure that you appreciated the opera.”

“The opera was ... most enlightening. I have not enjoyed a production quite like that in some time.”

Cassandra hid her smirk behind her cards. Lord Pembroke could certainly think of charming things to say, even if he was making it up.

“I do not care for the opera myself,” Lord Beauchamp said. “But I suppose it is part of the Season, so I endure it the best I can.”

“This particular opera was riveting,” Lord Pembroke said. “Wouldn’t you agree, Lady Cassandra?” There was a slight smirk on his face.

“I thought you did not like the twist in the plot,” Lady Cassandra said, playing along. As neither of them had paid attention to the opera, she could only imagine he was referring to the way she had all but threatened him to let her help in uncovering information about the thief and why he was stealing.

“On the contrary, it caught me quite by surprise.”

Lady Rosalie played a card. “I should enjoy going to the theatre, I am sure.”

“It is quite the place. What else have you enjoyed in London, Lady Rosalie?” Lord Beauchamp asked his partner.

“The balls, of course, and I enjoyed the musicale. There is still much I have not experienced, but my brother has promised that I will attend the next opera. Isn’t that right, brother?” Lady Rosalie smiled when her brother played a wrong card, allowing her to take the trick.

Lord Pembroke grumbled at his mistake. “That was unlucky,” he said. “Yes, we will go to the opera next week.”

Lord Beauchamp engaged Lady Rosalie in more conversation, and Lady Cassandra let her mind drift away from the introductory questions and answers. As they played, Cassandra stole glances at Lord Pembroke, wondering if they would have a chance to speak about the substantial things that had been on her mind since last night. She desperately wanted to prove to him that her family was guiltless and above reproach. And if she could help him in the process, maybe she’d also create a positive impression on the marquess.

Three hands in a row, Lord Pembroke made a mistake.

Cassandra groaned each time. “Lord Pembroke, I am beginning to believe that your sister exaggerated your skill level at this game. You are playing very poorly.”

Lord Beauchamp smirked. “Perhaps it was Lady Rosalie’s plan to boast about her brother’s skill level simply so she would not be stuck as his partner.”

Lady Rosalie laughed and everyone but Lord Pembroke joined in. “I do not remember my brother playing quite *this* bad before.”

Lord Pembroke scowled at his cards. “I believe it is the hand I was dealt. If I had better cards, I should not play so poorly.”

Cassandra raised an eyebrow. “Better cards will not help you. You need a better strategy. Reversing the last three cards you played, you would have been able to take each trick.”

Lord Pembroke studied his cards, as if pondering hard while considering his next move. He placed down the card, and Lady Rosalie laughed in triumph.

“We have beaten you,” she said.

Lord Pembroke nodded. “It was a close game.”

”It was not close at all,” Lord Beauchamp said. “But we thank you for the win.”

Lord Pembroke stood. “Congratulations are in order, and I will not be sore about the loss. However, I believe I am not quite up for losing again. Lady Cassandra, would you like to join me for some refreshment in the next room?” His eyes held a hint of something—almost like a laugh.

Cassandra stood. “I should like that, Lord Pembroke.”

”Excellent. Rosalie, please do not trounce any other unsuspecting victims at this game. I know it is your favorite.”

”Very well, brother, but only because you asked so nicely, and lost so terribly. I have never seen you lose in such a splendid fashion. But I do not believe you can blame it on your partner.”

“Sometimes the cards are unkind.” He bowed to his sister and Lord Beauchamp, and then Lord Pembroke held out his arm to Cassandra.

She looped her arm through his without hesitation. She studied him for a moment. “Do you believe I am the reason we lost the game?”

“I know you are not the reason we lost.” He smiled at her as they made their way into another room with tables with refreshment. He held out a cup for her.

A sudden thought struck her. “You *wanted* to lose. You *planned* it.”

“I will never tell,” he said, a broad smile crossing his face.

“You just did, but you could have fooled me. You looked as if you were concentrating very hard during the game.” She took a drink, then placed the cup on a different table.

“I was concentrating very hard.” He leaned closer to her, his whisper tickling her ear. “It is difficult to lose so splendidly in such a short amount of time. It took all of my concentration to make it look like I was not making poor choices on purpose.”

She caught the spicy scent of mint mixed with shaving soap. “What game are you playing?” She took his arm as he led her through the crowds, as if they were looking for someone.

“A game of speed. We could not be stuck at a card game through the whole of the evening now, could we? Losing is a sure way to get out of another round.”

“It was most fortunate that you can play so poorly, though it does not inspire me to partner you again in cards.”

“I know how to play the game.”

She smiled demurely. “Of course you do, Lord Pembroke. Whether you can play it well is yet to be seen.”

Lord Pembroke leaned closer to her ear. “I would be happy to forgo talking about the war with you and we can go back to playing cards for the rest of the night.”

“No,” she whispered. “You promised I could help. I want to clear my family’s name.”

“You understand it is lunacy to want to be involved, don’t you? You are a member of the Peerage.”

“You are involved, Lord Pembroke, and such concerns do not seem to bother you.”

“I talked to my cousin, Mr. Cavendish. The most important thing you can do is listen for conversations.”

She glanced around the room. A few couples were dancing the reel, while others were mingling. “What kind of conversations?”

“Ones with a French flair to them. Anything you hear about people discussing the war, or their position on it. Any of those could be clues.”

“People speak about the war all the time. It is one of the most talked about conversation at gatherings.”

“That is true, so you will be listening for what is not being said.”

“I am not sure I understand.”

“Watch for changes in behavior and what is out of place. When war is brought up, see who is instantly disinterested in the topic. See what stands out and what is out of place. Look for those who are listening or watching too intently. Information may not be so obvious, but it will be useful.”

“Listen to what is not being said,” Cassandra said.

Lord Pembroke nodded. “Yes. And keep watch when those around you are having in-depth conversations. Longer than would be expected at social gatherings. You move in the

circles that we are keeping watch on. And that is why it will be helpful if you hear something.”

She eyed him warily. It felt almost as if he were putting her off on the subject. “And this is all I can help with?”

“It is the most important thing we need help with. But if it is not something that suits your fancy, we can, of course, reassign it to someone else. No hard feelings if you choose not to take part.”

Cassandra lifted her chin ever so slightly. She did not think this assignment was of much use, but she would not give up the opportunity to help her family and her country. “I will help. I am sure I will learn many things,” she said.

Lord Pembroke raised an eyebrow. “You *want* to help?”

“Of course, I do. That is what I have been saying this whole time. You are stuck with me.” As she said the words, a small fluttering started in her center. She would help him, and she would enjoy being in his company. “How shall I send you information? Shall I send something to you by post?”

His eyes widened. “Are you determined to ruin your reputation? You cannot send me a letter in such a way. It would be highly improper unless there was an understanding between us.”

“How else shall I give you information?”

“For now, you may give me information at social functions.”

“How shall I know what is important?”

Lord Pembroke shook his head. “It is not for us to determine what is important or relevant. We let others decide

on the leads that should be followed. We are here to gather information, not to decide if it is valuable.”

Cassandra nodded. “When should I start?”

He turned her, so she faced him straight on. “Right now. After all, we are at a social function. There are plenty of people here, and more than one conversation to be overheard.”

“And what will you be doing?” she asked.

Lord Pembroke glanced over her shoulder for a moment before bringing her hand to his lips and placing a kiss on the back of her hand. “I shall do something of a similar nature, and then I believe I will leave early. I should not want to be around the entire evening.”

Cassandra wondered why he would not want to stay, but she kept the question to herself. “Where shall I start?”

“In one of the card rooms. I will choose the other one, and we will mingle and see what we find.”

Cassandra entered a new card room by herself. Finding an open spot, she sat down for a game of whist, not focusing on the game as she listened to the surrounding conversations. Most of them were inconsequential, and she wondered if Lord Pembroke specifically chose this task for her to annoy her. For the next hour, she listened to bits and pieces of conversation involving fashion, and the Season, Lords, the state of the roads, the blessings of Town life, and the upcoming events.

Cassandra studied the cards in her hand as she listened to the conversations, thinking back to the brilliance of how Lord Pembroke had played. Maybe she could incorporate a similar strategy.

After her game with Lord Stantington, she gave her excuses to playing another hand of cards as this was now the

second time she had lost in the evening and was clearly bad luck. It did not take long to find Lord Pembroke in the next card room. He talked to a tall gentleman in the corner. When his gaze met hers, she raised her eyebrows slightly. He nodded almost imperceptibly and then headed toward the refreshment table.

“How is this evening faring for you?” he asked.

She furrowed her brow, wishing she had something to report. “Not well. I believe some of your terrible skills at card have rubbed off on me. I have not been able to win a single game this evening.”

His lips twitched, as if he were trying very hard to fight off a laugh. “I see. And was that useful?”

She shrugged. “Miss Gardner is in need of new hats. I learned every debutantes’ musical selection for the upcoming musicale, which is not surprising, as I typically learn that. Oh, and Lord Richmond is half in love with Lady Ellen and is planning to call on her this week to make the arrangement official.”

“That is quite a lot of news,” Lord Pembroke said.

“It signifies nothing of consequence or importance. This entire evening has provided nothing.”

He smiled. “That was to be expected. It takes time.”

She sighed. “I will continue listening and let you know if I hear anything.”

CHAPTER TEN



“Are you looking forward to the dinner party tonight?” Cassandra’s abigail asked her as she pinned up her hair in a complicated style of curls and feathers.

“It should be a much quieter evening than I have had in a long time,” Cassandra replied, giving herself a scrutinizing glance in the glass.

“Shall you be dancing, m’lady? I could secure your hair much tighter if you would like.” The girl held her hands in the air, waiting for instruction.

“What you are doing will suffice. I may only dance a little tonight. The games should take most of the entertainment away from dancing.”

Cassandra’s mind wandered over the last two weeks since she had helped Lord Pembroke at the opera. Since then she had attended every single social event that Society felt was important. At each one of them, she danced with Lord Pembroke. He was the type of partner she enjoyed dancing with. And each time, she had asked what she could do to help his cause. She was invested in helping him, and in making sure that he knew that her family was not needing to be suspected of anything. She had been more careful in her conversations with her friends, refusing to speak in French with them unless

they were in the secluded corners of a withdrawing room, or in the privacy of one of their drawing rooms.

Each time Lord Pembroke had only asked her to keep her ears open for any conversations that sounded sympathetic toward the French or Napoleon or were somehow out of character. She'd listened to hundreds of conversations, and she had never realized just how repetitive and trite the talk could be at social functions. So far, she'd only directed Lord Pembroke to half a dozen people who he had said he'd investigate further. Her leads felt insignificant. She never asked how those investigations went, and he never told her. But he'd made the rounds more frequently during balls and supper parties. Their dances became a way for her to give him information, and though she relished being in his arms, being held by him, it was strictly a way to help him.

At each successive ball, she seemed to dance fewer and fewer dances. It could be that she was keeping in company with Lord Pembroke for longer stretches at a time, and that limited her time to devote to finding a love match, but she felt it was more than that. Whispers about her filled the withdrawing rooms and the papers. Were other prospective suitors being scared off because of the time she had spent with Lord Pembroke?

She wanted to find a love match this Season, but so far everyone she had danced with did not hold her attention as well as the mysterious man who had captured her attention on Twelfth Night, and the Marquess of Pembroke. And two weeks ago she had learned that they were the same person. The only other person who had held her attention was the thief, but that was for an entirely different reason.

She liked being prepared for the conversations about the thief, and so had scoured all the papers for weeks. Talking about a thief while dancing was not among the gently bred topics her mother would insist upon for making acquaintances, so she saved those conversations for when she was with her friends, unless she was talking with Lord Pembroke. They seemed to broach many conversation topics, and she looked forward to each and every conversation with him.



LADY CASSANDRA DANCED WITH SEVERAL PEOPLE BEFORE THE parlor games started. It was not as prestigious as a ball, but she made small talk with her partners.

“Thank you for the dance, Lord Devon,” she said, as she curtsied to her partner.

“The pleasure was all mine,” he said, bowing over her hand. He led her off the small dance floor, and the formality of it felt ridiculous. “Lady Cassandra, would it be too bold of me to inquire if you enjoy riding through Hyde Park?”

Cassandra smiled demurely. “I do enjoy riding in the park when the weather is fine.”

He looked away from her for a moment, but seemed out of sorts when he met her eye again. “I see,” he said, distractedly.

Cassandra was not sure if she wanted to encourage him or not, but it had been a while since she’d had an invitation to Hyde Park during the fashionable hour. “What about you, Lord Devon? Do you enjoy Hyde Park?”

He swallowed, then gave a quick nod. “I do, when I get the chance of it.” He paused, then said, “Thank you for the dance,

Lady Cassandra.” He executed a rushed bow and then left her with a swiftness that felt unnatural.

Had he been about to ask her for a ride in Hyde Park? It had seemed that way from the conversation, but for some reason he’d left before the words had formed on his lips.

She turned around and saw a plausible explanation. Her heart tripped when she saw Lord Pembroke in the crowd. She schooled her expression, not wanting to let on that she was affected by him. After all, he’d admitted the kiss they had shared meant nothing to him, and that fact would not hurt her. After pondering his words after the opera, she knew she would not hold that moment against him. It had still been an enjoyable experience to be kissed by him, even if it had been used as a diversion in the moment.

Lord Pembroke approached her with a smile on his face, as if she was the reason for his smile. “Good evening, Lady Cassandra.” His bow was polished, his manners everything they should be.

A fluttering sensation danced inside her, and Cassandra smiled at him in return. “Good evening, Lord Pembroke.”

“How are you this evening?”

“I am well, thank you m’lord, though I must warn you that tonight’s conversation is particularly dull so far.”

Lord Pembroke’s smile sent a tingle up Cassandra’s arm. “Is that so?”

Cassandra nodded. “If I hear one more conversation about the most obliging weather tonight, I will choke on the punch.”

Lord Pembroke laughed. “It is not a glamorous job, to be sure.”

“I confess I expected it to be a little more exciting than it is.”

“You always have a way out,” he said. “You do not have to spend one more minute of your Season on this if espionage is too boring for you.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “No, you shall not get rid of me so easily. I want to help. I just wish I had more to show for it. It feels like very little progress.”

He took her hand, giving it a light squeeze. “Every day is progress.”

Her breath hitched in her throat at his nearness. “I see your sister is among the favorites here tonight.” She gestured toward the window where Lady Rosalie stood. “She has been dancing since I have arrived, or been engaged in conversation with several gentlemen waiting their turn to impress her.” And though she had seen Lady Rosalie for the last while, this was the first that Cassandra had seen Lady Rosalie’s brother tonight.

Lord Pembroke’s jaw hardened. “This is the trouble with London. So many scoundrels all vying for my sister’s attention and dowry.”

Cassandra laughed. “Spoken like a true brother. I have heard similar sentiments from my own older brother. It is quite hard on younger sisters.”

“I am not sure I like that she is out already.”

“And would you have her be an old maid instead? She must have her share of Society or she will never find love.”

“Love? I would settle for her to be married to someone who is not a rake or a scoundrel.”

“Take care, Lord Pembroke. If you interfere too much, you may find you will have more Seasons to endure than just this one.”

“Did your brother interfere so much?” he asked.

Cassandra bit her lip. “I do not think he meant to interfere. But his presence is enough to scare some suitors off. And there were other circumstances outside of my control. I sometimes wonder though if my brother wishes I had found a match in a previous Season instead of being a burden in my third.” She felt the stain of so many years on her reputation.

“It seems that your brother should watch you a little more closely this Season. The last three gentlemen you danced with were all scoundrels in my estimation.”

“Have you been here long enough to note my last three dance partners, Lord Pembroke? I will repeat that I do not need another gentleman to act like my brother.” She raised an eyebrow at him, though secretly a thrill ran through her that he had cared to notice.

“You are a puzzle, Lady Cassandra. You claim you do not want to be pursued by rakes and scoundrels, yet you dance with an uncommonly high percentage of them.”

“Mr. Havercamp is not a scoundrel,” she countered.

“On the contrary, m’lady. He is a rake of the worst sort. You have your reputation to consider.” There was a look in his eyes that she could not quite name, but she did not dwell on it.

Instead, she pretended to scan the sea of people gathered for the evening’s entertainment. “And who should I be safe with, m’lord? Which young man shall I dance with?”

“Why, me, of course,” he said, holding his hand out toward her.

“I have already told you that I do not have any information yet to give you about this evening. You will give a certain impression if you keep favoring me with your company. If you have not noticed, the *ton* has already begun whispering about us.”

“Let them whisper. I will not rescind my offer.”

She nodded. “Very well, Lord Pembroke. Thank you for the honor. I should be delighted to dance with you.”

They took their places across from each other, joining in at the end of the line of dancing couples.

Lord Pembroke was all ease and smiles. “Are people really talking about us?”

“You are the king of asking impertinent questions, aren’t you? I should have never told you that.”

“But they are?”

Lady Cassandra nodded. She could admit the information openly. “Of course they are, m’lord. You have favored me with more dances than you have anyone else, and we have been seen together on multiple occasions. And I am fairly certain your presence is the reason why Lord Devon did not finish asking me to ride with him in Hyde Park tomorrow.”

“Perhaps it is time I ask you for a ride through Hyde Park then,” he said.

She laughed off his suggestion. “Do not be foolish. You would ruin my chances of finding a match this Season if you did that. You are already an intimidating force on my arm. No one wants to compete with you.”

“I am not sure how to navigate around this. I do not wish to damage your chances this Season.”

“I daresay you should watch your next words carefully, Lord Pembroke.” She raised her eyebrow. “Do not ask me if I wish to quit what I have started. I am very determined to help you, no matter what the repercussions are.”

“Then I shall take you for a ride in Hyde Park tomorrow, at the fashionable hour,” he said.

A lightness filled her. He wanted to take her for a carriage ride. The idea surprised and excited her. “What game are you playing at?”

“Whichever game gives me the honor of your company tomorrow.” He cleared his throat. “After all, there is always more to discuss. And we should make a strategy for the rest of the social events this week.”

Cassandra smiled. This was business, and she had agreed to this. “It has been some time since I rode through Hyde Park,” she admitted.

“Will you do me the honor?” His sincere eyes never left hers.

“I would be delighted,” she said, and they enjoyed the rest of the dance together without their usual cryptic conversations about espionage.

After dancing with Lord Pembroke, Cassandra spent an hour listening to the conversations during the parlor games. She sat in a corner with Miss Abbott, who was telling a long story about the man she’d met.

Cassandra tried to focus on her friend’s conversation, but she found her mind wandering to every snatch of conversation around her.

Suddenly, she heard two men talking nearby in French. She paused, leaning in to hear better. One man was talking

about the war with Napoleon. Cassandra strained to pick out the words, pretending to focus on her friend's story while she listened intently.

“He will not escape this time,” one voice declared. “We must set up a decoy and bait him into the trap.”

“But what if he catches on?” the second voice asked.

“No, do not worry. We can ensure his defeat this time,” the first voice said confidently. “We must prepare for a long and tiresome war, though; we cannot afford to let our guard down. Send the note to the usual rendezvous spot. We have a new way to seal the information. Pull in the next asset. We will get the ducks one way or another.”

The man laughed, and Cassandra dared to catch a glimpse of the two men who had been talking. She did not know their names, but she knew that she could recognize them again in a crowd.

To anyone else, it might have only sounded like they were talking about the game of charades they played, but Cassandra had a feeling that there was more to this.

She committed the words to memory and then pretended that she hadn't been eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Shall we take a turn about the rooms while you finish telling me your story?” Cassandra asked her friend.

Miss Abbott agreed, and Cassandra linked her arm through Miss Abbott's. She needed to find Lord Pembroke and tell him everything she had learned and point out the two men to him directly.



“YOU SEEMED TO HAVE ENJOYED YOURSELF THIS EVENING,” Cassandra’s mother said as they settled into their carriage on the way home.

“I did, Mama.”

“It is a shame that Lord Pembroke did not stay through dinner. The two of you seem to have plenty to say to each other.”

“He is a very good conversationalist.” Cassandra smiled as she thought about her evening. She had learned nothing of consequence at the beginning of the evening, but she’d had an enjoyable time dancing and talking to Lord Pembroke. Then, when she had heard valuable information before dinner, she could not find Lord Pembroke anywhere. She would have to tell him the particulars tomorrow when she saw him.

“You look as if you have some news.” Her mama missed nothing.

Cassandra lifted one shoulder, unwilling to be too affected. “Nothing of so great importance. Lord Pembroke asked me to accompany him on his ride through Hyde Park tomorrow. I will enjoy the fresh air. The weather has been most obliging this last week.” She could not believe she repeated the phrase to her mother after she had complained about it earlier.

Her mother smiled approvingly. “He certainly is very attentive to you,” she said.

“He has been,” Cassandra agreed. But did it signify anything? He had paid attention to her at the beginning because she, and then her family, were under scrutiny. Now, she was on the lookout all the time for information to impress him, anything that would help him see that she was not

sympathetic to Napoleon's cause, like he had originally thought.

"I believe he is better suited for you than Lord Worthen was last Season. Do you not agree?" Mama asked.

"It is a little too early to tell, I think," Cassandra said. Lord Pembroke's attentions were strictly based on her desire to help him. And that choice came with an obvious consequence. She knew she was putting herself at risk of another disappointing Season, and yet, when she was helping Lord Pembroke, she did not mind at all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



“*Y*ou are smiling again,” Rosalie said the next morning at breakfast. “What has caught your attention this morning?”

Robert straightened. “I was not smiling in any particular way,” he said. “I was only thinking of the long day ahead of me.”

Rosalie lifted an eyebrow. “Are you not taking a carriage ride in Hyde Park with Lady Cassandra?”

At the mention of Lady Cassandra, Jeremy’s eyes found Robert’s. He looked as if he were waiting for the answer as well.

Robert’s inclination was to deny that Lady Cassandra had anything to do with his good mood. But, in truth, he enjoyed conversing with her and dancing with her. She was intelligent, beautiful, and charming. “I am.” He could not keep the grin off his face.

Rosalie’s smile matched his own. “I am delighted to hear it. She has been ever so kind to me this Season.”

“I am glad,” Robert said. Warmth spread through him that Lady Cassandra was attentive to his sister. He had not felt this level of exuberance about anything in a long time, not since

before his parents died. That had to mean something, did it not?

“I do not like it,” Jeremy said, his brow drawn into a scowl.

Rosalie put her toast down on her plate. “And why ever not, cousin? You can plainly see as well as I can that the mere mention of Lady Cassandra’s name is enough to make my brother smile.”

Both sets of eyes turned toward Robert, and try as he might, he could not hide the smile that perpetually formed on his lips, like a bit of sticky jelly that refused to come off.

“See, cousin? Robert is nigh on his way to being smitten by her. Why do you disapprove of his happiness?” Rosalie’s pointed stare at Jeremy was unrelenting. She was a force to be reckoned with.

Jeremy kept his gaze on Robert. “It is not that I disapprove of his choice. Far from it. Lady Cassandra is everything lovely,” he said hastily.

“Then why do you not like him riding out into the Park with her? It is a sign of his preference toward her. In fact, I think I will extend an invitation to her to come for tea.”

It was clear Jeremy wanted to speak his mind openly, but still he hesitated. “I do not object to him riding with her. It is simply the ... timing ... that I take issue with. It is all sudden, and it detracts from the ... *point* of this Season.”

Rosalie laughed. “Isn’t the whole point of the Season to find a suitable match and fall in love? That is what your mother is always telling me.”

“That is all well and good for a woman in their first Season. But a titled gentleman—”

“Is just as deserving as any other person in London, and perhaps more so,” Rosalie said, interrupting Jeremy and finishing his sentence for him.

“Must take his responsibilities and duties seriously. Now is not the time to be making such hasty decisions when it comes to *marriage*,” Jeremy said, finishing his thought as if Rosalie had not given her opinion.

“Cousin, how can you say such things? Yes, my brother has Lords and duties in Parliament, but so do most of the gentlemen you speak of. It is the background for the Season. It does not have to be the entirety.” Rosalie took a small bite of her toast and when she was finished, she added, “Besides, if everyone followed your logic, the whole of Society during the Season would be turned on its head. Families would not come, parents would not send their daughters, and then all those attending Parliament during the Season would only have themselves to socialize with. There would be no balls, no theatre, and no reason to meet together. I imagine most would prefer to live in their country estates the entire year and quit London entirely.”

Robert used his napkin to wipe his mouth, but he could not hide the laugh at how well his sister had captured the essence of Society. He schooled his expression and looked at his cousin. “I am afraid I must agree with my sister.”

“You always take her side,” Jeremy said good-naturedly.

Robert tilted his head, conceding the point. “Perhaps I do favor her more than you. No one can blame a brother for that. But in this case, she has made excellent points. I cannot imagine being in London without the diversion of Society.”

“I do not think you care one whit about Society in general. You are only thinking of one particular person who’s company

you favor now.”

Robert’s grin spread, and he clapped his cousin on the back. “I cannot deny it.”

“I still do not like it,” Jeremy said.

“It is not your decision,” Rosalie countered in defense of her brother.

“I understand your point of view,” Robert said slowly, hoping his cousin had caught the underlying meaning. They could not speak freely about matters involving the War Office with Rosalie in the room. “And I will be careful.”

Jeremy nodded. “I suppose that is all I can expect.”

Rosalie watched the interchange. “I do not understand. Of what will you be careful of, Brother?”

Robert cleared his throat. “Why, my heart, of course. It is a very difficult thing to give one’s heart so freely to another. I imagine Jeremy has reasons for his concern.”

At that, tears filled Rosalie’s eyes. “Hearts are meant to feel. Hearts are meant to find love. Shall we reserve feelings until we are certain that no harm will come to our heart? What a ridiculous notion. No one can ever be certain of the future. We do not curse the sunshine days because they will not last forever. We cannot predict when loss will break our hearts, or squeeze them until they burst. Papa and Mama did not live like that.” Her words broke as she spoke of their parents.

Robert’s heart constricted, feeling guilt alongside the pain. He swallowed, looking to his cousin, wishing he could tell his sister the secret that he knew. Jeremy only shook his head once. The gesture was slight, but no less emphatic. A weight pressed upon him, like a mountain burying him alive. He felt suffocated. He wanted to relieve his sister’s pain, and he was

helpless. Was this how his cousin and uncle had felt as they had kept the burden of this secret away from him? He breathed deeply, forcing the crushing weight away from him. He could still try to console her, still try to mourn with her, even though he knew she did not need to mourn their parents' deaths anymore.

"Rosalie," he said, stopping when she looked at him. The tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Here." He held out a handkerchief for her, and she took it.

"Thank you," she said, covering her eyes and then drying her face. "I miss them every day."

A lump formed in his throat. "I miss them too," he said, choking the words out. "How can I help?" He looked at Jeremy once more, silently pleading for the permission to relieve his sister's suffering. But Jeremy's stony expression had not changed, and the shake of his head implied a finality in the discussion.

"I have a feeling that nothing can be done to cure the loss at present. London seems to bring out more memories of them at inexplicable times. I had always pictured the way my first Season would go with Mama at my side."

"I am sorry," Robert said. "I wish there was something I could do to ease your pain."

"Seeing that you are happier is a good start for that," Rosalie said, smiling through her tears.

"How do you mean?" Robert asked, warning bells going off in his head.

“I have noticed a change in you since you have arrived in London. The melancholy that has hung over you since our parents’ deaths has lifted. You are quite altered.”

Robert looked at Jeremy, feeling caught. Somehow Rosalie knew. He swallowed. “It is nothing. I have grieved long enough. I still miss them, of course, but ...” He rushed his words together.

“But you have found someone that fills some of those empty places in your heart.” Rosalie sighed, a small smile forming on your lips. “And it is precisely why I am glad you are spending so much time with Lady Cassandra. To find a woman who can help you forget your grief so entirely is no small thing.”

Robert cleared his throat. “That is not quite true. I have not given her my heart.” And she had not solved his grief, had she? He was not really mourning anymore because he knew his parents were alive and safe in France. And that knowledge had given him hope.

“Perhaps that is because you fear loss,” Rosalie said, in a tone that made Robert think of his mother. Rosalie looked like a younger version of their mother—the same hair, the same eyes.

“Perhaps I do.”

“You should not. Papa and Mama did not live life scared of the unknown future. You cannot shy away from loving someone simply because you are afraid of losing them.” Rosalie dabbed at the corners of her eyes. “I like Lady Cassandra. I think she is good for you. And I think our parents would approve. Especially Mama.”

“I believe you are right,” Robert said.

“You should bring her flowers,” Rosalie said.

“I do not think taking Lady Cassandra on a ride through the Park requires flowers,” Robert said. He admired Lady Cassandra, but he did not want to give the wrong impression. After all, meeting with her on a regular basis had more to do with information and strategy than anything else.

“Robert, trust me. It is never too early to give flowers to a woman.”

“I—” Robert started to protest, but Rosalie cut him off.

“Promise me you will bring her flowers, Robert. It is a gesture. Trust me on this matter.” Rosalie’s eyes, still filled with tears, undid all of his resolve.

“Of course, my dear sister. I shall take your advice.”



“YOU NEED TO BE MORE CAREFUL,” JEREMY SAID, AS THEY SAT next to the window in Robert’s club. “You nearly slipped up a dozen times in front of your sister this morning.”

“I wish I could tell her.” Robert held up his hand, cutting off his cousin’s objection before it began. “I know the reasons why I cannot share the news, but I wish I could heal the pain and suffering she is going through. She attributes my healing to Lady Cassandra, but the truth is, I think it is just because I know they are alive that I can cope.”

Jeremy shook his head. “This is a point where I agree with your sister. I think that Lady Cassandra is the one who has had an influence on you. And therefore, you must proceed with extreme care.”

“Why?”

Jeremy blinked, looking at Robert as if he were daft. “Why? Because you are in the middle of something bigger than yourself. Having your focus split is dangerous.”

“Lady Cassandra is already aware, at least in part, of what I am involved in. And in a real way, she has helped me. And at the very least, she did not turn me in when she could have.”

Jeremy nodded. “She is a unique woman in that regard. Perhaps your sister is right. She does suit you well. But take care.”

“I am being careful. I am not risking anything at the moment. Lady Cassandra and I are of the same opinion on this matter. There is nothing between us. We are focused on the mission.” He dropped his voice. “Nothing is more important to me than getting two certain people back home safely.”

Jeremy raised a scrutinizing eyebrow. “Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

“I will not deny that she’s beautiful. Does she drive me to distraction? Occasionally. But at the end of the day, I know my focus, and it does not interfere. I can admit that I enjoy spending time with her, and we get along well. But she is helping me with my mission. That is the end of it.”

Jeremy looked like he wanted to say more, but he remained quiet. He took the paper that was on the table between them and unfolded it. Robert watched as his cousin expertly held the paper up, as if he were studying it intently. All the while, he was actually scanning the room. Jeremy had been working for the War Office much longer than Robert had, and seemed to read situations and circumstances naturally.

A man brought their drinks, then bowed and left. Robert swirled his drink thoughtfully. He could not look like he was

also scanning the room, or they would both look suspicious. Instead, he looked out the window, watching people as they passed by on both sides of the street.

London was busy, full of people, carriages, and horses. The weather was mild, though a few clouds hung in the sky. A small street urchin held out flowers to those that rushed along the streets. A few stopped and bought flowers, but most walked by without even a glance at the small child. Robert had seen that look on many people. The acknowledged dismissal of the lower class.

“I have found my mark,” Jeremy said so quietly that Robert was not sure he had actually spoken. But then Jeremy folded the paper, smiled, laughed, and took a drink. “I am headed over to the far table. There is a man I need to talk to, and he has eluded me when I have called for him at his house.”

Robert raised both eyebrows. “Would you like me to come with you?”

Jeremy shook his head. “This is a separate matter from the one you and I are working on. I must attend to it myself.”

Robert nodded, then looked out the window again. “Then I shall take my leave. Rosalie was insistent I buy Lady Cassandra flowers before I take her for our ride through Hyde Park.” He stood, and Jeremy followed suit.

His cousin straightened his jacket, then grabbed the paper off the table, leaving his glass almost completely untouched. “Do you truly think it is a good idea to court her while you are in the middle of this?”

Robert frowned. “We are not courting. I am bringing a woman flowers at the request of my sister. I should not wish to

disappoint Rosalie when she asks for a full report. Like you, I am learning how to separate the two parts of my life that have so recently collided together.”

Jeremy nodded. “We will talk more this evening. Once I have made a few calls, I will rendezvous with my superiors and will bring back any news that is pertinent to you.”

“Thank you,” Robert said, knowing that every piece of this complicated puzzle would eventually help him retrieve his parents. Surely once the War Office solved this mystery, they would turn their resources toward extracting his parents from France safely. He held onto that hope, knowing it was all he could do.

Robert’s carriage was waiting for him when he left the club, and he waved to his driver in acknowledgement before he passed his carriage and found the urchin a few paces away.

“A shilling a flower,” the child said, holding out a single flower in his outstretched hand. The bundle of flowers cradled in his arm was more than a little wilted, but the boy’s hopeful blue eyes turned up toward Robert.

“Where are your parents?” Robert asked the boy, guessing the answer before the boy actually spoke the words into reality.

“They are far away. Buried in a churchyard.” The boy said the phrase matter-of-factly.

“My parents are far away too,” Robert said, and he pulled out several more coins than was needed for the modest purchase. “Will this cover all the rest of your flowers? I should like to purchase the rest of them.”

The boy’s hungry eyes grew wider. “Too much, sir. Far too much.”

It was rare to see an orphan refuse a larger sum of money. Robert placed the coins in the boy's hand. "But they are beautiful flowers, and I should like to purchase them for a beautiful woman. Please take it. It will save me a trip to the hothouse if I can get all my flowers here."

The boy smiled, pocketing the money with speed and dexterity. "Thank ye, sir." He handed the bouquet to Robert.

Robert smiled back. "You are welcome," he said, feeling lighter as he approached his carriage. When it came to Lady Cassandra, he took both his cousin's and his sister's advice in stride. With Lady Cassandra involved, there were dangers, both to the mission and to his heart.

But perhaps his sister was right. Perhaps Lady Cassandra was his match, regardless of the circumstances. His heart pounded and raced as he felt a dozen emotions all at once. He held the bundle of flowers in his hand, wondering if he should stop at the hothouse for a larger bouquet before calling on her. He opened his pocket watch, knowing he would be late if he stopped. He weighed his options—his desire to bring a grand material gift, or punctuality.

Moments passed before he finally gave the driver the correct direction. One thing was certain: he was spending more time thinking about Lady Cassandra than anything else.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Lizzie laughed, pulling Cassandra from the needlepoint she had been working on. “What is so amusing?” she asked her sister indulgently. “Which part of the book has you in stitches this time?”

Lizzie held the volume she had been reading protectively against her chest. “It is not my book, sister. Look.” She pointed to the window. “Your beau has arrived.”

Cassandra glanced down at the street, where Lord Pembroke stood next to his carriage, speaking with his driver. “Lord Pembroke is not my beau, Lizzie. He asked me to ride with him in Hyde Park, nothing more. And what is so amusing about him?”

“I assume he is your beau, or will be shortly for as much time as you are in each other’s company. And you seem to talk about him at length with Mama.” She shrugged. “But what could he mean by bringing you that bouquet? It looks as if he has been in a country field.”

Cassandra left her seat and joined her sister on the bench next to the window, where Lizzie had been reading. She blinked, color rising in her cheeks. “I adore wildflowers,” she said, trying to make sense of the moment.

“You receive the most elaborate flower arrangements in Town. What could Lord Pembroke mean by it?”

“How do you know they are the *most* elaborate?”

“You are not the only one who reads the paper in this household. I have read about it, but I have also seen them, dear sister.”

Cassandra smiled. Her sister was clever and observant. “And how many of those elaborate flower arrangements lead to anything? It does not signify one whit.”

Lizzie tapped her chin. “He is pulling on his cravat with such force. He looks nervous.”

“He does look nervous. Perhaps he has some dreadful news to share.” Agitation spun inside of her, and she twisted the thread in on her needlepoint. Her heart was affected by this man. She knew he wore a mask a secrecy. The intrigue of their very first meeting was still something that drew her to him. But was there something else he was hiding?

Lizzie’s musings cut through her own. “Perhaps because his bouquet is not as lavish as the ones you received earlier this week? Maybe he has fallen on hard financial times, and he needs to marry in order to secure his finances.” She opened her book and let her gaze drop to the open page.

Cassandra tapped Lizzie’s book. “You, my dear sister, read far too many books. Your head is full of nonsense.”

“Nonsense? It is not. However, in my experience, it is usually the gentlemen who do not parade about who have the most to offer. His flowers might be a blessing in disguise. What news could possibly be so bad?” Lizzie asked over the pages of the book she was reading for likely the fiftieth time.

Cassandra twisted her hands in her lap, mimicking the feeling of her insides. “I do not know. Only he has never appeared uncomposed before.” That was not true. He’d been most uncomposed when she had caught him in the library. That was when he had let his mask slip, and she’d seen underneath his poised persona.

Lizzie did not lift her eyes, but Cassandra sensed that Lizzie still took in the situation with a keen sense. She turned her page and said, “Technically, my dear Cassandra, he still has not appeared uncomposed before you this time, either. You are spying on him.”

Cassandra’s pulse quickened. “Spying? I was not spying on him. You were the one who alerted me to his presence, and he will be here at any moment.”

“When he comes through the drawing room door, then you will see for yourself if he is uncomposed when he sees you, or if he was simply working out his nerves before arriving.”

Cassandra laughed. “And just how do you pretend to know so much about such intimate moments of a Season when you have never attended?”

Lizzie looked up then. “Simple. I *read* about them. A lot can be learned when you can see both sides of a story. Reading is very educational when it comes to relationships.”

Cassandra smiled at the naivete of her little sister, but she stayed silent on correction. Let Lizzie think about what she wanted to now. Next Season, when it was Lizzie’s turn to be presented and make her debut, Cassandra vowed she would help her sister make the smartest match in record time so that Lizzie would never have to wonder if gentlemen loved her only for her material possessions.

The door opened, and Cassandra was momentarily caught off guard. Lizzie rose from the bench and gently pulled Cassandra up at the same time. Her cheeks heated. How had she forgotten such basic manners?

Lord Pembroke bowed to both of them. “Lady Cassandra, Lady Elizabeth. It is good to see both of you,” he said, though his eyes stayed on Cassandra. There was no sign of nervousness as he gave her a disarming smile, which made Cassandra wonder if she had imagined his hesitation on her front steps.

“Good day, Lord Pembroke,” Lizzie said. “Pray forgive my inattentiveness today. My mother has gone shopping, and I am at a very intriguing part in my novel.” She settled back in her seat, book in hand.

Cassandra cringed inwardly. Her sister’s propensity to be so vocal about her reading was endearing when she was a young child, and Papa had indulged her with books to add to their family library each time he returned home from his travels. But Lizzie was going to be presented next year. Lounging about the drawing room with her nose in her novel was unacceptable in London. She was sure that Lord Pembroke would say nothing, but if the *ton* heard about Lizzie’s habits, they could affect her next Season when she was presented, or worse, they could affect the way the *ton* saw Cassandra.

Lord Pembroke smiled warmly at Lizzie. “Please do not let me disturb your reading,” he said. “I know how difficult it is to put down a book during a crucial moment.”

“Precisely,” Lizzie said, raising her chin just slightly, which seemed to be a smug gesture to Cassandra, if she knew her sister.

Lord Pembroke turned to Cassandra, holding out the flowers to her. “I apologize for the wilted state of these flowers. I wish I could blame the carriage ride for their condition.”

Lizzie peered over her book at the pair of them, something of a smile hiding behind the pages.

Cassandra received the bundle, putting them to her nose and drinking in the fragrant smell. She smiled at the bouquet. They could have only come from an orphan trying to make a few shillings. Her heart warmed at the thought. “They smell beautiful, and I am sure that they can be revived.” She rang the bell and when the servant appeared, she asked for a fresh vase of water.

Lord Pembroke’s face visibly relaxed. Had that been what he had been nervous about?

The servant brought a vase into the room, which broke Cassandra out of her own thoughts. She put the dark purple flowers into the vase, arranging them with care, and hiding the most wilted of the flowers. “Thank you, Lord Pembroke. I do love wildflowers.” They always reminded her of the fields surrounding Berkeley Manor.

“You mentioned that fact when we were dancing,” he said, a carefree smile back on his lips once again.

“Did I mention it?” she asked, puzzled to recall the conversation he spoke of.

He nodded. “Not in so many words. But you talked about riding through the fields, and spending hours picnicking among the flowers. You said that there was no place like it. And I assumed wildflowers were part of the equation.”

“That is very thoughtful of you. Thank you again for the beautiful flowers,” Cassandra said. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Lizzie watching the two of them conversing. The longer they talked with Lizzie in the room, the more Lizzie would compare Cassandra to a heroine in a novel, when the hero did something gallant.

“You are most welcome,” he said in the way that made her heart skip a beat.

Cassandra saw Lizzie smile from behind her book. Lizzie was too young to understand such things from Cassandra’s perspective. And Cassandra did not want to try to convince Lizzie that fictional stories differed completely from real life during a London Season. After all, the reason Lord Pembroke kept up a pretense with Cassandra was because she was discovering information for him.

“I am looking forward to our ride in Hyde Park,” she said, knowing that the news she had to share would be more difficult in the drawing room with Lizzie, though she pretended not to listen to a word they said.

“I cannot think of anything else I would rather do right now.” Lord Pembroke held out his arm in response.

She slipped her arm through his, her fingers tingling where they made contact with his forearm as he escorted her out of the drawing room.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Cassandra enjoyed everything about Hyde Park during the fashionable hour. It was a glittering tapestry of color and movement. The park was alive with carriages, horses, and people, their finery showing off their wealth and importance. The brilliant blue sky was marred only by the occasional white cloud, and sunlight danced along the grass and pathways.

Lord Pembroke's carriage joined in the procession of carriages gliding along the roads, the horses prancing and neighing with excitement. A boisterous energy punctuated the air, filled with a buzz of low conversations that reminded Cassandra of being next to a beehive.

A light breeze played with the ringlets at the side of her face and pulled on the strings of her bonnet. She pulled her lavender shawl tighter around her.

"I have something very particular to tell you today."

"I should very much like to hear what you have to say."

As the carriages crowded together, Cassandra heard the conversations taking place in the other carriages. They greeted the passing carriages.

“It is a very fine day,” she said, while they were still within earshot of Lord Havercamp’s carriage.

“That is the particular thing you wished to tell me?” His lips twitched.

She nodded, playing along. “The weather is most obliging.” She did not want to be overheard when she had important information to share with Lord Pembroke, so she spoke of the most neutral topic she could think of.

Lord Pembroke’s eyes danced at the joke between them. “Yes, it is. It appears the weather has brought everyone out today. I know how much you enjoy speaking about the weather.”

They rode past a group of women stopped beneath a large tree. Parasols high in the air, they spoke loud enough for anyone in the park to hear their gossip.

“We should take care,” Cassandra said, lowering her voice. “Perhaps we would have been better off discussing things in the privacy of my drawing room, with only my little sister to listen in.”

Lord Pembroke gave her a bemused smile that sent tingles through her center. “Does your sister listen to conversations? She seemed very much absorbed in her book.”

“Oh, she is a great reader, but she has read that same volume for the last year. She can most likely recite the entire book from memory by now. Her eyes may read the words on the page, but her ears pick up everything else around her.”

Lord Pembroke picked up Cassandra’s hand, squeezing it gently before he pressed a swift kiss to the back of her gloved hand. Even through the fabric, she could feel the heat from where his lips burned their impression on her. “It is no surprise

that such abilities run in your family, as you are very aware of everything going on around you all the time.”

“I do not go around gathering information simply for my own amusement. I always have good reasons.”

“I never declared otherwise. I know you are clever.” He tipped his hat at a few carriages that passed them. He was the picture of elegance in his dark green coat, his boots shined to perfection.

“What shall we speak of as we pass this carriage, Lord Pembroke? I cannot very well tell you all the information I have for you.”

Lord Pembroke leaned back in his chair, but he raised an eyebrow. “Do you have much to share, aside from how fine the weather is?”

“Of course. Should I not always have something of interest to share? That is why we are seen together so often.”

“You wound me, Lady Cassandra. You make it sound like a chore to spend time with me.”

“Not at all, m’lord. But is that not the reason we are so often seen together?”

“I should like to think that there are other reasons to be in company with a beautiful woman.”

“You flatter me, m’lord.”

“I only speak the truth, Lady Cassandra. I promise I shall always be honest with you.”

Cassandra took out her fan, suddenly feeling warm, though the temperature in the air would have suggested otherwise. “Nevertheless, I do have information for you.”

“And at present I am more interested in why you are coy about my direct attentions to you.”

Cassandra laughed lightly. “The Season is merely a game, is it not? Should I be so careless as to give credit to every form of flattery that comes my way? It has been three Seasons of that, m’lord. By now, I believe I can judge the sincere ones.”

“You do not think I am sincere? How very ungenerous of you.” He smiled at her playfully.

“On the contrary, Lord Pembroke, I believe you are sincere. But you are still a puzzle to me. There is something below the surface with you. Something still behind the mask that I cannot quite put my finger on.”

Lord Pembroke cleared his throat and glanced around them, a clear sign she was getting close to something uncomfortable. He leaned forward, and in a voice barely above a whisper, he said, “You are not wrong, Lady Cassandra. Though you are privy to some things about my ... current line of work ... there are other things that I cannot share. I hope you will forgive me for being vague, but it would not be wise to involve you in more.”

“I suppose that answer will suffice,” she said, knowing that she could not force the information out of him.

“But you may believe that I am sincere in my attentions toward you, no matter how the circumstance between us came to be.”

Cassandra smiled at his reference to her mistaking him as the thief, catching him in her brother’s study. “Those were a unique set of circumstances.”

“Very unique indeed.”

A floating feeling took hold of her, making it seem that she might be lifted up from the open carriage. For a moment she allowed herself to think of what this moment would be like if Lord Pembroke had asked her on a ride through Hyde Park with no other ulterior motive. She sighed. For the most part, she had put her personal considerations for the Season aside, but sitting in a carriage with a man she had spent so much time together, almost felt like they were courting.

A carriage rolled next to them, and the couple started talking to Lord Pembroke. Introductions were made, and Cassandra watched as people passed by her and Lord Pembroke. Certainly there was talk about them. She could see it. Lord Pembroke finished up his discussion with Mr. Martin, and then the two of them were off again.

Lord Pembroke's attention returned to her. Her pulse raced as she processed just how much of her entire Season had been wrapped in the man before her.

“What is on your mind?” he asked.

“I am merely reflecting on how much information I have been privy to over the last few weeks as I have been helping in the effort, that is all.” She chose her words carefully, aware of the carriages passing them, and not wanting to let them overhear anything of importance.

“There has been a lot going on, more than I originally expected,” he said.

“Oh? Are you closer to catching the thief?” She hoped he would give her more detail.

“You know I cannot give you information that is not already listed in the papers. But the information you have gathered has been helpful.”

“Speaking of the papers. I believe our ride today will make tomorrow’s headlines for all the stares we are getting.” She scanned the surrounding carriages. Some people looked away when she made eye contact, but most of the people passing them did not seem affected when they were caught staring.

“There is not much we can do about that at this point, is there? We have been seen in public together. A ride through Hyde Park is a perfectly appropriate activity.”

She waved to several of the carriages. “This ride will affect my dancing partners at the ball this week, especially if it makes the papers.”

He smiled. “That is fortunate for me, because then I shall be able to dance with you as often as I like.”

She smiled, briefly contemplating what it would be like to actually have Lord Pembroke’s undivided attention, instead of just a pretense. It was not an unpleasant thought. “You are limited to one set, m’lord.”

“Such an antiquated rule.”

They turned onto the lane bordering the river. There were fewer carriages, but more couples strolling along the bank.

“You missed a most amusing dinner last night after you left the party.”

“I am sorry I could not be there. I was called away with some other business.”

“I understand.”

Lord Pembroke leaned forward slightly. “Did you sit by anyone of interest?”

“Yes, my dinner partner was quite amusing.”

“Oh? In what way, amusing?”

“Lord Pembroke, you look as if you have swallowed a fly. Are you concerned that I can find others amusing?”

He furrowed his brow. “No. I just had not expected it. Not the way you talk about Society as a whole.”

“He told stories of his trip to India through the entire meal.”

“I see.” He looked thoroughly put out.

Cassandra leaned back in the carriage. “He was a friend of my father’s and of a similar age.”

Lord Pembroke smiled as if he had won something. “Well, those are just the sort of amusing dinner partners I approve of.”

She shook her head. “You are just as bad as my brother. Your poor sister may have to endure another Season, if that is your attitude.”

“Let us hope she will forgive me,” he said. “Did you hear anything at this highly amusing dinner?”

“Three gentlemen spoke in low tones in French.” She smiled triumphantly.

Lord Pembroke gave her a bemused smile. “Such information should have been announced in the papers this morning. You should have reported it immediately.”

Cassandra swatted him lightly with her fan. “Lord Pembroke. You are the most infuriating man I have ever had the privilege of being acquainted with.”

Lord Pembroke’s mouth twitched, catching all of Cassandra’s attention. “You admit it is a privilege to be

acquainted with me. I knew you were forming a stronger attachment to me.”

She tapped him again with her fan, even as her heart thrummed in her chest. “You are insufferable. Do you want to hear what I have to tell you before we are surrounded by more carriages full of people ready to listen to our private conversation or not?”

“I very much want to hear what you have to say, Lady Cassandra. Pray, continue.”

“I was speaking with one of my friends close to them, so I was able to listen in for quite some time. They talked about a drop off and a trap. I wrote down everything I could remember.”

Cassandra pulled out a parchment of paper from her reticule and handed it to him. “It was the strangest conversation about some flowers, and where to hide the flowers and the duck. It did not make any sense to me, but I guessed that they were using some sort of coded meaning.” She pulled out another scrap of paper. “They left after I walked past them. This was on the floor. I was not sure if it was important, but I dropped my glove next to it, then picked up the paper when I retrieved my glove and slid the paper inside.”

Lord Pembroke scanned the contents of the note she had written and the one she’d retrieved. “This is news indeed. I am not sure that I can decipher the code. It looks a little like a children’s story that makes no sense. Random numbers, random symbols. And the flowers and ducks mean nothing to me.”

“I could not make sense of it either, and I did not want to send this through the post and risk losing it.” She smiled.

“I will take this to my cousin and we will relay this to the right people immediately.”

Cassandra nodded. “I can come with you. I have always wanted to see the War Office.”

Lord Pembroke shook his head emphatically. “No, it is too dangerous. I am not even allowed to go there.”

That seemed strange. “Why ever not?”

Lord Pembroke looked around at their surroundings, then leaned closer, his voice a whisper. “I am not a regular member of the War Office. I help much like you do, but there have been some strange things going on lately. I will ask my cousin what the best way to proceed would be. He will know what to do.” He read the piece of paper once more, looking between the note and her a few times. Conflicting emotions were written on his face. He folded the note and put it inside his jacket. “I fear I must take care of this information immediately.”

“Of course. I am sorry I did not send it to you last night with a servant. I should have done that.”

“Do not trouble yourself about that now. But I fear we need to cut the rest of our ride short.”

“There is a shortcut out this way,” Cassandra said, pointing.

Lord Pembroke kissed her hand once more, making her wish for a real kiss, before they turned and exited the park early.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Back in his study, Robert sat impatiently as Jeremy scanned the contents of both notes that Lady Cassandra had given him earlier that day. He wished that he did not have to cut his ride with Lady Cassandra short. He had been enjoying the banter between them immensely, and if the spark in Lady Cassandra's eyes was anything to go by, she had been enjoying her time as well. But the war was bigger than he was. And the news she had shared with him seemed urgent.

But his cousin remained too quiet.

Tension was thick in the air as Robert drummed his fingers on the red leather-bound book beside him on the table. "What do you make of what Lady Cassandra heard?"

"I do not like it," Jeremy said flatly, looking up from the missive. "If someone realizes we have these codes, it could be even more dangerous. I think it would be best if we do not take any chances."

"Do you know what the codes mean? Have you heard these secret words and phrases before?"

Jeremy shook his head. "It is odd that such a thing should fall into our possession."

“Lady Cassandra has been a valuable asset to the War Office in bringing forth information. The dinner party was not small, but with my business elsewhere, I did not stay for the entire evening.”

Jeremy tapped the missive against his palm. “This is information that can be useful. I will take it in immediately. Good work, Robert.”

Robert held up his hands. “It was not me who found this. It was Lady Cassandra.”

“Yes, well, considering hardly anyone knows you are working for the office, and *no one* else knows that *she* is helping *you*, I will not be giving her the praise.”

“I understand,” Robert said. He would tell Lady Cassandra himself that she was helpful without giving away any of the specifics.

“There are two things that need to be done. First, she said she did not know these men. She is a woman who travels in the highest of circles. It would be helpful if she could point them out to you when you are next together at a ball. I should like to look into each of these men specifically.”

“I will do that,” Robert said. “And the second thing?”

“I need you to interrogate someone that I cannot be seen with. But it requires delicacy.”

“Who is it?” Robert asked.

“A peer who must not know that you have any connection to the War Office.”

“I do not let anyone know that,” he countered.

Jeremy raised an eyebrow in a challenge. “Except for beautiful women.”

“It is one woman. Singular. And I had no choice in the matter. And providence has smiled upon us in that regard because she has brought you more useful information.” Robert gestured to the notes.

“We will see how useful it is once I turn it in to Mr. Douglas. He will make the call.”

Robert nodded. “Tell me what you want me to do for this assignment.”

Jeremy smiled and pulled up his chair closer to Robert’s. “I thought you would never ask.”



AFTER GETTING ALL THE INFORMATION FROM JEREMY, ROBERT went to Baron Porter’s house. He was ushered into the dimly lit study where Lord Porter sat behind his desk. The room was plainly furnished and the curtains and the rugs were an older style but well preserved. The only sound that filled the room was the faint crackling of a fire burning in the hearth.

Lord Porter, a portly man with gray hair on the sides of his head, looked up from the ledger in front of him. “Lord Pembroke, I presume?”

“Lord Porter,” Robert said as he came into the room with authority.

The baron looked confused. “To what do I owe such a great honor as to have you in my house?”

Robert followed Jeremy’s instructions to the letter. He needed to be direct and void of any emotion. “I wanted to make you aware of some talk that I have heard recently.”

Lord Porter lifted his busy eyebrows. “Oh?”

“They are considering taking you off the committee in Lords dealing with the upcoming regulations this summer,” Robert said.

“What? That is impossible. I have been one of the most vocal members in pushing forward this new land bill! There would not be a committee without me. They cannot take me off of it!”

“This is why I came personally to let you know before the body calls for a vote.”

“What reason could they possibly have for making this decision?”

“They think you have sent a post to France. It is a very convincing argument to keep you off every committee,” Robert said.

The man’s eyes narrowed, and he puffed out his chest. “I have done no such thing. I do not tangle myself up in such a way.”

“Your seal would say otherwise. Parliament takes these things very seriously.” Robert held up a letter, watching the man’s moves with care.

Redness colored his face, and he stuttered over his words. “My seal was stolen months ago.”

Jeremy had mentioned this could be a possibility, but the baron should have known better. Still, he needed the baron to consider him an ally. “Why did you not report it missing?”

“I am sure I did not think of it at the time.” The baron made a guttural sound.

“I came to warn you. You may be taken in for questioning.”

“By who? You are no beau street runner. Who are you to accuse me of such things? I happen to work for the War Office. Are you above the *War Office*, Lord Pembroke?”

“No one is above the *law*.” Robert frowned. Jeremy had made it clear that the reason he could not question the baron himself was due to a connection with the War Office. And the baron gave information about being involved with the War Office almost without a fight.

“My seal *was* stolen,” the baron insisted loudly. “You have to believe me.”

Robert rubbed at his neck. “Perhaps there is a way to prove your innocence.”

“How?”

“Show me a ledger, or a letter you have penned.” He would get to the bottom of this. The man did, and the handwriting did not match at all. Still, there was something not quite right about the situation.

“Is that satisfactory?” The baron looked miserable, but there was something else in his eyes. Fear?

Robert handed the sampling of the handwriting back. It was possible that the man had many styles of handwriting, but it was impossible for Robert to figure that out at the moment.

“Whatever is the matter, Papa?” His daughter rushed into the room. “I heard a shout.”

The baron’s features softened when he looked at his daughter. “It is nothing to concern yourself with, my dear Henrietta. Lord Pembroke and I were just having a lively discussion.”

“About politics or the war?”

“Never you mind,” he said to his daughter affectionately.

Henrietta turned a scrutinizing glare at Robert, but then dropped into a small curtsy. “M’lord. Apologies for interrupting.” She turned back to her father. “Please let me know if I can be of assistance.”

The baron kissed her on the head. “Of course, my dear. Run along.”

Robert watched the interchange, then waited until the door latch clicked behind Henrietta. “Your daughter is quite interested in conversation.”

The baron smiled. “It is only her first Season, but the way she grasps the current events of the day is impressive. She is most interested in the details about the war. Of course, I imagine that has to do with our family situation. I served in the army before the War Office recruited me, and my second son is away fighting now. I am afraid most of our dinner conversations are heavy toward the conflict.”

Robert nodded and tucked the paper he had been holding away in his jacket. “I apologize for the inconvenience of disturbing your evening. You can see under the circumstances how imperative it was to know.”

The baron lifted his bushy, white eyebrows. “I would not have expected a marquess to come here to question me like this for Lords,” he said amusedly.

Robert straightened. “These are strange times, are they not? The committee is distantly connected to another committee I chair.” He had let wealthy families think what they would like of him. They could not know that he was from the War Office. “I trust you will be the picture of discretion. Someone is stealing seals, and we *will* get to the bottom of it.”

“I’d think you should care more about the jewels being snatched. Some of them are priceless heirlooms.”

“I am here to make sure the integrity of Parliament is upheld. I imagine that several beau street runners can investigate stolen jewels.” Robert bowed, then opened the door and let himself out of the study.



ROBERT STEPPED INTO WHITE’S AND SCANNED THE luxurious, wood-paneled room for his cousin. He found him at the far end of the room, speaking to a group of men. Robert walked past the group, made eye contact with his cousin, and then circled back to check the betting book displayed prominently on a pedestal. He mindlessly flipped through the pages that had been filled over the last several days, his eyes not seeing any of the wagers as he tried to listen to the surrounding conversations.

“Are you going to place a wager on a bet?” his cousin asked, standing close beside him. “You know it is bad form to bet on anything that involves yourself.”

Robert looked up from the leather-bound volume. “Are there open wagers on something that involves me?”

His cousin smirked and turned the page. “But of course there are. Several, in fact.” He pointed to the middle of a page. “Here is the wager on how many dances you will engage Lady Cassandra for at the next ball at Almack’s, and this one is about when you will propose to her.” His cousin flipped back a few more pages. “And back here we have—”

“I get the idea,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Why anyone ever thought this was a good idea, I will never understand.”

Grown men making wagers on the most ridiculous things, as if they were all back in the schoolroom.”

Jeremy put a hand to his cousin’s arm and lowered his voice. “And yet, it serves a unique purpose for the gathering of information. Seeing how people think and what they are willing to respectably gamble on when it comes to trivial and important things can be quite useful when we are looking for clues. The War Office finds it particularly interesting.”

Robert huffed. “Still, to discuss my impending courtship with Cassandra—Lady Cassandra—is quite uncouth.”

“Impending? Already?” Jeremy’s eyes widened. “Well, in that case, I should place a wager down myself.”

Robert glared at his cousin. “No. It is no one else’s business.”

“I assume you have information for me?” Jeremy asked. “Shall we discuss it somewhere else?”

Robert shook his head. “Today I am going to enjoy the club. There are no duties for Parliament today, and with your parents and my sister out at various activities this afternoon, I am going to stay here.”

“I should have thought you would be in a hurry to see Lady Cassandra if you truly have nothing on your schedule.”

Robert gave him a rueful smile. “I would have called on her, but she is out today as well. Shopping with her mother, I believe.”

“Ah, I see how it is,” Jeremy said, his eyes filled with understanding. “I am the last resort, and because there is no one for whom you may go visit, I must provide you with conversation and entertainment.”

Robert looked back at the infamous book that seemed to laugh at him, let his fingers scan down through the page until he saw his name, then clapped his friend on the back. “Perhaps I will try to get an audience with the duke today. If I hurry, I may be able to upset all the bets that assumed I would not ask for Lady Cassandra’s hand so soon.”

Jeremy stood dumbfounded. His slack-jawed state lasted for several moments before he laughed and said, “You cannot be serious.”

“Of course I am not serious. I should never call on the duke with so little notice.”

“Robert—”

Robert grinned. “Relax, cousin. I am in no position to take a wife while we are in the middle of this. But perhaps when things settle down ...” He let the sentence dangle in the air until it faded into nothing. Someday he would give serious thought to settling down. Instantly, a dark-haired woman with the most intelligent green eyes filled his mind.

Jeremy steered him away from the betting book. “Shall we find a quieter place to discuss matters? Have you news from the appointment you had earlier today?”

Robert scanned the room. No one was within hearing distance of their whispered conversation. “It did not turn out to be anything at all. Like the others, his seal was stolen.”

Jeremy nodded. “I was hoping we had found our leak with him.”

“He may still be,” Robert said.

Jeremy shook his head. “He is in a different area than I am. That is why we are cross-checking everything. We have a few others within the office to look into. We will find the leak, one

way or another. My father is also looking into others in round-about ways.”

Robert nodded. He was not used to being at someone else’s beck and call, like he had been with the War Office over the last few months. Though he enjoyed the work, he could use a reprieve. The sooner they caught the thief, the faster he could expect his parents’ home. And now he had an additional reason. The betting books held the truth, after all. He wanted to court Lady Cassandra. But he could not do that while he was still actively trying to help with such an undertaking. “The sooner we catch the thief, the better.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Robert paced the floor in his study, waiting for Lady Cassandra to show up for tea with his sister. Since breakfast, when Rosalie had informed him that Lady Cassandra would be her guest today, he had been preoccupied. Was it terribly inconsiderate of him to interrupt their tea to talk to Lady Cassandra himself? He wished to talk to her about more than the conversations she had overheard, and the thought had distracted him away from every other simple task. Not wanting the servants to see him so distracted, he had given the staff strict instructions that he was not to be disturbed until his sister's guest arrived.

The knock that proceeded his study door being thrown open was barely audible compared to the door being shoved against the bookcase next to the door.

Robert's heart pounded. At last, some news of Lady Cassandra. He turned, but it was not a servant come to tell him of Lady Cassandra's arrival—only his cousin, disheveled with wide eyes.

He was about to call for the servants and reprimand them for letting his peace be disturbed—after all, he wanted no interruptions, and that included from family members. But

Jeremy looked as white as a ghost. “What the blazes is wrong, cousin?”

Jeremy gasped for breath. “Your sister is missing.”

Robert shook his head. “What do you mean? She went for a walk with a friend before her tea time with Lady Cassandra. She should arrive home soon.”

Jeremy shook his head. “She was out, as you say, with a friend. Her maid was walking behind them when Rosalie twisted her ankle. Both her maid and her friend tried to help her walk, but eventually they summoned a hack. Since there was only room for two, the maid said she would make her way back on her own.”

Robert blinked. “Rosalie is hurt?”

Jeremy nodded. “And still missing. Her maid just arrived, and is still a little shaken from the entire experience. She went along the back of the houses, as she would not enter through the front door. As she approached the servant’s door, a young man dropped this letter and ran. She just delivered it to me not five minutes ago.”

Jeremy held out the piece of parchment, and Robert took the missive. He read the sparse lines written with an unsteady hand, as if someone were trying to disguise their handwriting.

“Back off the trail or your sister dies. Call off any other beau street runners or you will never see your sister again. If you want your sister back, you must send cargo aboard one of your ships. To be picked up on Friday at midnight. If you do not agree to these terms, your sister will die.”

Robert read the threat over again, the paper shaking in his hands as he tried to make sense of everything. He turned the paper over, but there was nothing else written on the small

square. “We must do something immediately. We need to alert the authorities. No resource will be spared.”

“Robert, you have been made. Whoever this is, thinks you are a beau street runner. We must proceed cautiously.”

“There is not time for caution. We must get her back.”

Jeremy nodded. “I agree with you. But they will be watching you. They will want an answer about the cargo.”

“How am I to get the people responsible an answer? Could that be a clue to her location? Should we check the shipyards?”

“It would be a fool’s errand to search the shipyards. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.” Jeremy took the note from Robert. “I will take this to the War Office straightaway. They must be alerted to this development.”

“They said not to get anyone involved,” Robert said. “It would be better if we handle this ourselves.”

“Every moment we deliberate is precious time lost. I must at least speak to my father,” Jeremy said again. “From there, we can decide the best course of action.”

“Are you mad? You want to go to the War Office in the middle of the day? In a marked carriage? Do not be ridiculous.”

“There are more discreet ways of entering the War Office than using the front door.”

“Then I will come with you,” Robert said, without hesitation.

Jeremy shook his head. “We cannot give away that you are working with the War Office. Based on this note, whoever

took your sister is not aware of your involvement, and I would like to keep it that way.”

“If my parents find out about this, it will kill them. I want to help.”

“You will be helping. Stay here. I will be gone an hour at the most.”

“Are you pulling rank on me?” Robert asked, lifting one eyebrow.

Jeremy shook his head. “I would never dream of it, cousin. But we should not take this lightly. These threats are a serious matter. I shall return in less than an hour.” Jeremy left out of the room, but as soon as he left out of the study, he came back in, and he was not alone.

Robert’s numb heart pounded back to life as he saw the person he’d been expecting to see all day follow his cousin back into the room.

He bowed automatically. “Lady Cassandra, it is good to see you.”

Lady Cassandra curtsied, though she appeared rushed. She glanced toward his cousin before her gaze focused back on him. “I apologize. I did not mean to eavesdrop on your conversation. I was told that Lady Rosalie was not at home at present, but I told the butler I insisted upon seeing you about a personal matter, even if I did not take tea with Lady Rosalie. I did not want to interrupt the conversation.”

“How much did you hear?” Robert asked. He knew Lady Cassandra would not spread the gossip about his sister, but the admission that his sister was missing was still a vulnerable topic.

Lady Cassandra's eyes were kind. "I know enough of the situation at hand, and I am happy to lend my support in any way I can."

"That is most kind of you," Robert said, knowing there was nothing that Cassandra could help with.

"I will take my leave," Jeremy said, keeping the door to the study open as he departed. "I will send word immediately after I speak with my father."

Robert nodded. "Thank you, Jeremy."

Lady Cassandra's gaze fixed on the study door until Jeremy disappeared through it. When he was out of sight, Lady Cassandra ran toward Robert and pulled him into a tight embrace. She held him close. "Oh, Robert. I am so sorry. What a horrible situation." Her voice was muffled against his chest.

He took several ragged breaths as he finally processed the gravity of the moment.

She pulled away from him, her intense green eyes full of concern. "Tell me how I can help. How can I be useful? We will find her."

Robert gave her a smile, surprised she could pull it from him at such a time. Lady Cassandra's declaration that they would find Rosalie gave him hope and sprang him forward in his determination. The situation had not changed, but having Lady Cassandra merely suggesting that she was willing to do something to help in such a helpless situation was comforting.

"I-I do not even know what I can do at this point. As I am sure you heard, Jeremy is headed to the War Office, where my uncle is. Jeremy will fill my uncle in on the situation, and hopefully, my uncle will have some ideas. I cannot involve anyone, as the note says, or they will take action. And the

consequence will be dire.” Robert’s voice broke on the last word, but he repeated the words on the note that had been seared into his mind.

Lady Cassandra’s eyes grew large. She covered her mouth with her hand, but it did not keep the gasp from escaping her lips. “This is quite shocking,” she said. “My brother has resources. We can call upon him, and he will help you with this.”

“I cannot risk them thinking I have alerted the authorities.” Robert paced the floor. “But I cannot just stay here. There must be something I can do.”

Lady Cassandra began pacing the room, similar to the pattern he’d walked for most of the morning. “Who did you say she was with?”

“She went for a walk with a friend,” he said, trying to recall if the maid had said the name. Everything blurred together.

“Who was it?”

“I do not know,” he said. “I am sure her abigail knows.” He rang the bell and called for the girl.

Rosalie’s abigail appeared in the doorway and executed a shaky curtsy.

“Betsy, who was Lady Rosalie out with this morning?”

The girl looked like a frightened animal. “She was with Miss Henrietta Porter, m’lord,” she said, her voice trembling.

Robert nodded. “Thank you, Betsy. You look as if you could use some tea to calm you,” he said kindly.

“I am concerned for my mistress,” she admitted.

Robert nodded. “We all are, but I trust you will keep what you know from the whole of the staff and only discuss this circumstance with the butler and the housekeeper.”

Betsy curtsied. “Of course, m’lord.”

Robert rang the bell again and called for his housekeeper. When she arrived, he gave her instructions for helping Betsy and making sure that she was given some tea. Then he dismissed them both from the room.

“What are you thinking?” Robert asked.

“Only that it seems to me Miss Porter’s family should be informed of this matter,” Lady Cassandra said.

“Absolutely not. I do not wish for the information about this abduction to become public. I do not know her family well.” And except for his visit to the Baron yesterday, he had never been to their house before. Calling twice in two days felt strange.

“If the driver of the hack abducted Lady Rosalie, then Miss Porter is very likely in danger as well. Her family will want to know that she is in trouble as soon as may be.”

Robert nodded. “You are right. I had not thought about that.”

“I will go and tell her family what has happened, and I will be back presently to let you know what I have learned.”

“No, I cannot have you do that. I will go. Jeremy did not want me to come to the War Office, but it would likely help our cause if I see what the Baron knows. And if I leave now, I could be back before Jeremy returns.” Staying in motion would be the best course of action.

“Yes, we will stop at Miss Porter’s house, and you can explain everything you know. Perhaps they have received a letter of their own that will give you more information, and we will know how to proceed.”

“*We?* I cannot have you coming with me,” he stammered.

She put her hand on his arm, her expression full of concern. “Of course you can. It will be silly for me to sit here at your house. There is no time to lose. We should depart immediately.”

Fire spread where Lady Cassandra’s hand lingered on his arm. Robert nodded, agreeing with Lady Cassandra’s plan. “I will call for the carriage.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Cassandra sat next to Lord Pembroke in his carriage. They bumped along the busy London street, and Lord Pembroke seemed to keep time by bouncing his knee up and down, his gaze out the window, his demeanor distracted. He mumbled to himself, and Cassandra did not want to interrupt him. He was clearly in a state of shock, and though she felt a calmness amid the stress, she did not know how to transfer any relief to him. She could not really even offer him comfort. She hoped things would turn out, but she did not have any concrete assurances to offer.

He drummed his hand against his thigh, and without thinking too hard, she grabbed his hand in both of hers, hoping to pour comfort into him as best as she could. She could not promise him that everything was going to be alright in the end. She did not have the answers.

He removed his gaze from the window and stared at their joined hands. He seemed to force a smile when he looked at her, and Cassandra wondered if she had been too bold by grabbing his hand.

“I wish there was something I could do to help you,” she said.

He squeezed her hands gently. “I cannot think of anything. And though I do not think you should have come, I am grateful that you are here, and that I am not alone.”

She did not respond in words, but her gloved fingers stayed in his until they arrived at their destination. She did not think too much about why that was—why he had not pulled away, but then she had been there to offer him comfort and there was no reason to think too much about it.

He held out his hand to help her down from the carriage. She took his hand, then his other hand wrapped around her waist, lifting her over a mud puddle. Her waist burned where his hand had been as the two of them ascended the stairs to the Baron’s house together.

Cassandra smiled at the picture they made. No one passing by would be able to guess that the weight of the world was on Lord Pembroke’s shoulders. It was only the crease around his eyes, and the hard-set jaw that could give away that anything was amiss. To see those signs, one would have to stand very close to him.

When the butler opened the door, Lord Pembroke announced himself without his usual flourish. “Lord Pembroke and Lady Cassandra here to see Lord Porter on a matter of urgent business regarding his daughter.”

The butler bowed, allowing them to enter. They were led directly to the study, where Lord Porter was sitting behind his desk.

Cassandra watched the way the marquess strode into the room, with more confidence than she’d seen from him today.

The baron blinked, looking at both of them with some surprise. Cassandra assumed her upper-class air, lifting her

chin a little higher as the baron scrutinized them together.

“To what do I owe the privilege of your company?” he asked, his eyes wary. “I thought we had finished our business, Lord Pembroke.”

“I came here about a different matter, Lord Porter. I wanted to make you aware of a situation involving your daughter,” Lord Pembroke said, a slight hesitation in his voice.

The baron raised his eyebrows. “Please sit.”

Lord Pembroke shook his head. “I do not have a moment to spare. I only wanted to know if you received a letter concerning your daughter and her whereabouts in the last hour?”

The baron’s puzzled look changed, his eyebrows drawn together. “What the devil are you speaking of, Lord Pembroke?”

“My sister went on a walk with your daughter earlier this afternoon.”

“I do not need you to tell me my own daughter’s schedule,” the baron said.

“Of course you do not. I only wanted to inform you of the circumstances. My sister never arrived home, though she had twisted her ankle.”

“That is dreadful news indeed. But how does this involve me?”

“My sister’s maid came home by foot, but Miss Porter and my sister took a hack, I have no doubt, to spare her ankle.”

“That was wise. Are you looking to settle a debt on the price of a ride in a hack?”

“Of course not,” Lord Pembroke said, his voice rising.

“I wanted you to know that you may receive a letter. I have reason to believe that both of them were abducted.”

The baron laughed. “You jest, surely. My daughter arrived home ages ago and is likely taking tea.”

“She is at home?” Cassandra asked. “Is Rosalie perhaps with her?”

The baron shrugged. “I know she had a few friends come for tea. I do not keep track of all the particulars.” He rang a bell, and when the servant appeared, the baron said, “Show Lord Pembroke and Lady Cassandra into the drawing room. They wish to see Miss Porter.”

As they walked down the hallway, Lord Pembroke whispered, “The baron was less than helpful. I should not have said that Rosalie was abducted. He will likely spread the gossip far and wide.”

Cassandra put a hand on his forearm. “I doubt the baron will do such a thing. At any rate, it would not be wise.”

Cassandra and Lord Pembroke were announced and entered the drawing room. Miss Porter’s face seemed to drain of color, as she stood, but she soon collected herself, and said, “I was not expecting you, but please come in. I will ring for a few more cups and saucers. You must join us for tea.”

“No, thank you. We are not here long,” Lord Pembroke said. “We simply have a question for you.”

Miss Porter’s eyes widened, her smile tighter than it was before. “Of course. What would you like to ask? You are welcome to ask it in front of my guests.”

Lord Pembroke looked around the room, as if taking in the eager faces for the first time.

Cassandra's heart raced. Was Lord Pembroke about to announce to a room of a half dozen first year gossips that his sister was missing? Surely, that would not do. It would be worse than the baron knowing. Such girls would have no scruples in spreading gossip that would have a damaging effect on Lady Rosalie's reputation.

Cassandra had to intervene before Lord Pembroke made the situation worse. After all, the warning on the note had been clear. "I am afraid it is I who has the request. We were on our way to Hyde Park, and I had the most wonderful idea. I thought you might be the perfect debutante to open up next week's musicale. As you know, I help create the order, and I could not think of a more lovely start to the program than your talents on the pianoforte." She gave her most polished smile to the room, even as she inwardly cringed as she said the words. She could think of several others she would want to have display their talents before Miss Porter. Supposedly musical talents were the great equalizers of rank and status, though Cassandra knew that was not always the case.

Miss Porter smiled, and she seemed to sit a little taller as she dipped her head in a small acknowledgment of the honor Cassandra had just condescended to give her. "I would be delighted to do that for you. I am always happy to do favors for others."

The rest of the women in the room began chatting away about it, and Cassandra cringed. She was, of course, doing Miss Porter the noblest of services in allowing such an honor, but for her to phrase it as a return favor to accept the position rankled Cassandra. She pushed the unkind feelings aside and

smiled with as much happiness as she might if she were extending the offer to someone she knew better. “I will send over the details with more of the specifics tomorrow.”

“I shall look forward to it,” Miss Porter said, clearly pleased. “And I insist that you both take tea with us. I will not take no for an answer.”

“We do not wish to take your time, as you are still entertaining guests. Might I have a private word with you before we take our leave?”

At that, Miss Porter looked immediately guarded. Her cup rattled against her saucer as she placed both on the table. “Of course,” she said, though there was a shake to her voice. “What would you like to speak to me about?”

“Let us take a turn and you may show me the lovely display over there,” Cassandra said, standing up and assertively moving toward the farther corner of the room.

Miss Porter stopped in front of a case and described the artifact. Then she said, “What do you want to know? I do not know where Rosalie is.”

A sudden realization hit Cassandra, something she had been guessing at. Miss Porter was definitely hiding something. Her bringing up Rosalie without Cassandra mentioning it meant something. But how could Cassandra extract the information without alerting Miss Porter? “Oh, I only wanted to explain a few things about the upcoming musicale, to give you your best chance at the presentation. After all, it is an enormous responsibility to go first.”

Miss Porter lifted her head up with indignance. “I am up for the challenge.”

Cassandra smiled, trying to put the woman at ease. “Of course you are. But everyone else is going to be wild with envy that you were chosen.”

“I do not wish to make others envious,” she said in a voice that made it sound like she meant the exact opposite.

“Of course you do not, and for that reason, I suggest you keep the name of your song a secret so that you do not make others feel inferior to you.”

“I am good at keeping secrets,” she said.

Cassandra paused, wondering how far she could push the conversation. “Yes, I bet you are. In fact, I have heard from several women that you are very good at keeping a confidence. That is one of the reasons you were chosen.”

“Truly? Who has said such a thing about me?” If Miss Porter had had feathers, she would have been preening them with such praise.

“Most recently, I heard it from Rosalie.”

Miss Porter blinked. “I told you before that I do not know where she is.”

Cassandra laughed and then looked around the room. “Oh, you mean, you do not know why she is not at your tea. I suppose Lord Pembroke and I could have brought her with us on our way to the Park. We did not think of that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you wondered where Rosalie was. I assume it is because you invited her to your house for tea. What other explanation could there be?”

Miss Porter cleared her throat. “Yes, of course. She is in our circle of friends, and was, of course, invited.”

Cassandra waved her hand in the air dismissively. “Of course, I do not think she meant to slight you in the least. She was just talking this afternoon about how caring you were when she twisted her ankle. Hiring a hack was such a thoughtful gesture. I can only imagine that she would not have been able to make it home without such care.”

“She made it home?” Miss Porter’s voice held the question, mixed with confusion.

Cassandra smiled like she did not have a care in the world. “Of course she would be home. And at any rate, she was the one who told me you were such a dear friend and confidant. After thinking through it, and with her suggestion, I decided you would be the very first to play at the musicale.”

“You talked to her this afternoon? After she twisted her ankle?” Miss Porter’s brows drew together.

Cassandra smoothed over the fib she was telling. After all, it had been the maid she had talked to, not specifically Rosalie, but she knew she was on to something. “Of course. I sat and took tea with her this afternoon after she returned, while she waited for the doctor. I am sure that her injury is why she did not think to send her regards today.”

Miss Porter blinked, her eyes unfocused. “Yes, that makes sense.”

Cassandra wanted to get more information from her, but was not sure how. “It was so sweet of you to ensure her safe return today. You are a loyal friend, just as she said.”

“Truthfully, I only gave the driver the direction to her house. The hack dropped me off first.” She shook her head. “I am glad she made it home safely. It would have been terrible if

something had happened to her. I will have to call on her when she is feeling up to visitors.”

“I am sure she would appreciate the kind gesture,” Cassandra said, still feeling Miss Porter was hiding something, although her concern for her friend looked real.

Miss Porter took a deep breath. “I will do that. Please forgive me, I should get back to my other guests. Our tea time is almost over, and I have other things pressing on my schedule.”

Cassandra curtsied. “Of course, I understand. I think we must take our leave of your lovely party. Lord Pembroke has promised me a ride in Hyde Park today.”

Miss Porter curtsied as well, and the two rejoined the party long enough for Cassandra to make a magnanimous gesture to the room.

Lady Cassandra looped her arm through Lord Pembroke’s and the two took their leave.

As they exited the street, Lord Pembroke turned to her. “What are you thinking?” he asked her. “You spent a lot of time talking with Miss Porter. It was all I could do to keep up conversations with so many females all at once.”

Cassandra pressed her lips together. “I apologize for my inattentiveness to you. But I hardly left you with wolves. They saw us arrive together.”

“They did. And then they saw us not talking among ourselves, and it was exhausting trying to fend them off.”

“Well, it was a good thing you did, because I learned some valuable information.” As they approached the carriage, she asked, “Will you give your driver instructions to drive ahead a few houses and wait?”

Lord Pembroke nodded and spoke with his driver. “What are we waiting for?” Lord Pembroke asked as they sat in the stationary carriage.

“Miss Porter was quite jittery; do you not agree?”

Lord Pembroke nodded. “I do not know her well and have spent little time in her company. Her personality may be a little more reserved than you or Rosalie, but I noticed she was nervous.”

“I noticed that as well,” she said, and then quickly summarized what she had learned from Miss Porter and how the conversation unfolded.

“It sounds like she is hiding something,” Lord Pembroke said.

Cassandra nodded. “More than that, I have a feeling that she knows exactly where Rosalie is.”

“Where?” Lord Pembroke said, his voice desperate.

Cassandra shook her head. “I do not know. I did not think a direct approach would work. But if my instincts are right, I have a feeling we are about to find out exactly where.”

“How?”

“Before we left, Miss Porter said that her tea was almost finished, and she had pressing things this afternoon. Hosting such a big event is not typically cut short. My friends and I will spend hours talking together, if we have nothing else on our schedule.”

“What does that signify?”

Cassandra leaned back in her chair. “Miss Porter is in her first Season. It is true that it can be a demanding schedule, but

when I host a tea at my house with my friends, I schedule nothing pressing afterwards.”

“She may feel differently.”

“She may, but from the amount of desserts and sandwiches on the tray, she was not planning to end this tea on time. I have a feeling we may see her leave sooner rather than later.” She opened the back curtain in the carriage. “Look, her guests are leaving now. One, two, three ...” Cassandra counted as all the guests exited. “They are leaving with such speed. If Miss Porter comes soon, we should follow her.”

“You believe she will go to Rosalie?”

Cassandra nodded. “I hope that my words to her filled her with some sense of urgency. I made her believe Lady Rosalie and I had spoken after she had twisted her ankle. The shock in Miss Porter’s eyes was unmistakable. I have a feeling she wants to check on my story.”

“What if she goes to my house?” Lord Pembroke asked.

“Your servants are instructed not to let anyone in who asks to see Lady Rosalie. And as she is *recovering from a sprained ankle*, she will not be missed at social functions for at least a few days.”

“But if Miss Porter goes there to see how Rosalie is ...” He let the sentence trail off.

“Then I suppose my hunch would be wrong.” Cassandra rubbed her forehead. “In my mind, I thought she would go where she thought Lady Rosalie was, if she was truly an accomplice in this.”

Lord Pembroke shook his head. “I would not think such a sweet debutante is capable of something so malicious.”

Cassandra bit her lip. She always tried to think the best of others as well. But life experience had taught her to trust the feelings in her heart and the thoughts in her head. Last year, when she'd been suspicious of someone, she'd brushed it off, ignoring the feeling in her stomach, and she had been wrong to brush them aside. It had almost led to dire consequences. Since then, she had been more aware of her own intuition, and she knew she trusted it now.

“I think it speaks to your character that you wish to think and speak well of others. Let us wait a few more minutes. If no carriage comes around to the front of the house to pick up Miss Porter, we will think of something else.” Though, what that could be, Cassandra could not say. This felt like their only lead. Trying to think of a different plan would have to wait until this one did not pan out.

“We must think of a way to find Rosalie. It is my responsibility to keep her safe. I shudder to think what my parents would say if they learned harm came to her.”

Cassandra nodded. She wanted to say something comforting, something helpful. She could only imagine the terror he kept hidden under his stoic mask. Now, to talk like it would kill his parents all over again was heavy. She took his hand. “We will figure this out together.”

A sound of horses and a carriage was heard behind their carriage. Cassandra leaned slightly forward in time to see Miss Porter, dressed in a long, dark cloak, come down the front steps only a few houses away from them.

“Draw the curtains,” Cassandra said, closing the ones next to her quickly.

Lord Pembroke obeyed. “This is highly unusual.”

“She is hiding something, and we do not want her knowing that we are following her. If she were to look into the carriage and see us, she might be suspicious.”

“Perhaps it is good that my carriages in Town are unmarked.”

Cassandra nodded. “It is a very good thing. My brother’s carriages are entirely too conspicuous with a ducal seal on them.”

Lord Pembroke tapped the top of the carriage roof lightly, and a small hatch opened, revealing the driver’s face.

“Yes, m’lord.”

“The carriage I want you to follow is directly behind us.”

The man barely glanced at the other carriage, but nodded. “I understand, m’lord.”

“We wish to be discreet. Can you follow at a distance?”

“Of course.” The small hatch closed, but soon Cassandra heard the familiar slap of the reins and the horses began to move, pulling their carriage to an unknown destination. A destination where Cassandra very much hoped the man next to her would find his sister.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



It was absolute lunacy to drive down the street in his carriage with the curtains drawn, sitting next to the woman who had captured his heart. The situation before Robert required his complete focus. At one point, Lady Cassandra grabbed his hand, holding it in her own, just like she had done on the way to the baron's residence.

Rosalie was missing. Lady Cassandra had followed what looked like a paltry lead only an hour ago. At least they were moving somewhere. He wanted to tap on the roof and have the driver go faster, but he knew it was smart to follow at a distance. The sedate pace would help them blend in, but it did not match the sensations racing around in his head and his stomach.

The carriage lurched to an abrupt halt, causing Robert and Lady Cassandra to topple forward. Robert caught himself and instinctively wrapped his arms around her waist to prevent her from falling. A fire blazed through him as he steadied her.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his voice husky with emotion.

"Yes, I am quite alright," Lady Cassandra replied, her words trembling as she looked into his eyes. "This road has more unexpected turns, and without the reference of seeing out the windows ..." Her gaze fell to where his arms still lingered

around her waist, firmly protecting her, and filling the air with tension.

He cleared his throat, releasing her from his embrace. The carriage began moving again, and Robert pushed the curtains aside for the remainder of their journey. "I apologize. I only wanted to make sure you were safe."

A faint blush bloomed on her cheeks as she replied, "That was kind of you."

The carriage came to another abrupt stop. They waited for a signal from the driver that the coast was clear.

"This is quite a different carriage ride than our last one through Hyde Park," she admitted. "Perhaps it is the lack of flowers."

"I shall make sure to remedy that the next time I take you on a carriage ride." His heart thundered loudly in his ears.

The top hatch on the carriage roof opened quickly. "M'lord, I watched which door she went through. Had to wait until her driver left."

Robert surveyed the street. This was not an acceptable part of Town. "Lady Cassandra, I want you to promise me you will stay in this carriage. I will not be long."

"I am coming with you," she said.

Robert shook his head. "No. It is too dangerous. You should not have come."

"If it was not for me, you would not have come either."

Robert stepped from the carriage. "A fair point, but I still cannot risk your safety. You should draw the curtains."

A smile crossed her lips. “You are worried about my safety, m’lord?”

“Of course I am. There is already one woman I care about in peril today. I do not want to make it two.” He bowed and then closed the door.

“Thomas, point me in the right direction.”

The driver indicated a small door on the back of a large building. The street was nearly deserted.

“Odd that her driver would not stay,” Robert mumbled, trying to think of what that could mean.

“Unless he is pulling ‘round to the front of the building. But I wouldn’t know where the front is.”

“Thank you, Thomas. Take care of Lady Cassandra. I will not be long.”

Thomas nodded. “I will, m’lord.”

Robert walked toward the door as if he were going into White’s. He needed to look like he belonged, as if he were simply calling on neighbors in this part of Town. Though it did not feel exactly accurate. What kind of neighbors have you call on them through the back entrance?

He looked up and down the street, trying to take everything in without being obvious about it. There was a man leaning against a post on the far side of the street. He was tossing something in his hand—a coin, perhaps—his entire focus seemed to be glued on the repetitive motion, but Robert had the feeling that the man in the dirty shirt and torn pants missed nothing that happened on the street.

Robert approached the worn door and leaned toward it, trying to make out any sound on the other side, but heard

nothing. Suddenly, this brilliant idea to follow a lead felt foolhardy. Robert wanted to find his sister—needed to find his sister—but he had no idea what was on the other side of the door. Should he knock or walk right in?

He tried the handle, but it was locked. His pulse raced. He raised his hand to knock, then thought through his situation. He had no weapon, no reinforcements.

Perhaps he should go back and send the carriage to get reinforcements first, before he went barreling in. He took a step back from the door.

“Leaving so soon? You’ve only just arrived,” a chilling voice said from behind him.

Robert whipped around, seeing the man who had thrown the coin standing between two hulking figures, holding clubs. Before he could even register what was happening, a man stepped forward, club swinging high.

One of the clubs connected with his middle, and he groaned doubling over in pain. He did not have time to recover before the second club connected with his head. Agonizing pain erupted through him, and then darkness consumed him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The door of the carriage opened, and Cassandra jumped back. She screamed as a large man entered the carriage. Panic filled her.

She opened her mouth to scream again, but before she could utter a sound, his filthy hand clamped onto her mouth. Grime filled her senses and threatened to make her sick. The man pulled her roughly from the carriage.

Thomas, the driver, was crumpled on the ground next to the carriage. She caught a glimpse of his bruised face before she was whisked away down the street.

She struggled against the man who held her, but he tightened his grip over her mouth, making her jaw ache, and her cheek hurt.

“She is a fighter, I’ll give her that,” the man who held her said, the stench from his breath enough to make Cassandra sick. “Where do ye want her?”

“Same place as the other one. But be quick about it.”

The man grunted his response, dragging Cassandra forward toward a small door. The man knocked twice, and the door opened. She was pulled inside.

A small lantern hung on a metal peg on one side of the wall, but in this room there were no windows. What should she do? She would not attempt a scream again. It would do no good, and she needed her wits about her as she thought through their predicament. The driver was unconscious, and Robert was nowhere to be found. When the driver came to, would he know where to come to find her and Robert?

Panic rose in her chest. No one knew where they were. Their driver might be out for hours. She wanted to squeeze her eyes closed and block out this entire situation, but she had to stay alert. They'd passed through two more rooms, and down a long hall, then up a flight of steps. Were they at the street level now? She committed the twists and turns to memory, though she felt all turned around. She would need to remember where she was in order to get out again. Lord Pembroke was nowhere to be seen. She had tried to look back, but was roughly jerked around the moment she tried.

The hand that was over her mouth suddenly removed itself as she was thrust into a small room. A small lantern hung high on the wall, revealing an unconscious Lord Pembroke on the bare floor. His hands were tied behind his back, and large purple marks were on his face. The room was sparsely furnished. No fire blazed in the hearth. No pictures adorned the faded walls.

She was deposited in the center of the room. The taller man forced her arms behind her back and tied them with a coarse rope. Cassandra tried not to wince as it cut into her wrists. She was forced into a sitting position on the filthy floor, then tied back to back with the unconscious Lord Pembroke. She struggled as the men tied more ropes against her hands, but it did not make a difference.

“I demand to see my captor,” she said, her chin lifted in defiance as the two unsavory men laughed.

“Who is she to be making such demands?” the taller man said. “No one gets to see the boss.”

The man with a hook nose laughed. “Maybe she thinks she is royalty.”

“Maybe she thinks she is the only person staying in this palace.” They both laughed.

Cassandra’s mind caught hold of the slight revelation. She was not the only one here. But were they referring to just Miss Porter or someone else instead? “This is an outrage to be treated like this. I want to see her. I want to see Miss Porter.”

At Cassandra’s demands, the two men looked at each other, eyes wide. “Have we made a mistake?”

“No one should know anything.”

“I am here to see Miss Porter, which you would know, if you had any brains at all. I have never been treated with such disrespect when I have called on her before.” Cassandra let the terse insult fall from her mouth, then wished she could recall it when the taller man came toward her, anger in his eyes.

The shorter man stopped him with his hand. “Careful, Jack. We don’t know who she is. We may have made a mistake.”

“Should we bring her with us, Dan?” Jack asked.

“Nah, we will leave her here. The boss will not take kindly to knowing that Henrietta has been inviting people here.”

“True, but that’s of little significance once we get the ransom. She will be as easy to dispose of as the rest.” The two men left, talking low.

Cassandra strained her ears to hear any sounds, but the only thing she could hear was their retreating footsteps. She looked around the room. There had to be something she could use. Something to help her out of the situation. There was a poker next to the fireplace. There was a small chair and a stool, but other than that, the room was bare. The poker might be useful, if she could get to it.

She nudged against Lord Pembroke's shoulder. He was slumped forward, pulling against the ropes that bound them together. She pulled on the ropes that encircled her wrists. The ropes gave more than she expected. She tugged at them, loosening them each time they scratched into her skin.

She worked with the knots, trying to think of what she knew. There was a possibility that she and Robert could escape this place, but so far she had seen nothing of Lady Rosalie. They had come this far—if they left without her, would they be able to find the help they needed to rescue her?

“Lord Pembroke, you must wake up,” Cassandra whispered, nudging her shoulder against his back. “We need to figure this out.”

He moaned incoherently.

The bonds loosened a little more, and she pulled at them until they fell away from her wrists. Hands freed, she worked at finding Lord Pembroke's hands and untying his ropes. His were much easier with having full motion in her hands. Lord Pembroke's bonds seemed like a sloppy job, but perhaps that was because he was still unconscious.

Suddenly she felt him strain against his bonds, and her fingers stilled. “Lord Pembroke? Are you coming to?”

“Cassandra?” His voice was distant.

“I believe it is Lady Cassandra to you,” she said, enjoying the sound of her Christian name on his lips.

He strained against their bonds, squeezing the breath out of her.

“Do not pull so tightly, m’lord. We are tied together.”

Lord Pembroke huffed. “What the devil are you doing here? You were *supposed* to stay in the carriage.”

“I listened to that instruction, and a lot of good it did us.” She explained what had happened, filling in the details of seeing the driver unconscious. “What happened to you?”

He filled her in on what he remembered.

“How are you?” she asked.

“You mean aside from being a tied-up prisoner?”

“Yes, aside from that.”

He groaned. “I have a splitting headache. That blow was hard.”

“I imagine so.” Her fingers went back to working on his bonds. “I have been working on the knots. I should have us out of these ropes presently. Thankfully, these men were not expert at tying knots.”

“Where are we? Where are the men?”

“I think they went to get Henrietta. There is no telling how long they will be gone. I have a feeling Rosalie is here.” She filled him in on the conversation that the men had and gave him what she remembered about the hallway turns and stairs as best she could. Then she said, “There is a poker near the fireplace. But I have seen nothing else that can help us.”

“You seem to be an expert at this,” he said. “Perhaps you should officially join the War Office when we get out of here.”

“If by expert you mean I learned my lesson when I was tormented by my younger brothers in the schoolroom, then you are correct. I am an expert. They used to tie me up and then take turns rescuing me, but I learned how to untie knots and pick locks with hairpins in the process. I never thought they would become useful skills once I *left* the schoolroom.”

“I have a knife in my boot,” he said. “If you can loosen my bonds enough, I may be able to get it to cut the larger ropes off of us.”

“They did not tie yours particularly tight. I am nearly finished,” she said, undoing the last knot against his wrists.

“Thank you,” he said. “I am going to see if I can reach my knife.” He pulled against the ropes, trying to get the knife free.

Cassandra could not see how Lord Pembroke was coming along on the task, but after a few moments of concentration, she heard the thud of something falling to the floor. “Was it a success?”

“Nearly,” he said. “If we can move just a little on the floor, one of us should be able to reach the knife.”

Moving across the floor proved to be more difficult tied back to back than Cassandra thought. More than once, she hit her head against the marquess. “I apologize,” she said, after her head connected with his for the third time.

“It is quite all right. As blows to the head go today, it is not the worst one I have felt.”

She stifled her laugh. “Are you making light of our situation?”

“On the contrary, I was only speaking the truth. The knife is not far now. Just a little farther.”

Cassandra’s fingers brushed the top of the leather satchel. “I can almost reach it.” Stretching out her fingers, she slid the knife between them. “I have moved it. How do we get it open?”

“Hold the leather portion of it. I will attempt to pull the knife out.”

She held the knife holder steady as he pulled the knife out.

He dragged it out slowly. “I am keeping the blade away from us,” he said in low tones. “This may be more difficult than we thought.”

Metal scraped against rope slowly as each movement was slow. Cassandra could not see the angle that Lord Pembroke held his knife at, but she had a feeling it was most uncomfortable.

Suddenly, the door swung open. The two men who had tied them up came in, along with Henrietta. “These are the two we were telling you about. That one was lurking about the door, like we told ye. The other one was waiting in a carriage.”

Lord Pembroke’s knife hand immediately stilled, his back stiff against her own.

Henrietta’s eyes widened, but when she spoke, it was with sourness. “Tying up my guests is no way to treat anyone.”

“They looked as if they were following you. He came out of a carriage just after you came in here.”

Henrietta took a step forward. “Of course they were following me. I had an interview with both of them this

morning. As I could not continue talking business at my personal residence, I asked them to follow me here.”

The tall man scrunched his eyes. “He looked like a spy when he arrived.”

“Of course they are spies. Is that not what the boss wants? More spies for his operation?”

Cassandra’s heart pounded against her chest. This was a much bigger problem than she had originally anticipated.

“Untie them,” Henrietta said. She walked around Lord Pembroke and Cassandra, seemed to glimpse the knife, and then moved back around them. “Actually, on second thought, leave them tied up. I will conduct the rest of my interview with them like this.”

The men laughed.

“I shall conduct this interview alone.” For one so young, her voice held a commanding style. How was it that a mere girl was in charge of such an operation?

“What do you want us to do? Want us to go get the boss?”

“No!” She cleared her throat, her voice much calmer when she said, “I should like to be the one to tell the boss about these two. After all, they are my recruits.”

One of the men grumbled. “I guess we are back to keeping watch.”

“That did no good last time. Had these been spies, you would have led them right into one of our only safe houses left? No, that will not do. You must fetch the doctor. Do not come back until you bring him with you. Our other guest must be attended to as soon as possible.”

The men grumbled, but left, slamming the door behind them.

Henrietta put her head to the crack in the doorway. After a few moments, she turned toward them. “What are you doing here?”

“Should that not be obvious?” Lord Pembroke said. “I am trying to find my sister.”

“Your sister is safe for the moment. However her ankle is hurting.”

“I want to see her,” Lord Pembroke said.

Cassandra could feel the infinitesimal movements he was making with his hand. Was he still trying to cut the rope with Henrietta in the room?

Cassandra speared Henrietta with a glance. “I cannot believe you are mixed up in this kind of situation. You are the thief that has set London in an uproar.”

Henrietta’s mouth dropped open in the most unladylike gape. “I-I did not mean to. But you do not understand.”

“I think we understand plenty. Not only are you a thief, but you are an accomplice in abduction. I am sure there must be another accusation too—if you are helping the French, that is automatically a sentence for treason.” Cassandra lifted her nose, putting on airs, as if she were sitting on a couch, and not tied up on the floor.

“I am not helping the *French*. I am saving my *brother*.” She broke down. “I did not mean for things to go this way, but I do not have any choice.”

“You always have a choice,” Lord Pembroke said, forcing the knife through the cords with more strength than he had

given it before. The ropes fell away, and he was swiftly to his feet, his knife pointing toward Miss Porter.

Her eyes widened as her hands instinctively rose closer to her face in a sign of surrender. “I promise I meant you no harm, or your sister.”

“Explain yourself. Why do you think you have no choice?”

“The boss—he is holding my brother captive. I-I opened the mail that was addressed to my father. He works for the War Office, and I am particularly curious when it comes to the conflict. My brother is serving, but the note made it clear that my brother would be held captive until certain things were accomplished.”

“What sort of things?”

She lifted a shoulder. “At first, it was nothing too grand. They wanted my father’s seal. I wrote back to this person. I could not let my father know what had happened to his son. My father looks strong, but his health is frail. I was afraid that news of my brother’s capture would ruin him.”

“So you decided to take matter into your own hands?” Cassandra asked.

“What else was I to do? I care for my brother. I could not do anything else. He means the world to me.”

“I am sure you can appreciate that I feel the same about my sister. Where is she?”

“In an upstairs bedroom, resting. She is comfortable, I can assure you. I had sent for the doctor earlier, but it is tricky to get someone to come to this part of town.”

“I can imagine,” Lord Pembroke said dryly.

“I was not planning to keep her here long. I was going to help her escape,” Henrietta said miserably.

“Your henchmen talked about shipping her off across the channel. They have been using the seals you have stolen to frame other honorable people in England to look like traitors. Meanwhile, they are stealing secrets from the War Office and giving our enemies an advantage over us. Those are treasonous crimes.”

Henrietta opened her mouth and closed it a few times before speaking. “I am unaware of that. I did not think about the secrets I was sharing that I overheard. Not really. I was only thinking about my brother, about saving him. I do not wish to be tangled up in this mess, but what am I to do? If I do not help them, they will kill my brother.”

“And if you help them, you will be ruining other lives. It was cowardice,” Lord Pembroke said coldly.

“I know it was,” she said in a small voice. “Which is why I sent Dan and Jack to fetch the doctor. That should buy us some time.”

“Unless they mean to betray you by going to your boss instead.”

She swallowed, a flash a fear in her eyes. “I want to help you, but if I do, I will be putting my brother’s life in jeopardy.”

“Let us help you,” Robert said smoothly. “I have ... connections with the War Office. If we let them know what is going on, they will be able to help.”

“I—but my brother—”

“We will try to help your brother and things will go much better for you. We do not have long.” Lord Pembroke lowered his knife. “What will you choose, Miss Porter?”

Miss Porter took a deep breath. “We must hurry. I do not think your sister’s ankle is broken, only sprained. If you can help carry her down, I will see that you have safe passage out.”

“And what of your boss?”

“There are other safe houses and places to hide. I will simply leave word that due to the negligence of the guards, this safe house was compromised, and I needed to leave immediately. I am to deliver more information during the Masquerade Ball in two days’ time. No one should suspect anything has gone awry if I leave a note, with my seal explaining I have moved to a different location.”

“You mean your father’s seal.” Lord Pembroke raised his eyebrows.

She nodded. “Do you have a carriage? Mine will not return for at least another quarter of an hour.”

“My carriage is here.”

“I will come with you. It will be the only way we will not be suspected if there is still someone watching this place. If you carry your sister, I think that will be the ticket I need to show that we needed to move her with more strength than I have.”

“Why should we trust you?” Cassandra asked.

“Because you do not have a choice. And if you truly have contacts at the War Office that can help my brother, I would be very much obliged.”

Lord Pembroke nodded. “I will do what I can for you,” he said. “Explaining your situation may help you, though I cannot speak for the War Office when they find out about the thieving.”

She nodded almost imperceptibly. “We must hurry. Let’s get your sister and get out to my carriage before Jack and Dan return.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Robert followed Miss Porter and Lady Cassandra up a flight of stairs before they entered a drawing room. The dust-filled room looked like it had not been redone in over a century. Heavy, dark curtains were drawn, and the only light in the room came from a few candles on the tables.

“Henrietta, how could you?” Rosalie’s stern voice broke the silence.

“I know I have lost favor with you, but hopefully this will make up for it, at least in part,” Miss Porter’s voice was strained.

“I need a doctor. Have you brought one yet? Keeping me here like a prisoner—”

“No, I have not brought the doctor, someone better,” Henrietta said, stepping aside, and letting Robert come fully into the room.

“Robert! How did you find me here? I cannot believe that Henrietta brought you here.”

Robert covered the ground between his sister in three large steps before he wrapped his arms around her. The real fear that had sat on his shoulders for the last few hours seemed to be

thrown off him in an instant, like rocks thrown off a large cliff and into the sea. “Rosalie, are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“Only my ankle, brother.”

“We need to get you out of here immediately,” Robert said.

“I could not agree more. It has been horrid here, brother. Oh, but the stairs are too much for me to navigate.”

“I shall help you,” Robert said, and in one swift motion, he picked up his sister, cradling her in his arms.

“For what it is worth, I am sorry, Rosalie. I never meant for this to get so out of hand.” Miss Porter had the good graces to at least look chagrined.

Robert headed toward the stairs with his sister, his entire focus on getting her to the carriage safely.

Lady Cassandra pointed to the writing desk. “Aren’t you forgetting something, Miss Porter?”

Miss Porter swallowed, then resolutely nodded. “I will be but a moment.” She quickly penned a few lines and dripped wax on the edge of the paper before sealing it. Then she opened the desk drawer up and shoved a few things into her reticule. “I am ready. Let us make haste.”



ROBERT FOUND THE DRIVER INSIDE THE CARRIAGE, AWAKE, BUT dazed, not having wanted to leave his post. Once Robert settled his sister in the carriage, he helped Miss Porter into the carriage. Miss Porter’s actions still bothered him, but he set them aside for the moment.

He turned and held out his hand to Lady Cassandra. She winced when she took his hand, and he turned her hand over in his, seeing the raw, red marks from the ropes along her fingers and hands.

He rubbed his thumb across her wrist. "You are hurt."

She shook her head. "It is merely a scratch."

Pain ran through him that the woman in front of him had endured so much in an effort to save his sister. He brought her hand to his lips, kissing one of the marks gently. "I am so sorry."

Her eyes met his. "It is not your fault."

"I still feel responsible."

He gave the driver directions, but once the carriage rolled down the street, there was only silence in the carriage.

Robert sat next to his sister, and across from Lady Cassandra. A few times he caught her eye, wishing he could read her mind at the moment. Rosalie stretched out her leg straight in front of her, forcing Miss Porter to sit in the middle of the bench.

As the carriage bounded along, Robert took in the scenes outside the carriage. They were not in a part of town that he recognized. The buildings felt gloomier, the streets dirtier. Everything had a layer of sadness surrounding it. He waited for something to change, and within a few streets, he was looking at white marble buildings and bustling people carrying packages. He knew where they were now.

"Where are we going?" Miss Porter asked, looking panicked.

“My sister requires a doctor. We are headed to my residence first. I must see to her needs. Then I shall hire a driver and send a servant with you to make sure that you are escorted home safely.”

Miss Porter nodded. “I will go home and tell my father everything when I return home.”

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Robert said to her.

“And thank you for doing your best to help with my brother.”

“I will reach out to my connection and see what can be done,” Robert promised.

“I will await information from you.”

“Likely it will come from someone who is not me,” Robert said.

Miss Porter nodded, then turned to Lady Cassandra. “I believe that the present circumstances will necessitate me turning down the offer to play first at the upcoming musicale. I am very honored by the offer, but I cannot accept it.”

Lady Cassandra nodded. “I think that is probably wise.”

The carriage stopped in front of Robert’s house. He helped Lady Cassandra and Miss Porter out of the carriage first, and then turned to his sister. “Shall I carry you to the house?”

“And attract all the gossips you were firmly trying to escape from? No indeed, just let me lean against you, and I shall be well enough off.”

Each step Rosalie took looked painful, but she put on a brave face while she kept as fluid a motion as she could under the circumstances. However, the moment they stepped through the front doors, Robert picked her up despite her protests. He

gave orders to his staff to fetch a doctor and for Rosalie's abigail to attend to her. Then he carried her to her room.

A maid came in with hot water and clean cloth, attending to the dirt and the scrapes that she had.

"Thank you, Robert," Rosalie said.

Robert closed the door to give his sister privacy as she changed out of her gown.

"What can I do to help?" Lady Cassandra asked in the corridor.

"I suspect you should be on your way home before we are caught in a scandal for the day's events."

Lady Cassandra arched an eyebrow. "When my carriage arrives, I will depart. Until then, let me help."

"Once my sister has changed, you may go into her room and have your hands attended to."

Miss Porter stood farther down the corridor, not moving.

At that moment, the door down the hall burst open and Jeremy came into the corridor. "Where the devil have you been?"

"Language in front of the fairer sex, my dear cousin," Robert said, feeling the stress of the day loosen from his chest like a discarded cravat.

"You were supposed to wait here until I came back with news from my father. Rosalie could be in serious trouble."

At that moment, another maid went into Rosalie's room.

"What is going on?" Jeremy asked.

"Hello, cousin," Rosalie said from where she was propped up in her bed.

Jeremy's eyes focused on his cousin. "Rosalie? When did you return?" He looked to Robert for an explanation.

"Just now with Lady Cassandra and myself."

Jeremy blew out a breath. "I see. It looks like you have much to explain."

Robert nodded, keeping his voice low, so that Rosalie did not overhear him. "Let's go meet in my study. I will fill you in on everything."

"Ladies." Jeremy bowed, then turned toward the door.

Robert also offered a bow to the women. "It appears that I have a pressing matter of business to discuss with my cousin."

Lady Cassandra smiled. "Go. I will stay with your sister until the doctor arrives."

"Thank you, Lady Cassandra. That will be of great comfort to me."

"Let me know if there is ..." She paused, looking to Rosalie before her eyes locked on him again. "If there is anything I can do. I am happy to help."

Robert swallowed. "Thank you for the offer. I shall let you know." He turned to Miss Porter. "I think it would be wise for you to come with us before the hack arrives to take you to your house."

Miss Porter nodded. "Very well."

CHAPTER TWENTY



Cassandra watched as Lord Pembroke exited the corridor with his cousin and Miss Porter, a sense of loss filling her as they went to go discuss the matters surrounding the day. She was ushered into Lady Rosalie's room and sank into a chair, not caring that she let her posture slip from its usual exactness. The weight of the day, the change of emotions from one moment to the next, being tied up with an unconscious Lord Pembroke, and then somehow making it out alive with not only Lady Rosalie but also the discovery of the thief—*a woman!* All of it weighed on her, pulling at every joint and muscle. And in a swift moment, the man who had been with her through the experience was whisked away from her on business.

“I can see that you favor my brother,” Lady Rosalie said quietly.

“Oh, yes, I-I suppose I do favor him. We have been through ... a lot together.”

Lady Rosalie arched an eyebrow, watching Cassandra in a way that made Cassandra shift under the scrutiny. A maid brought a tray into the room and set it on the table in between Cassandra and Lady Rosalie.

“Will you pour today?” Lady Rosalie asked Cassandra. “I believe I should keep my ankle up, and it feels most cumbersome to complete the task while I am sitting like this.”

“Of course. I shall be happy to do the honors.” Cassandra straightened in her chair, purpose filling her as she poured the tea and added sugar and cream to each of the cups. She dished up a small plate for Rosalie with small sandwiches and a tart, and did the same for herself.

The food seemed to enliven all of Cassandra’s senses. She had not realized just how taxed her body had felt until she ate the food before her. The achy dullness that had settled on her was now being replaced with her usual good cheer. She was safe. Lady Rosalie was safe. And Lord Pembroke was safe.

“I believe my brother favors you as well,” Lady Rosalie said between sips of her tea.

Cassandra coughed in a most unladylike manner. “Has he said something to you?”

Lady Rosalie smiled but shook her head. “He has not said much on the subject to me, but the way you look at him. It is the same way he looks at you.”

Cassandra could feel her cheeks grow warm. He had alluded to wanting to talk to her in more depth about their situation. The idea of it sent flutterings through her center. “It was a different day than I expected.”

Lady Rosalie nodded. “I apologize that it has taken us all afternoon to have tea together.”

Cassandra blinked. “It is not your fault at all. I am only glad that you are at home again. Your brother was completely out of his mind with worry for you.”

Lady Rosalie smiled. "He is an excellent older brother. But I cannot think about the rest of the events today. It has been far too taxing on my mind."

"I can imagine," Cassandra said, still a little in shock herself, that Miss Porter was an accomplice to more than one crime today. Miss Porter being the thief was shocking enough, but to add on to it that she had helped abduct Lady Rosalie was far worse.

The doctor came in to the room, and Lady Rosalie explained everything regarding her ankle.

Cassandra stood and took her leave of her friend, promising to call and see how she was tomorrow.

Then she let herself out of the room to give Lady Rosalie privacy with the doctor. But she had not been summoned yet, and without a carriage, she was not sure of her next course of action. After such a day, there was no thought in her head about going out for the evening or to be social. But she should depart for Falsted Manor soon. She stood in the hallway outside Rosalie's room, not knowing how to proceed.

She passed the study where Lord Pembroke and his cousin were discussing the situation. She wished she had a reason to be part of that discussion. She lingered a moment, listening for the conversation at the door. Should she disturb them to ask for use of a carriage? Should she go back and wait with Lady Rosalie? She did not want her mother to worry. As she debated within herself, she heard Mr. Jeremy Cavendish's voice loud and clear through the solid wood door.

"You will be tried for your actions. We must take you into the War Office immediately."

Cassandra's heart jumped into her throat. Why would Robert be tried for his actions? He had done nothing wrong. Without giving it another thought, she flew open the door and rushed into the study, ready to defend Lord Pembroke to his cousin. "Mr. Cavendish, I insist that you—"

Three sets of eyes turned toward Cassandra—Lord Pembroke, his cousin, and Miss Porter. Surprised by Miss Porter's appearance, Cassandra swallowed the rest of her sentence. "Oh, Miss Porter, I did not know that you were still here." Confusion swam around her. She had thought Jeremy had been talking to the marquess, but perhaps that was not the case at all.

Mr. Cavendish raised his eyebrows. "You insist that I, what, Lady Cassandra?"

Cassandra closed her mouth, letting her lips curl into a smile. "Nothing, sir, please continue."

Mr. Cavendish looked to Lord Pembroke before he continued, "We are in a precarious situation."

"Lady Cassandra has been through a similar ordeal today," Lord Pembroke said. "As it is, we will have to report some of this."

Mr. Cavendish nodded, then turned his attention to Miss Porter. "I am afraid we have no choice but to take you to the War Office."

Miss Porter's frame seemed to crumple. "I understand that. But will not some of the information I have gathered help you?"

"Jeremy, the girl has been through a lot today. Perhaps what she knows will be useful."

“Undoubtedly, it will help. But that is not for me to decide. I cannot make promises about what the War Office can or cannot do for you, Miss Porter, but we will do what we can for you and for your brother,” Mr. Cavendish said.

“I understand. I am grateful, even though this is difficult. I was to give information about Lady Rosalie’s whereabouts to someone during the Masquerade Ball. Shall I still attend that tomorrow night?”

Mr. Cavendish frowned. “I do not think it is wise for you to converse with anyone, not if you are truly repentant of your ways.”

Miss Porter’s face was shining. “I was only trying to help my brother. I thought I was helping ensure his safety. I am willing to go to the War Office and help them.”

“We will start with that course of action,” Mr. Cavendish said. “I will escort you there now.”

“Wait! They will know something is wrong if I do not show up for the Masquerade.”

“I can go,” Cassandra offered. “I can retrieve the information.”

“Are you daft?” Lord Pembroke asked, his brows drawn together.

“I can help. I have already helped to catch the thief and helped save your sister.”

“And you were captured in the process.”

Cassandra lifted her chin. “As were you.”

“I will not risk it,” Lord Pembroke said.

“You are not risking anything,” she replied. “Besides, I will be in disguise. How difficult could it be?”

Miss Porter snorted. “More difficult than one would imagine. It takes skill.”

“I am sure if you gave me the particulars, I could manage just fine. You and I are of similar height. In a costume with my hair completely covered and a mask on, I should not be recognized.”

“Your closest companions would recognize you, and then our entire cover could be blown. Tell her she is mad for even thinking of such a thing, Jeremy,” Lord Pembroke said.

Mr. Cavendish stayed quiet for a moment. “Lady Cassandra may have a point, Robert. The cover of one of our female operatives was recently discovered. I fear we do not have another person in our network that could pass so well for Miss Porter as Lady Cassandra.”

“I do not like the idea of it,” Lord Pembroke said.

“Let the office decide,” Cassandra said. “I should come with you, and—”

Mr. Cavendish shook his head. “Absolutely not. You are not to be seen anywhere near our headquarters. And now that I think of it, I do not think we should take Miss Porter there either tonight. We may want to keep our cards close on this. I will take her home and talk with her father.”

Lord Pembroke nodded. “That sounds like a wise idea.”

Mr. Cavendish turned to Cassandra. “Come, Lady Cassandra. We will escort you home.”

“But I was waiting for my own carriage ...”

“If your driver shows up here, we will explain that you were escorted home in my carriage,” Lord Pembroke said.

Cassandra nodded at Lord Pembroke and then turned to Mr. Cavendish. “Shall you need me tomorrow during the Masquerade?”

“That is still to be determined. We will send word if you are needed tomorrow,” Mr. Cavendish said.

“Very well. Good evening, Lord Pembroke,” she said, curtsying to the master of the house.

He waited until both Mr. Cavendish and Miss Porter passed them, and then took her hand in his own, drawing it toward him. He gently squeezed her fingers and placed a kiss on the back of her hand. “There is something I should like to speak to you about later this week. Might I request a private audience with you?”

Amid the swirl of the emotions from the day, Cassandra felt light at his words. She smiled at him, nodding. “I should like that very much indeed. I look forward to it, Lord Pembroke.”

He pulled her closer and leaned toward her ear, whispering so that only she could hear him. “Lady Cassandra, after everything that has happened today, please call me Robert.”



CASSANDRA GAVE HERSELF ONE MORE LOOK-OVER IN THE glass, mesmerized by the transformation of a costume. She had worn masks before, but never one that covered her so completely. The veil she wore over her head disguised her

dark curls, and the tightly fitting mask covered her entire face except for small holes for her eyes, nose, and mouth.

The mysterious dark purple and gold costume had not been her original choice, but when a note came for her this morning, along with the costume, she knew it was the part she would play. Her mother wondered at the strangeness of the costume, but Cassandra had pushed off the conversation, saying only that a friend had lent it to her for the night, and she would save her woodland spirit costume for another evening later in the Season.

A nervous skittering ran around her spine as she entered the Masquerade. She quickly joined into the group so she would not be seen alone. She would not stay long, only long enough to retrieve a note after giving one herself. The note was written in Miss Porter's hand. After that she would pass the note she retrieved to Lord Pembroke, who wore the friar's costume.

She tried not to glance in Lord Pembroke's direction during the evening, though she caught his form once. He looked at ease, talking with several people she did not recognize. Then again, it was not always easy to tell who was who at a Masquerade.

His words from last night rang through her, and consequently, she had not been able to sleep, as she thought about him. He wanted to speak with her—more specifically, to have a private audience with her. The idea had her grinning underneath her mask.

Cassandra wove through the crush, making her way to the far end of the room, where a large statue stood next to the door. As the final counts of the song played, she gently

brushed against the shoulder of the statue. Then she held her breath and waited.

It took less than a minute before the man dressed as a bear approached her. She wanted to recall every detail she could, but it was impossible to tell much about the man whose face was just as covered as her own.

“Your costume is a hard one to place,” the bear said.

Cassandra nodded and recited the password. “I am a woman of mystery. But your costume appears to be no mystery at all.”

The bear nodded, seemingly satisfied with the answer Cassandra had committed to memory. “I trust everything went as planned.”

Cassandra knew that this might be the second code word, so she answered, “A simple note should answer everything you need to know.”

At that, the bear opened his hand and Cassandra placed hers in the scratchy paw, note held in her fingers. The man in the bear costume made a gesture of bringing her hand to his face, but did not actually kiss the back of her hand. Instead, he took the note from her hand and then with his other slid a small note into her sleeve.

The whole of the exchange was not very long. She knew that someone else in the crowd would watch the bear for the rest of the night and see who he interacted with. Of course, the fact that Cassandra had barely had a conversation in passing with him meant that he could meet a dozen people between now and the time Cassandra left the room. Who knew where the note she’d passed would end up. But she did not look behind her. She made her way to the refreshment table. It was

difficult to drink the tart lemonade, but she managed to swallow a little.

She spotted the bear again in the crowd, and when his back was turned to her, she turned toward the door where the friar was. He bumped into her on her way out, and as she apologized, she passed the note to him. Then, with a swift motion, she was out the door and on her way home, and not a moment too soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“Lady Cassandra is a genius,” Jeremy said as he came into Robert’s study the day after the Masquerade ball. “I have just been given word that the information in the note was good. Three of our men were able to apprehend the man in the bear suit, in addition to the two men who were lookouts for Miss Porter. It appears all loose ends have been tied.” Jeremy sat down on a wingback chair, crossing his ankle over his knee and looking very much at ease.

Robert studied his cousin from where he sat behind his desk. In a way, he envied the way his cousin was carefree. Last night had been another restless night of sleeping and uneasiness still surrounded him. “I still do not like that Lady Cassandra had to be at risk for us to get this information.”

“She was not at risk. The War Office made sure of that,” Jeremy countered. “If anything, she was more protected than any one of our skilled operatives. She was watched the entire night, and even discreetly followed home to make sure that everything was done without a trace of her involvement.”

“At any rate, at least it is over,” Robert said. Rosalie was still healing from her twisted ankle, but perhaps that had been

fortuitous as she did not go to the Masquerade and had not given away the deception.

“Over and then some. Who would have guessed that the mole and the thief were the same person? And a woman besides. I suppose it means that operatives will need to take extra precaution at home as the information was leaked from her father. Knowing that solves so many other things.”

“What other things?”

“We now know that there was not betrayal among the operatives. It was the daughter. The baron’s tongue may be loose at home, but at least it was not a betrayal of one of our trusted people.”

“What about the boss that Miss Porter was working for?”

“Other agents are following that lead. We do not need to worry about it. Our job is complete.”

Robert relaxed slightly at Jeremy’s words. He took in a deep breath. Their part was complete. “Will the baron continue working for the War Office after everything that has happened?”

Jeremy shrugged. “That is for the War Office to decide. I have no authority to speak about his fate. Our priority was removing both him and his daughter from London with haste. They were escorted to a safe house somewhere outside of London yesterday morning before the Masquerade. All the details surrounding the location and other specifics were tightly held by those much higher up. With Miss Porter removed from London, the exchange of notes with Lady Cassandra could happen without the chance of someone knowing that Miss Porter had already left. I do not even know

if the baron will be close enough to London to help in the future, but his current assignments have been redistributed.”

“Will that redistribution not trigger someone knowing what happened?”

Jeremy shook his head. “The War Office partitioned off operatives and jobs. Not everyone knows everything. And not everything that is reported is shared among those higher in rank. It has kept the information more secure.”

“It is fortunate that it is finished.” Robert felt a weight fall away from him.

“I should think you would be more excited than that, cousin. Three major accomplishments in under a week is almost unheard of. You caught the thief, rescued your sister and avoided a scandal around that, and thanks to Lady Cassandra’s retrieval of that note, the War Office was able to tie up all the loose ends with the other people involved. This could mean that you could find out more about your parents, only think of that. Perhaps the office will be able to discuss plans to help your parents return to safety. I think this is cause for a celebration.”

Robert nodded, but his thoughts swirled around the circumstances differently. He was glad that loose ends were tied up, and especially that his sister was home safe, even if her ankle still needed some attention. Catching the thief and discovering the leak in War Office was also a huge weight off his shoulders.

But through it all, he had worried for Lady Cassandra. More so than his parents, and even more than his sister. He swallowed. When he had come to after being knocked out before they had rescued Rosalie, it was Lady Cassandra’s safety he had been preoccupied with, and no one else’s.

He wanted to celebrate the moment, but it was *who* he wanted to share it with that had his mind wrapped up far away from the cares that he had experienced. He stood, and Jeremy followed suit. “I should like to celebrate, but I should like to call on Lady Cassandra; after all, she has played a big role in this as well.”

Jeremy smiled. “I should have expected that. What shall you do? It is past the fashionable hour for a ride in Hyde Park.”

“I think I will call on her and talk to her.”



WHEN ROBERT ARRIVED AT FALSTED MANOR, THE DUKE’S London house, he had hoped that Lady Cassandra would have returned from her shopping, but alas, she was not at home. Robert was ushered into the duke’s study, where the duke of Cheshire sat behind his desk—the very desk that Robert had broken into during his first dinner party at Falsted Manor.

“Ah, Lord Pembroke,” the duke said, standing from his desk and bowing. “Welcome.”

Robert offered a bow and walked forward. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

The duke returned to his seat and motioned for Robert to take a seat as well. “What brings you here today?” There was a look of amusement in his eye that seemed to know exactly what Robert had come for.

Robert cleared his throat. He was not going to beat around the bush about this, but a sudden nervousness filled him. Here he was to ask for permission to court Lady Cassandra from a

man who was similar to him in age. For some reason, that made this conversation more difficult than it would have been had he been addressing Lady Cassandra's father. "I am here to seek your permission to court your sister, Lady Cassandra, Your Grace."

The duke of Cheshire leaned back in his chair, surveying Robert for a long moment. "I assumed this was coming," he said plainly. "All the betting books have been pointing in this direction for weeks. And of course, I have heard the reports from the balls where I have not been in attendance."

Confound those stupid betting books. "Yes, the betting books did seem to predict this moment with a measure of accuracy."

The duke leaned forward on his desk. "Lord Pembroke, I admire you in Parliament. I only hear good things about you—you have a firm mind and a strong moral character."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"But my own personal feelings about the character of men must be put aside when it comes to the suitors of my sisters."

Robert nodded, though he was not sure what he was agreeing to.

"I am sure you can see this for yourself, as you and I are now in somewhat of a similar situation."

"Which situation, Your Grace?"

"Inheriting a title so early, and with it the responsibility toward our families," the duke said with a matter-of-fact stoicism. "No amount of mourning time can help ease the burdens that are now placed upon you as the head of the family. Your sister is now out in Society, and you now assume the weight of care for her."

“It does appear as if we are in the same situation,” Robert said, though he hoped it was only a matter of time before that changed. His parents would soon be back. The duty of approval for any of Rosalie’s suitors would eventually fall back to his father. Rosalie was enjoying her Season, and so far had not shown any sign of attachment to anyone.

The duke gave him a small smile. “I am not a stranger to the mixture of emotions that this status brings. It is a hard thing to navigate, and I confess last Season, I was not as present in my sister’s Season the way I ought to have been. I was ... in pursuit of my own path, and in some ways that took away from my sister.”

“My uncle and aunt are assisting me with my sister,” Robert said. “I have no wish to neglect my familial duties, but there is time for me to follow my own heart as well.”

“Your heart?”

Robert swallowed. “I admire your sister. She is the most intelligent, brave, and beautiful woman I know. I should very much like to court her, with your permission, of course.”

A small smile formed on his lips. “Lord Pembroke, I do not doubt your sincerity in your statements, but could I speak to you frankly?”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

“Even when I was pursuing my own bride last year, do you know how many suitors came to me with similar lines of flattery about my sister?”

Robert shook his head. “I am not sure I would be able to guess at the number.” His stomach twisted and hardened. Of course he was not the first to ask for her hand. She was

beautiful and talented and charming. Likely she had many who saw those qualities.

“Over two dozen. And during her first Season there were just as many, professing their love and admiration for her.”

Robert blinked. “Surely Lady Cassandra does not know this. She assumes she is unwanted by the *ton*.”

The duke raised an eyebrow, in a similar way that Lady Cassandra made the gesture, his mouth a straight line. “Lord Pembroke, of course she is not *unwanted* by the *ton*. Quite the contrary, she is much sought after. But no, Lady Cassandra has not heard of all the men who have offered for her.”

Robert’s jaw slacked. Would he be added to the list of men who came to the duke, only to be rejected by him as a potential suitor for his sister? “You should tell her of the suitors.” Robert stopped himself from saying more. Yes, he was a marquess, but giving orders to a duke? It was not done.

Instead of taking offense, the duke merely laughed. “Lord Pembroke, why would I do that? She is not unaware of her vast dowry, or the fact that others want to connect themselves to her simply to get the ear of the duke. I would not want to point out all the times fortune hunters are after her. It would not inspire her with more brotherly affection if I were to let her know.”

“I see,” Robert said, wondering if he would have the same opinion as the duke when Rosalie’s suitors started asking for her hand. So far, he had not encountered that, but perhaps it was something to talk to his uncle about. “You are a wise brother,” he said.

The duke laughed again. “Wise or foolish. I suppose we will see when it comes to light if Cassandra thanks me for it or

not. Perhaps I should tell her.” The duke scrutinized Robert, but fell silent for longer upon the conversation than was comfortable.

Robert cleared his throat, willing himself not to be intimidated by his Peer. “I am not a fortune hunter,” Robert said with definitiveness.

The duke shuffled a few papers on the top of his desk. “I know, and quite candidly, you might consider knowing such things about your sister’s suitors before they come calling on you in a similar fashion.”

“How do you know?”

“I have an excellent solicitor who doubles as an investigator when I need him to.” The duke spread his hands wide, gesturing to the enormity of the papers before him. “I cannot be too careful when it comes to my family. We are easily a target now that my father is gone. I confess, I do not think my father would approve of all my methods, but as my sister’s guardian and protector, I have had little practice at this, and I do not want to be the chink in the armor that allows the irreputable into my family.”

Robert’s mind went to Rosalie, and he realized the duke was right. He would likely take the same precautions as the duke. The only thing that separated them at this moment was the fact that the duke had had a few more years of practice at discouraging suitors than he had. “I can assure you that my intentions toward Lady Cassandra are honorable. I have nothing but the highest respect and esteem for her and your family.”

“You would not have had an audience with me this long if I thought you had anything but honorable intentions. You have shown quite the preference for her this Season. So far, I have

only received a half dozen requests for permission to court her.”

“She has received other offers this Season? She surely does not know that.”

The duke speared him with a look. “And I intend to keep it that way, Lord Pembroke.”

“I shall not break your confidence, Your Grace.”

“I believe that I can count on your word,” he said. “I am not unaware that you have had an influence on my sister. And the *ton* is not unaware of your growing attachment. Still ...”

“I do have a preference for her. I am quite enamored with your sister, but I will not officially court Lady Cassandra without your blessing.”

“Your honor does you credit in that regard. I do not believe you are after her dowry as a means to an end. Still, you must understand that Lady Cassandra’s money is her own. That will be part of the marriage settlement when she does marry. Her husband will not control any of her money or her assets. They are hers alone to do with as she chooses.”

The duke nodded, then smiled. “My solicitor is most brilliant in the way he has set up both of my sisters’ dowries, and documents will be signed to keep their fortunes from those who would like to take advantage of it.”

“Your Grace, you seem to have thought through your sister’s future with a great attention to big and small details. But, may I be so bold as to ask why, when you are already vetting suitors to make sure that they are not in debt, do you need such legal documents signed?” Robert held up his hands in a sign of surrender. “Not that I would mind signing such documents. Upon my honor, I would sign them. I assure you, I

do not need to marry to secure my future financial stability in any form. But as someone who has a sister, who will likely have similar attentions thrown her way over the next few months and years, what is your thought process behind it?"

The duke blew out a long breath. "My father believed that marriage was more than a transactional arrangement between men and women. He believed in the unpopular notion that marriage is a higher institution for a life of bliss. My own mother's grief at my father's passing has been evidence of their deep and loving bond. They modeled something that is unique among the upper class. They taught their children what it means to truly love someone. My father and my mother spoke often of that ideal as the highest and most worthy of pursuits. I have been fortunate to find love in my own marriage. And it is a blessing, just as my father described. I do not want less for my sisters."

A lump formed in his throat. "My parents were of similar minds on the subject of matrimonial bliss and contentment." Though it had been months since he had shed tears on his parents' behalf, he felt the salty stinging in the corner of his eyes, which momentarily took away his ability to speak. "I should love nothing more than to follow their example in this matter."

The duke did not speak for a long moment. "I realize in my haste to put us in the same category, I have neglected a very real difference between the two of us."

Robert swallowed, biting back the tears, unsure why he was feeling particularly emotional at this moment, when he knew his parents were alive and well. Could the duke know his secret? "And what difference is that, Your Grace?"

“Why the fact that you have lost both of your parents, and I still have my mother with me. I have experienced loss, but it is not as complete as what you have suffered. I am sorry for that.”

Robert nodded. “Loss is still loss, Your Grace.”

“I believe that I have enough information for the present.” The duke stood, and Robert followed suit.

“What does that mean, Your Grace?”

He smiled warmly. “It means precisely that I do not disapprove of you as a suitor.”

Robert was not sure whether to laugh or cry, but emotion felt like it pulled him in both directions at once. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

The duke shook his head. “Do not thank me yet. I have only said I do not disapprove. But that does not mean that I yet approve or give my blessing.”

“I do not understand.”

The duke smiled. “My father made it clear that matrimonial bliss is a choice. I stand as my sister’s protector and guardian. A sentinel, if you will, into this family. You have passed the first level of scrutiny. I will not send you away without hope. But I will discuss this matter with my sister before I give my blessing. We have established that you are not after her fortune and that you admire her for reasons that are deeper than just ornamental. But true happiness is not created from one party alone. Before I give my permission, I want to know what my sister thinks upon the matter.”

Robert smiled, knowing that would be the conversation he would want to hear about someday. He stuck out his hand and

shook the duke's. "I agree to those terms. It is very sensible to include your sister in the decision."

"I confess it may be a little unconventional, and I have never been in this situation before. Every other suitor has not been worthy of her. I hope, for your sake, that you find true favor in her eyes, and not just a passing fancy, but I cannot promise you anything until I speak to her."

"Of course, Your Grace."

"I shall be in touch with you once I have had a discussion with my sister."

"I look forward to hearing from you, Your Grace."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Cassandra stepped into her brother's study. James was behind his desk, looking over a wild stack of papers, if such a random pile could be called a stack.

“Ah, Cassandra. How are you?”

Cassandra smiled. The ordeal that she'd had as she and Lord Pembroke rescued Lady Rosalie had been more taxing on her nerves than she had originally allowed. But she had thought she had done a decent job of keeping the stress to herself. She'd still yet to hear about the results from the Masquerade Ball, but it had only been a day ago.

“I am about the same as I was at breakfast when you asked me the same question.” She arched an eyebrow. “Do you think women to be always changing our minds on the subject?”

James smiled. “These days, my Emma's well-being changes from moment to moment.”

“That is to be expected, considering her delicate situation. Why she traveled at all to London is beyond me. Those are very unforgiving roads.”

“She came because she wanted to be with me, and there was no possibility of me dissuading her.” James smiled as he spoke of his wife and one of Cassandra's dearest friends.

There was always a look of tenderness in her brother's eyes whenever he spoke about her. It was one of the things Cassandra had noticed right away after he had met his future bride last Season.

“She is an amazing woman to put up with you,” Cassandra said, teasing her brother in a light-hearted manner.

James's face broke into a grin that lit up his whole face. “She is the most amazing creature I have ever had the privilege of knowing. I thank God every day that I have her in my life.”

“Truly?” Cassandra asked, tilting her head.

“Every morning, at least once.”

What a beautiful idea, and one that Cassandra wanted for herself. She had always admired the way her parents loved one another and the way they had doted on their children, allowing them to have family dinners more often than any of her friends. But she had seen their love as a child. It had appeared everything normal and natural in her small world. She had never known what her parents were like before they met, except for the stories they told.

But seeing her older brother fall in love was a different experience all together. She had known him before he met his dearest Emma, as he often called her. She had witnessed the transformation of him from the very beginning, perhaps before James was even aware of the effect that Emma was having on him.

Cassandra sighed happily, grateful that her brother had found love, and that Emma had fit in so well with their family. It was a blessing. “I am so glad that you have been able to find a love match. I know it was a topic of conversation in our

house growing up, but seeing it gives me hope that true love is possible among the *ton*.”

James smiled, the glint in his eyes seeming to hold in a laugh or a secret.

“Do not laugh at me,” she said, raising her chin in the air, and putting on her most commanding posture.

“I do not laugh at you,” he said, though he let out a small chuckle. “But it is on this precise topic that I wish to speak.”

Cassandra folded her hands in her lap, the model of decorum. “And so we have been talking about it.”

“In general, yes. And about me, yes. But now let us turn the conversation to *you*.”

Cassandra lifted one eyebrow, a challenge to her brother, and perhaps a warning. “What about me?”

“How do you feel about the prospect of marriage?”

Cassandra laughed. “James, I am in my third Season. If you think that I am here in Society so I will *not* be married, you are quite mistaken. We have had this discussion before. There is no one from Cheshire that I would consider marrying. London is the hub of everything. It is where I want to be. And hopefully, I will find love in the process. I want what you and Emma have.”

James nodded. “Is there any man of your acquaintance that you would consider marriage to?”

Cassandra blinked. “What an impertinent question. Women consider all men of their acquaintance for how they would suit. It is the way we do things.”

“I see. But there is no one in particular that you are considering?”

“Am I permitted to choose in such a manner? What difference does it make if I prefer one to another if they have not asked for my hand and you have not consented to it?” She sat up straighter in her chair—a new and more dreadful thought crossing her mind. “You are not considering arranging a marriage for me, are you? That would be most unfair for me not to have a say. Or if you do not approve of coming to London for the Season—”

“Cassandra, rest assured, I have no desire to arrange a marriage for you. That is not what I want for you. And I do not mind coming to London for the Season. I imagine with my position in Lords I will need to always keep a positive attitude about my time in London. I do not worry over that.”

“But you do not like that I am in my third Season, is that it?” Cassandra sniffed. She’d had her reasons during her last two Seasons why it had not worked out to find someone then.

“Hang it all, Cassandra. I am trying to get a point through to you, and you are being most obtuse. Have a dozen Seasons if that is how many you want. I care not. The expense is trivial in comparison to your happiness.”

Cassandra opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again. It was nice to know that he did not resent her having one Season after another—that he considered such grand expenses to be trivial. “Then what am I in trouble for? You never call me to your office in such a way as this.”

“I wanted to see if there is anyone that you admire right now. Any gentleman that you would consider.”

“I am not sure how that is relevant.”

“And this is why I have not brought this up before. Dozens of suitors have asked for your hand; all of them so completely

unworthy of you that I turn them down immediately.”

“*Dozens?* I have had *dozens* of suitors come to call? How have I not known about this until now?” She was all shock, all astonishment.

“Because I am a protective older brother who did not wish to marry you off to a rake or a fortune hunter, or to a myriad of other men with unsuitable qualities.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one to decide who is suitable and who is not?” She felt an anger rise within her at her brother’s words. He said he would not arrange a marriage for her, but refusing her the chance to be courted by so many, was that not the same thing? The thought rankled her, and she bit her tongue to keep from lashing out.

James stood and came around to stand next to her. He took another chair next to her and reached for her hand. “You should have that opportunity. But I told you in no uncertain terms that if I did not approve of gentlemen, I would send them away.”

“You have said that a hundred times, but I always expected that it was a hypothetical statement, not something that you’d actually followed through on.”

James gave a sheepish nod. “Father said you started getting attention when you were fourteen, that families had tried to arrange marriages for you and for Lizzie years before that even. He wanted to be able to give you the ability to choose. He cared about that, so he never arranged a marriage for any of his children.”

The way James mentioned their father was so tender. Cassandra was filled with love for her father, and in the next breath, immediately filled with the loss of him. James was

doing his best to fill the role of guardian for her, and she was grateful for him. He was a good, kind brother, and he had her best interest in mind. She swiped at a tear with her gloved hand. “I know you are filling a position you never wanted so early in your life. Thank you, James.”

James pulled Cassandra into a hug. “I miss him, too, Cassandra.”

Cassandra nodded but could not respond. She swiped at a few more tears before pulling out her handkerchief and dabbing properly at her eyes.

“This is the second time in as many days that I have had someone tearing up.” James looked almost amused by his own statement, rather than frustrated.

Cassandra blinked away a few more tears. “I apologize. I will keep my emotions in check.”

“You are allowed your emotions, Cassandra. I do not wish to be pushy on this subject. But someone has asked for my permission to pursue a courtship with you. I have not yet given my permission, because I wanted to speak to you first about it.”

Cassandra’s heart beat wildly at her brother’s words. “You do not object to this man this time?”

James wiggled his jaw, seeming to search for the right words. “I do not find him a reprehensible choice, as I did all your previous suitors who asked for the same permission.” He held up a hand to stop her from asking questions. “I told you I will not defend or explain my choices on that front. Suffice it to say, he is not a fortune hunter, nor a man that I would disapprove of. I have had our solicitor do a thorough

investigation of him, and he can find nothing untoward about him.”

“You have been investigating my possible suitors?” Cassandra smiled at her brother. He had never shared this with her before. And yet, she could see that his motive truly was about preserving her happiness, and that alone helped her understand him a little better than she had before.

James shrugged. “I have to do my research. I do not want you entering into a marriage with any kind of delusions or false information. More than half of our friends who are titled are also deep in debt. It is not uncommon for those in serious financial trouble to find a wife whose dowry can pay for those past choices. I do not want to see you in such a situation. It is better to find out that information ahead of time.”

Cassandra leaned forward, curiosity settling around her at the information James was telling her. “Have my previous suitors all been debt-ridden?”

James’s lips tugged upwards. “Not all of them, but more than there should be, I am afraid.”

“You have truly been watching over me, and for that, I am grateful. But tell me, is there a chance that any suitor coming to call will gain your favor?”

“They will not gain *mine* until they have gained *yours*. Yours is the favor that matters. Your thoughts and feelings on the matter are what truly matter. I have done my best to discourage and dissuade many who were not worthy of you. I have no objections to this particular suitor, but that only matters if you like this suitor. I will not push you into a loveless match. You are in the fortunate position that you will never have to marry to secure your own comforts. You will be

well taken care of and provided for, regardless of your choice to marry.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes. “Are you purposefully dragging out the information I most want to know? Who is the suitor?”

James tilted his head. “You do have someone in mind.”

Cassandra’s breaths came in short spurts as she tried to keep her nerves in check. “Of course I do, but I will not share that information first. What if we are speaking of two very different people?”

“I shall not keep you in suspense any longer, dear sister. The man who has asked for permission to court you is none other than Robert Cavendish, Marquess of Pembroke.”

Heat colored Cassandra’s cheeks when her brother said Lord Pembroke’s name. Happiness bubbled inside her at the prospect. Fluttering filled her insides, and she was glad to know that in all of her brother’s investigations into her suitors that Lord Pembroke had at least passed the initial inspection.

James lifted an eyebrow, surveying her carefully. “You have feelings for him?”

Cassandra nodded. “I do. He is someone that I admire very much.”

James nodded decisively. “Then I will grant him permission to court you, if that is what you wish.”

“I would like that very much indeed.”

“Cassandra, this does not mean that you have to marry him if you choose not to. It is your choice, and your choice alone. There is nothing set in stone until you have been married by the vicar.”

“I know that. You are very good to me, James.”

“If he does not suit you, please do not feel any pressure from me.”

Cassandra stood, a hand on one hip, with one eyebrow raised. “Are you trying to dissuade me from marrying? You wish me to always be in your charge, at your estates?”

James stood, smiling at her. “I wish you to be happy, that is all. And sometimes it is difficult to tell what will make one happy in the future.”

Cassandra stood and lifted up onto her toes and kissed her brother on the cheek, the way she had always kissed her father. “Thank you for your concern, dear brother, and for caring enough about my choice in a husband that you also let me have a say in my own future. I am most indebted to you.”

“So you will plan on marrying him, is that what I am to understand?” he asked, calling after her as she moved toward the study door.

Cassandra turned. “I have plans to be happy, and right now, exploring those plans with Lord Pembroke is the surest way to that.” She smiled, knowing that her not giving a precise, direct answer to her brother would vex him. Unless she married a duke, she already knew her status would go down among the *ton*, but the idea of marrying Lord Pembroke did not feel like a step down at all. It only felt like a step forward—a step toward a promised happiness.

She closed the study door and leaned against it, letting her smile grow and stretch to fill her entire face. Flutterings gathered around her heart and she felt like she might float away like a cloud. Lord Pembroke had all but asked for her hand by coming to see her brother, and her brother hadn’t said no to the idea.

Her heart beat wildly, wishing she could go riding in the country instead of being confined indoors for the rest of the afternoon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Cassandra dipped her brush into the pot of water, letting the blue paint mix and swirl with the other colors. The sunshine was almost blinding on her pristine paper as she sat in their private gardens with her sister. Lizzie had suggested the idea of watercolors but had only brought her book out and sat on the bench, engrossed in her novel.

Cassandra's mind wandered as she delicately added blues and purples to the paper.

Lizzie looked up from her book. "You are doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"You are humming."

Cassandra's cheeks heated. "I am not."

"Yes, you were."

"You could not hear me over the sound of your brain reading all of those words. I know how you get when you are engrossed in a novel."

Lizzie closed the volume and clutched it to her chest. She leaned over to look at Cassandra's paper. "Flowers?" She looked around the garden. "Which are you painting? I do not see any blue or purple flowers in our garden that look like that."

Cassandra lifted a shoulder. "I have painted the flowers in our garden here a dozen times. I suppose I am thinking of home in the country, and all the wildflowers there."

Lizzie studied the picture again. "They look very much like the flowers Lord Pembroke brought you, do they not? Perhaps reality is better than the book I am currently reading." She arched an eyebrow, though it did not raise particularly high.

Cassandra laughed. "I do not understand your meaning," she said, but then the memories of the last week spending time with Lord Pembroke clamored for her attention.

"That cannot be true. You went to a Masquerade ball three days ago and you have yet to give me any details. You know Masquerades are one of my favorite events to hear about it."

"There is not much to tell. The Masquerade was uneventful," Cassandra said, waving a dismissing hand in the air.

"You did not dance with anyone?"

Cassandra shook her head.

"That is most unlike you at a ball."

"I was not there very long. I came home early, remember?"

"You have attended events nearly every day during the Season. Surely there must be something memorable."

Cassandra raised one shoulder. "Pray that you only have one Season, Lizzie. By the third, all the events blend together unless there is something of particular significance that happens. Someone did sneeze during their performance at the pianoforte. It caused quite a stir. It reminds me of the time when Miss Long stepped on another's gown and both women

landed in a heap on the floor. Of course, that incident happened my first Season.”

“You know those are not the sort of details I am asking about. I do not want to know what *Society* in general is doing. I want to know what *you* are doing. From what I hear, Lord Pembroke has been paying you attention at every event.”

“Where have you been hearing such gossip?” Cassandra asked. Her sister was not wrong.

“Ah, then it is true,” Lizzie said. “You would have dismissed the statement if it were false. The fact that you want to know where the gossip comes from means that I have stumbled upon it.”

Cassandra laughed at her sister. Lizzie may spend much of her days with her nose between a book, but she had a sense for things. “You have found me out, though I suppose you have guessed at it for some time now.”

“I am quite perspicacious.”

“Where did you hear it from?”

“You told me just now, I know how to put the pieces together. And also Mama and Emma were talking about it. Mama says you have been seen together at almost every function. Is he an accomplished dancer?”

“He is a brilliant dancer.” And it was more than that. He had been concerned for her and had protected her. Though she had been exuberant and naïve to come and help him, yet, he had protected her and kept her safe. Since the moment she had caught him in her brother’s study, things between them had been different—he had paid more attention to her at each subsequent event. She had talked to almost no one else at gatherings. She’d heard the whispers surrounding them as he

had led her away from groups so that he could have a private word with her.

“Fine dancing is a sure way to someone’s heart,” Lizzie said dreamily.

Cassandra shook her head, laughing at her sister. “Someday you will need to experience life, not just read about it in books.”

Lizzie lifted her chin, clutching her book tightly to her. “When I do, I shall be much more aware of love when it stares me in the face.”

“Lizzie, Lord Pembroke and I are still getting to know each other.” Though Cassandra’s heart beat rapidly at her sister’s words. She had tried to sort out her own feelings on the matter. He had been dashing and their adventures had certainly enlivened what could have been an otherwise mundane Season. She thought highly of him, and she thought about him quite often.

Lizzie turned toward the road. “Is that his carriage I hear?”

Cassandra’s pulse quickened even further. “Is it?” She looked over her sister’s shoulder, but the street was empty.

Lizzie gave her a triumphant smile. “You do not fool me. You prefer him.”

“Perhaps I do.”

“Then why not admit it? If not to me, then why not to yourself? I am here in London because Mama did not want to leave me behind this year, but I do not get to go out to the parties or the dances. It is not like home in the country. I should dearly love some amusement, too.”

Cassandra stood and then sat next to her sister on the stone bench. She had not realized what it must be like for Lizzie. All this time, while Cassandra was off making visits or receiving callers, or spending her evenings away from her family, she had not realized just how lonely Lizzie might get. Especially without their brothers in tow. No wonder she read so much. There was little else by way of amusement when everyone else was out for the evenings. “Very well. I do like him. He is very charming and very brave, and I sometimes cannot come up with exactly what I want to say around him. It is as if I am speaking with a mouthful of cook’s sweet bread.”

Lizzie clutched her book even tighter, her voice rising in pitch. “It all sounds wonderful, except for the part about not being able to speak.”

Cassandra laughed. “I *do* still talk to him. I just do not always word things exactly as I would wish to. He brings out a competitive spirit in me that I know I do not have any other time.”

Lizzie laughed. “Of course not, since you *never* care about winning.” She laid her head on Cassandra’s shoulder. “Would you be happy if he asked you to be his wife?”

Cassandra swallowed. She had thought the sentiment more than once, but could she truly admit something like that aloud? It was her third Season. Her prospects were all wrapped up in him. He’d essentially claimed her hand in public, and had talked to her brother, but had yet to speak to her about it. Though she anticipated his proposal soon, she could not say as much until it was official. Would she be happy as his wife? A broad smile pushed its way onto her face, and when she tried to stop smiling, it only made her smile grow. “Yes, Lizzie, I believe I would be perfectly content with my life.”

Lizzie squealed. “Oh, I shall wait up all night to know what happens tonight. You should find time to speak to him alone.” She tapped to her book. “That is always what needs to happen before someone proposes marriage.”

Cassandra smiled. Perhaps there was something to the books that Lizzie was always reading. “Enjoy your book.”

“I shall enjoy your story *much* more than a book.”

“I promise to let you know if anything of significance happens.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



*J*vy Manor hosted the most elaborate events throughout the entire London Season. Tonight was an evening of games and entertainment. Robert arrived with his cousin. He bowed to the hostess, the Marchioness of Lansdowne, who immediately launched into the full itinerary for the evening. Charades and other games more commonly seen in house parties were to be the central focus of the evening, after dancing and dinner.

Robert scanned the room, looking for Lady Cassandra.

“It is a shame your sister had to miss this event,” Jeremy said.

Robert nodded. “She is getting better every day, but I would like to see her fully restored before she attempts dancing in such a crush. Will you dance tonight?”

Jeremy nodded, then lowered his voice. “I believe it is the first social function I will be able to truly enjoy since this Season started.”

Robert slapped his cousin on the back. “It has taken a toll on all of us, but I am glad to put the matters we have dealt with behind us.”

“And now to turn our attentions to the next pressing matter of business,” Jeremy said, his voice barely above a whisper, referring to bringing Robert’s parents home.

“Yes, that feels like the next task to take on,” Robert said. “It is a different kind of weight, but a happy one, in comparison to what we have dealt with.”

“I agree. But for tonight, my priority will be dancing as much as I can,” Jeremy said. “What about you, Robert? Will you only focus on one partner this evening?”

“That is my current plan, but I do not see Lady Cassandra anywhere.”

“The duke of Cheshire just walked in,” Jeremy said, gesturing toward the entrance. “Perhaps he will know where his sister is.”

Robert glanced in the duke’s direction, and His Grace made his way over to them.

“Your Grace,” Robert said, executing a bow. “It is good to see you.”

“Lord Pembroke, the pleasure is mine. Though I have a feeling that you are looking for my sister, and not for me.”

“I assume she is here tonight, but I have not seen her.”

“She should be coming in presently. Will you ask her to dance?”

Robert studied the duke. “That was my intention, if you approve, Your Grace.”

The duke smiled. “I more than approve. You have my blessing to proceed.”

Robert nodded. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

The duke nodded to both of them. “If you will excuse me, I have some other pressing matters I must see to immediately.” Then he strode purposefully through the crowd.

Robert kept his eyes trained on the door. He had been given approval and a blessing. He was officially allowed to court Lady Cassandra. Suddenly, his face felt warm and his hands felt cold. Surely there must be a draft.

“Cousin, are you feeling well?” Jeremy asked.

At that moment, Lady Cassandra walked into the room, looking elegant and beautiful in her pink satin evening gown.

He cleared his throat. “Perfectly well. If you will excuse me, I have a dance partner to claim.”

Lady Cassandra smiled in his direction as he made his way over to her. She curtsied. “Good evening, Lord Pembroke. I hope you are well.”

“I am well. And you look radiant.”

A becoming blush filled her cheeks. “Thank you. You always flatter me.”

“I only speak the truth,” he said, not taking his eyes off the captivating woman in front of him. “If you are not otherwise engaged, I should very much like to claim your first set.”

“I would be delighted,” she said, looping her arm through his.

They moved to the line of dancers, taking their place in the middle. Music propelled them through the steps. “You look well. Are you recovered from ...” He let the sentence hang in the air.

“I have been well, Lord Pembroke.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Perhaps a little shaken at times, but overall, I

have coped with it.”

“I apologize again that you were ever in harm’s way.”

She smiled at him. “I am well now. How is your sister?”

“She is still recovering, but she is getting better every day.”

“I should love to take tea with her when she is feeling up to receiving guests.”

“I will let her know. She will be most happy to hear it. She greatly admires you and enjoys your company.”

Cassandra lowered her lashes at the praise. “She is a delightful friend.”

The dance steps required that they split apart, and when they came back together, Cassandra said, “I heard that you talked with my brother a few days ago.”

Robert swallowed. “I did.”

“And did he scare you away? He can be quite terrifying at times.” Cassandra raised an eyebrow.

“No, but he did inspire some hope.”

“Hope?” she asked.

They spun around each other. Then he took her gloved hands again, and they made their way through the center of all the other couples. When they moved to the end of the line, they were able to continue their conversation.

“There is something I should like to ask you, Lady Cassandra.”

Cassandra smiled. “What would that be, m’lord?”

He blinked. He was not about to propose to her in the middle of a dance, in a room full of people. He had only been given the duke's blessing before the dance. He had not pictured this as the place where he would lay his heart out. "May I call on you tomorrow and request a private audience with you? There is something of a particular nature which I would like to discuss."

"It sounds rather mysterious," she said playfully.

He raised an eyebrow. "Not mysterious, but not something that I want to discuss in a ballroom full of people."

"Very well, Lord Pembroke. I will grant your request. You may call on me tomorrow."

He squeezed the tips of her fingers lightly. "I shall look forward to tomorrow."

"As will I."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“*H*ow are you feeling today?” Robert asked Rosalie at the breakfast table. “You are getting around with your ankle?”

Rosalie smiled. “It is doing much better. Thank you, Robert.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Robert said, smearing his toast with marmalade.

“What has you in such a good mood this morning? Do not tell me it is that I am recovering, for I will not believe it in the slightest.”

Robert set his knife down and picked up his toast. “You are right. I am in a good mood today. I am calling on Lady Cassandra this morning.”

“Are you?”

He nodded. “I hope you will not mind her for a sister, because I am going to ask her to be my wife.”

Rosalie clapped her hands together. “Oh, I cannot think of anything better, Robert. I daresay that is the most wonderful news that you have shared this entire year. I only wish ...” Her voice trailed off and there was a faraway look in her eyes.

“What do you wish?” he asked quietly.

She gave him a smile, one that reminded him so much of his mother's smile. "I only wish that Papa and Mama were here. I wish that they could see how happy you have been these last few months in London. It is a nice change from ... the hard time it was in the country ... with all the ... reminders."

Robert's throat constricted. In the country, he'd had more than one spell of the doldrums after the loss of their parents. He had tried to cope through writing letters to his French relations—none of which ever wrote him back or received a single letter he wrote. He had also tried to keep busy, and fill the large place his father had left behind as a marquess. But staying busy had never rid him of the sorrow, only buried it deeper. "London has been a nice change, to be sure."

Rosalie pointed her fork at him. "You have undergone quite a change, and I think that I can pinpoint the precise time to your mood shifting to the moment that you met Lady Cassandra."

That, and he had found out that his parents were, in fact, alive. He desperately wanted to tell his sister. He wanted to ease the burden that she had in this situation. "I wish they were here too," he said, knowing that he would keep his promise to his cousin. He would not tell his sister the truth, though it pained him.

Rosalie smiled. "Sometimes it feels as if they are right here with us. I often imagine them here with us. As if they have just gone out of the evening. I wish they could see you happy like this again," she repeated her earlier words. "I have a feeling they would approve of Lady Cassandra."

"I also believe they would approve," he whispered.

They finished their breakfast, and Robert answered all of Rosalie's questions she had about the events she had missed. Robert escorted Rosalie to the drawing room and then took his leave. He headed down the stairs, and his butler had his hat, coat, and gloves ready for him.

Robert strode out the door and down to his carriage. Anticipation filled him. He had already received permission from the duke to court Lady Cassandra. He had hinted to Lady Cassandra about it last night after he had spoken with the duke. But today he would make it official. For the first time since arriving in London, he had no extra burdens on him. Rosalie approved of Lady Cassandra, and now that he had finished his assignments with the War Office, the only other thing to pursue would be to see his parents safely returned. But that might still take time, and his need to control the timeline was out of his hands now.

He settled himself on the bench in the carriage, no cares in the world. Robert tapped his walking stick on the roof of the carriage, and the carriage rolled forward until it immediately stopped.

Robert blinked hard as he saw his cousin waving his arms, trying to get his attention.

"To what do I owe the honor of seeing you this morning?" Robert asked, his voice cheery. "I expected you were still in bed when you did not breakfast with Rosalie and myself this morning."

Jeremy panted, as if he had been running. "I have been at the War Office. We need to talk."

Robert studied the agitated look on his cousin's face, then unlatched the carriage door. "Get in. What is wrong?"

Jeremy climbed into the carriage and the carriage lurched forward. "I have some grave news. Perhaps it is time to bring you into the War Office."

"What happened?"

His face paled. "I-I ... Perhaps now is not a good time. Where are you off to?"

Robert could not contain the grin that spread across his face. "I am going to call on Lady Cassandra this morning. It is time to make things official. I trust you will take the carriage to where you need to go while I call on her."

Jeremy ran a hand over his face, his features looking gaunt.

"You look as if you have not slept a wink." Robert put a hand on his cousin's shoulder. "What is distressing you?"

Jeremy shook his head. "Three are dead, Pembroke."

Robert sobered. His cousin did not use his title often. "What do you mean three are dead?"

Jeremy lowered his voice, though no one would have been able to hear their conversation as they drove down the road. "Three from the War Office, to be precise."

"Who?"

Jeremy waved his hand in the air. "Three people you do not know. But they were high up in the ranks. And there is more." He pulled a note from his pocket and handed it to Robert. "This was found at the scene of the crime. I wanted you to see it in person before I bring it back to the War Office."

The scrawled hand looked nothing like the previous notes. The letter had been sealed with wax, but no engraved seal

pattern. Robert stared at the words. “*R. Pursue me and there will be three more deaths, starting with your betrothed C.B. and ending with your parents.*”

Icy fear ran up Robert’s spine. “Do you think this note is intended for me?” Robert saw the confirmation of it in his eyes before he spoke.

Jeremy nodded. “I do. I do not know who else it could mean.”

“But, as you said, I do not know who those three people in the War Office were.”

“Someone made the connection. I am sorry, Robert. I thought we took every precaution.”

“This is all my fault. I should have never let Lady Cassandra become involved.” His chest constricted.

“It is not your fault. The note refers to her as your betrothed, not a fellow agent.”

“That makes it worse. I should have been more careful of my attentions toward her in public.”

“Others have worked on this alongside us. We clearly did not apprehend everyone involved like we thought. There is something we overlooked. I cannot quite place my finger on it.” Jeremy sighed.

“We caught the thief, and her accomplices. We rescued Rosalie.”

“Lady Cassandra was with you that day. And you have not been shy about paying her attention over the last week.”

“That is because I thought the danger had passed. I never would have ... I would have been much more discreet about my feelings if I felt that any harm would come to her.”

“I know,” Jeremy said. “But we must turn our minds to the present, and the future. We must solve this puzzle.”

Robert read the note again. “I am not following anyone anymore. What could that mean?”

Jeremy breathed out loudly. “I do not know. Except that there is no safe way to bring back your parents if we cannot ascertain the threat. Perhaps before they expected your involvement with the War Office. Now, with Rosalie rescued with the help of you and Lady Cassandra, if there are any loose pieces, that information could be valuable.”

“Then why have not they come after me? Why have I not been personally targeted?”

Jeremy rubbed the back of his neck. “I do not have a good answer. As you said, you were out in Society and did not think twice about your safety. So you did not take precautions. Perhaps they are waiting to make a move? It is all very puzzling.”

“But they expect that I am following them. So there must be more going on.”

“Perhaps they are still gaining secrets from the War Office.”

“Should we go there to discuss it?” Robert asked, trying to keep all the facts straight.

“I thought that might be a good idea. But now I am not so sure. It was easy to assume that all information was leaked through Miss Porter—that she was the thief and the mole—and gained her information from her father. But these deaths prove there must be someone else. If there is another mole on the inside, they are very well concealed. The point of code names and not knowing everyone in the agency is to protect

against things like this. But if we go in and share what we know unwittingly with the mole, we will be hurting our cause, not helping it.”

“Then what are we going to do? What am I to do?”

“I do not know. I only know that this threat is real. I am sorry I dragged you into this at all. I should have kept you out of this mess from the start.”

“You did not drag me into this. I chose to help.”

“And helping has put you into this position.”

Robert put a hand on Jeremy’s shoulder. “We make choices. What is done is done. I do not blame that on anyone. My father clearly made a choice to help in this cause, and he accepted the risks. I must do the same. I accept the risks. What should we do now?”

Jeremy shook his head. “My father is watching the War Office, but so far, he cannot identify a spy from within. There was, however, a note that he was able to intercept before it was delivered. It might contain the clue we need. My father had the foresight to change the time on the note, which bought us four hours of time. It might be useful.”

“What was the note about?”

“A rendezvous point, several leagues away. I imagine it is to give the location of something.”

“This is a dangerous game. Why let the note be delivered? Why not capture the person who took the note and find the mole that way?”

“Because we must operate with stealth. The battle is now on our own soil, when it comes to this. It is vital we know the

kind of secrets that have been passed on before we intercept the spy.”

“How can I help?”

Jeremy shook his head. “Based on the other note, it would be wise for you to lie low. Someone has been watching you. Someone knows that you are betrothed.”

“Not quite betrothed. But that was my next destination.”

Jeremy shook his head. “I cannot advise you what to do. But if someone sees you are involved, then not only will you be at risk, but potentially Lady Cassandra *and* your parents.”

Heaviness weighed on Robert’s chest. The weight of the world seemed to come crashing down on him. He knew only a few things at that moment. He loved Cassandra, and he had to keep her safe. Threats about his parents were serious, it was true, but he could not protect them or warn them. He could do nothing for his parents except pray to God that He would watch over them while they waited to be rescued. But Lady Cassandra—he could protect her.

He could make sure that she was not a target, that she would not be harmed. And contrary to the note’s threats, he would not leave this situation alone until the person behind these threats was found. “I will help. And to take extra precautions, I will see that Rosalie stays out of Society until there is no longer a threat. Let us discuss our course of action to take when your father arrives at home tonight. I will attend Lords as planned this afternoon, and free up the rest of my schedule so that we can solve this. But there is something I must do before we return home.”

“What is that?”

“I am still calling on Lady Cassandra.” He glanced out the carriage window, trying to pull his heart back together. Saying goodbye was going to be the hardest thing he’d ever done in his life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Cassandra pulled at her needlework, the flowers coming faster than they normally did along the cloth. She had tried playing the pianoforte, but she could not get her brain to focus on the notes in front of her, so she had gone back to her needlework, smiling as each flower seemed more effortless than the last.

“I think I hear the marquess’s carriage,” Lizzie said, from where she perched next to the window in the drawing room.

Cassandra looked up placatingly toward her sister. “You say that every day.”

“Did you not say he was going to call on you today?”

Cassandra expertly threaded the needle through the linen cloth, adding another pink petal to her rose. “Yes, dearest. He did say that, but if one dwells on what one expects—”

“It is him!”

Nerves skittered around her. Her hair was perfection, her dress was beautiful, but she was very uncomposed inside. She put down her needlework and walked to the window much too hastily for a gently bred young woman. Her heart pounded against her chest.

“He looks gallant enough to propose to you today,” Lizzie said, clasping the worn book to her chest. She sighed. “It is very romantic.”

Cassandra looked at the smart figure he cut in his dark blue coat. “He does look very well,” she said, stepping away from the window and returning to the settee with a calmness that she did not feel.

Lizzie frowned. “I suppose I should leave the room, so I do not have to be excused,” she said softly.

Cassandra smiled. “Do not count yourself out yet. You may stay for the present.”

Lizzie peeked over the top of her book. “You shall not even know I am here.”

Lord Pembroke was announced into the room, and Cassandra and her sister both stood, offering small curtsies when he bowed. Lord Pembroke looked to Lizzie, then said quietly to Cassandra, “I was hoping I might have a private word with you.”

There was something different about him, something guarded. Cassandra smiled to herself. She was likely projecting her own agitation about the situation onto him. With the thought of becoming engaged swirling around in her mind, she nodded to her sister, and Lizzie left the room, but not without first looking back and smiling broadly.

Cassandra took her seat on the settee, but she put the needlework aside in a small basket.

Lord Pembroke sat for a moment, then stood and began pacing the floor.

Cassandra wanted to laugh, but she bit the side of her cheek to control the desire. It appeared that Lord Pembroke

was just as nervous as she was for this moment, and the familiar fluttering spread through her. He paced back and forth three more times before her impatience got the better of her. “Lord Pembroke, you said you would like a private word with me. Surely that is a matter of some significance. You may sit.”

He nodded, then took a seat opposite of her. “This is harder than I imagined it would be.”

She smiled encouragingly. He was quite adorable when he was flustered. “Words do not have to be poetic to get their point across.”

He nodded, the look in his eyes sad. “Very true. I wish to say ... to let you know ... that I am most grateful for your assistance this Season. There are so many things we would not have known. You have been an incredible asset to the War Office.”

Lady Cassandra blinked. She had given Lord Pembroke leave to speak without being poetic, but she had not thought he would bring up her efforts to help the War Office as part of his proposal to her. “I was happy to help. I still am happy to help.”

Lord Pembroke smiled, but there were lines on the sides of his eyes. “There is no need for you to help anymore. We have solved the mystery, and all has been set to right in that regard.”

“Of course. I only meant in the future, if there is a need, I would be happy to serve the Crown again and help in the war against Napoleon.”

“The office has been clear that they will only use their operatives going forward. They do not have a full picture of how much you helped, as it would have compromised your safety. But I can express my deep gratitude that you were able to accomplish so much.”

“Think nothing of it. It has been my pleasure to help, and to get to know you better in the process.”

Emotion charged the air between them. Lord Pembroke stood. “I should be going.”

Cassandra rose and came to stand beside him. “Lord Pembroke, I do not understand. Is that the only thing you wanted to talk to me about?”

He looked away from her. “I believe that is all I need to say.”

Cassandra mustered her courage. “I do not believe you. I thought—I thought you were coming here to propose to me. Why else would you ask for a private audience with me?”

Lines were drawn on his forehead, and his eyes held a myriad of emotions. Something was wrong. Everything seemed to be wrong. He shook his head. “You are mistaken. Though I have very much enjoyed our time together, Lady Cassandra, I fear that our acquaintance must end.”

Now it was she who felt like pacing the room. She stood and made her way over to him, sitting close to him on the settee. “End? Robert, what is going on?” Her gloved fingers reached for his, and she found a familiar comfort in them for a brief moment until he pulled his hand away.

“I wish you the very best, Lady Cassandra. I do hope you will find happiness in the future.” He swallowed, the look in his eyes betraying emotion that was void in his words.

“My happiness? *You* are my happiness.” Something was terribly wrong.

He stood, looking away from her. “It is not meant to be.”

She stood, putting her hand on his arm. He did not pull away, and she was saddened that it surprised her. “I do not believe you.”

The plea flashed in his eyes. “You must.”

She dared to touch his cheek, turning his eyes toward her. When they met hers, she said, “Then why do your eyes betray your words? You are not telling the whole of it. I do not understand you.”

“Perhaps I am just the rake you always thought I was.”

“I do not think you are a rake.”

He swallowed. His voice was low when he finally said, “Then what do you think?”

She raised her chin defiantly. She was not letting him go without a fight. “I think you are in love with me, and you are too afraid to say it.”

“I am not afraid of anything.” His jaw wiggled just slightly. Strain and resistance.

She blinked, swallowing the lump that was forming in her throat. She was trained well enough not to let her emotions spill all over her face. “You are afraid. I can see it in your eyes.”

“What you see is not fear, but exasperation at you not listening to me. It is best we go our separate ways.”

“You could have told me that last night, or any of the nights previous.” Something was not adding up.

“In hindsight, you are right. That would have made this moment easier.”

“Your mouth is saying one thing, but your eyes are telling a completely different story. What game are you playing at?”

Something of a growl rumbled in his throat. “There is no game. The game is over.”

“Then tell me that you do not have feelings for me. That you do not love me or feel as I do toward you.”

His face became a stoic mask. “That is what I have been saying. You are mistaken, Lady Cassandra. I have no feelings for you. I had a job to do this Season. And you were a very helpful diversion in that process.”

She heard the words, and this time they found their mark. “I understand, Lord Pembroke. You may see yourself out.” She wanted to say more but could not. To speak again to him would be to find herself in a puddle of tears. Only her pillow would see her in such a state.

She turned away from him and walked as steadily as she could toward the drawing room door. Turning the handle, she opened the door, standing next to it so Lord Pembroke could pass her. He gave her a slight bow, then turned toward the stairs to make his way out. A tear slipped from her eye, and she could not glance back in his direction. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her wound. Once she turned the corner, she picked up her skirts and made haste to her room, before any other tears fell.



ALONE IN HER ROOM FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL HOURS, Cassandra cried out her emotion until there were no tears left. Pain gnawed at her. Confusion pressed upon her each time she tried to reconcile the man she knew with the one who showed

up today with the blatant intent to break her heart. She clutched her pillow fiercely as she buried her face into it once more. Lord Pembroke was nothing but thorough in everything that he did, and the way he broke her heart was no exception to that rule.

A knock sounded at her door.

Cassandra took a deep breath, but it did nothing to calm the shakiness she felt. “I do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Dearest, will you be joining us for dinner?” her mother’s voice sounded muffled through the door.

“I am not hungry right now.”

“Is there something I can get you? We have the Ramsgrave’s party tonight.”

Cassandra steeled herself. She was not ready to talk to her mama or anyone about her experience today. She could not face anyone. “I have a headache,” she said, which was true enough. Hours of crying had left her head pounding with more pressure. “Please make my excuses to the Ramsgrave’s.”

Mama did not answer right away. The pause was so long, Cassandra assumed her mother had left her door. But finally, she said, “Very well, I will make your excuses. And I will send a tray up.”

“Thank you,” Cassandra said quietly, then curled up in her blankets until her abigail came in to help her undress.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Robert looked in the dingy glass at the inn two miles from the rendezvous location. His hair was dirty and covered in an even dirtier hat, and that only seemed to be outdone by the amount of grime that itched his jaw and nose until he was ready to claw off the entire disguise. “This better work,” he said to Jeremy.

Jeremy held a torn coat at arm’s length away from himself. “It will work. We have taken every precaution.”

Robert sighed and took the coat from his cousin. The coat fit ill, hanging much lower on the sleeves than his tailor-made jackets, but it was the best thing to cover up his hands that were not roughed up from manual labor. “I thought that was what we did last time.”

“The spy, whoever he is, knows the regular operatives enough to spot them. Five days to find loyal men who could don different disguises than their normal was difficult. But rest assured, several men are standing guard.”

“That will not look obvious,” Robert said, trying to feel comfortable in such scratchy, dirty clothes. He’d need to bathe for a month after this.

“They will not actually be standing. But they are all in position. They have been at the rendezvous spot for the last

day. They have been keeping a lookout for anything suspicious. Hopefully, everything will go well, and you will not even be able to pick them out of the crowd.”

Robert harrumphed, then smeared more mud and grime on his hands and under his fingernails. He adjusted the eyepatch and pulled his hat low. The boots he wore were too big on him. He would not be able to run quickly in them if the worst came. But he had be able to manage walking in them for the two miles to the pub next to the waterfront. He could not very well show up in a carriage.

“You look the part,” Jeremy said. “Do you remember everything you need to do?”

“I hope so.” He eyed his cousin warily. “Your men will have the coach standing by?”

“Yes. You will need to commit everything to memory that the spy says. You will be repeating his same words to the person who will come a few hours after.”

The stench from his clothes filled Robert’s senses, and he tried to breathe through his mouth. “I remember. I should get going. I will keep an eye out, and I will give the signal if anything seems amiss.”

Jeremy nodded. “I will see you soon. I will get my own disguise on after you leave. That way, you will not be tempted to look for me. But I will be there, by the front of the pub, just like we planned.”

The walk was not far, but the uncomfortable boots rubbed against his ankles and toes. He pushed the thoughts away, and other pain came into his mind, but this type was not because of ill-fitting boots.

His mind returned to Falsted Manor, where he had said many untrue things to Lady Cassandra, not the least of which was that he was not afraid of anything. He was, in fact, very afraid that something might happen to her—that somehow his actions, and his public admiration of her had made her a target. The War Office had promised to keep an eye on her, but that had not kept her from becoming a target the first time. And Robert wondered if the request made her more of a target.

As it was, she had not been seen in Society by the handful of operatives who had been sent to watch for her over the last week. The fact that she had not been out should have given him comfort. After all, if something nefarious had happened to her, he would have heard that information by now. Which meant that she was safe for the time being. But he had wounded her. He was not sure how he could ever forgive himself for the pain he had caused her. He'd seen the pain in her eyes, though she had done a brave job of keeping it to herself.

Robert continued walking along the road, letting himself into the muddiest part of the street, so that his boots would be sufficiently caked.

He pushed the thoughts of Cassandra out of his mind for the time being. He had to first solve the problem in front of him. He'd have to catch the spy giving the information. It was the only way to keep his family safe—his sister, his parents—and it was the only way to keep Cassandra safe.

His heart ached, but he kept walking. At the top of a hill, he saw the seaside village below, and the small pub at the water's edge. He changed his gait, walking with a labored step down the final hill, and began stooping as he swung his arms at an unnatural angle. The effort made his back stiff and his

shoulders hurt, but the effect likely hid his gentleman's status well.

Raucous laughter sounded in the air as Robert pushed his way in through the pub's door. A small fire roared at the far end of the room. The bartender looked up toward the door when Robert stepped close and then went back to drying the glass he had in his hand with a dirty rag.

Robert settled himself down in the far corner of the room with his back to the wall. He faced the door, but he focused on the fireplace, ordered a pint, and rested his head in his hand. He gave off the impression that life was hard and his journey had been a long one.

He kept to himself and waited for quite some time until he took a drink. The alcohol was strong, burning through him. He pushed the mug away forcefully and let some of the liquid spill into the splintering table to give off the impression he'd drunk more than he really had. He had at least an hour to wait, and so he sat with his head down and pondered all the ways he had said the wrong things to Cassandra. If he ever got the chance, he would make things right.

After an hour of waiting, he turned toward the door but kept his head down. Several people went in and out. He tried not to notice those who had been in the pub since he'd arrived. He knew that there were some who were here to keep watch on the situation, but it did not calm his nerves.

"This seat taken?" a man asked.

Robert looked at the sea-hardened man, then leaned back in his chair. Finally, the mole had arrived, and had given him the password. He responded with the answer Jeremy had given him. "I do not own the place. You sit where you like."

The man scraped the chair against the floor as he sat down heavily. "I do not recognize you," he said warily.

"Are you supposed to? Only the highest in the ranks know who I am."

"What happened to the other man?"

"He is too sloppy. Almost blew the entire operation. So I came here myself."

The other man chuckled menacingly. "You are right on that account. Now, about the exchange. How much money for the information? It's not easy to get information from the top."

Robert looked around, noticing several people watching them. He was not sure which of them were on his side. He bent closer to the stranger across the table from him. "I let my last man handle the money. You will get a generous percentage if you give me the information that I want."

"I want to see it," the man said.

Robert shook his head, needing to improvise. "I have someone standing outside the pub. He will compensate you accordingly. I cannot bring that amount of money into the pub without drawing attention." Would this man take the bait? The only way for him to secure his next meeting with the boss was to get this information, but then more importantly to get this man outside so he could be apprehended before the true boss came into the pub.

The man laughed again. "No one is paying us the least mind. This is the best for cover, or have you forgotten?"

Robert used a menacing voice, growling out the words. "I have not forgotten. And you should watch yourself. I do not have time to come waste. Tell me what I want to know."

“The location of the marquess and his traitorous French wife is a closely guarded secret.”

Robert’s heart beat faster. He forced himself to not give any sign of interest when the man referred to his parents with such contempt. “Did you find the information or not?”

The man pulled out a dirty piece of paper from his coat and handed it to Robert. “I took that from the desk of the highest-ranking member of the War Office. Such a thing will earn a handsome reward from Napoleon himself with that.”

Robert opened the piece of paper, scanning the information while suppressing all of his feelings. His parents’ location was being used as a bargaining chip. “How do I know the information is good? If I deliver this information abroad as you have suggested, and these details are wrong ...”

“They are not wrong. It is a closely guarded secret. I had to kill three people to get the information. I can assure you, I did not mess this up. And there were no witnesses.”

Robert nodded, feeling like he might be sick from the revelation, but he pushed through. Pocketing the paper, he said, “You have done more than enough, and you will be compensated accordingly.”

The man grinned, revealing a mouth of missing and stained teeth. “Just doing a service to me country,” he said, laughing at the jest.

“You certainly have,” Robert said. “Your money is outside.”

“I will follow you,” he said.

Robert exited the pub and turned down a small alley adjacent to the building. The man followed him.

“Where is it? Where is my reward?”

Robert frowned, doing his best to look confused. “He will be here shortly. I could not have him waiting around with a pocket full of coins, could I? He would have been picked clean.”

They did not wait long, before a man came holding a large velvet bag. The seaman’s greedy eyes focused only on the man coming their way.

“Is this the guy, boss?” the man said to Robert.

“Yes. Pay him. He gave me everything I needed.”

The man came forward and offered the bag to the seaman, who then shook the heavy pouch in his hand. “That is more than last time.”

“Consider it extra for taking care of those three from the War Office.”

They walked out toward the exit of the alleyway. And then there were five large men, blocking their path.

“Run,” Robert said to the other two men that stood behind him. “We cannot be caught.”

The seaman ran back down the alleyway the other way until another group of men blocked his path on the far end as well. As the three men were surrounded, Robert allowed himself to be caught and pretended to struggle against the hold they had on him. The seaman was apprehended and then someone hit him over the head, knocking him out. The unconscious seaman fell to the ground, and the men tied his hands securely behind his back. Then they hoisted him and took him toward the back of the alley.

“Are you alright?” Jeremy asked Robert, loosening his grip on him.

“Do not let me go yet,” Robert whispered. “If he wakes up, I want him to see me putting up a fight.”

They waited until the group carrying the seaman turned the corner, then Jeremy released his cousin.

“Excellent work,” Jeremy said. “And you got him to admit to his crimes of killing the three that were found dead at the War Office?”

“We have the mole now, but we still do not have the boss behind this entire operation,” Robert said.

“That is what your next meeting in a couple of hours is about,” Jeremy said.

Robert dropped his voice to nearly a whisper. “He found out where my parents are, Jeremy. That is what the boss was after.”

“Among other secrets, I am sure.”

Robert nodded, then took out the paper. “Read this. It gives the direction to them.”

Jeremy took the small square paper, only briefly reading it before slipping it into his pocket. “One thing at a time, cousin. We must proceed with caution. Let us focus on catching the boss. The previous note my father intercepted said that the boss would come personally to this meeting. That is a significant thing.”

“Yes, it is.”

The group of men who had apprehended the seaman came back and stood in front of Jeremy. “We have finished our job,” one of them reported. “He is on his way to be tried in London,

but he will be taking a circuitous route so that he will not arrive at the War Office until nightfall.”

Jeremy smiled. “Excellent. You all know the rest of the plan and what you are supposed to do?”

The men nodded.

“Very well. Get into your places. We have one more fish to catch today, and I have a feeling it is going to be a big one.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Robert waited back in the pub by the fireplace, but he did not have to wait long. A man with a hat pulled low over his brow came into the pub. Robert kept his gaze on the fire, but out of the corner of his eye, he watched as the man took a seat in the other corner.

The man had his back to Robert. He glanced casually at the clock. The man was only two minutes early from the original appointed time. It had to be him.

Robert kept his head low as he slowly made his way toward the man. Stepping close to the table the boss occupied, he asked, “This seat taken?”

The man did not meet Robert’s eye but gestured for him to sit down. “Do you have what I want?”

Robert disguised his voice, trying to sound like the seaman he had talked to earlier. “That is why I am here, ain’t it? Killed three people to get the job done.”

”You took a risk in doing that,” the boss said, agitation in his voice. He spun a ring around his finger, with a large red stone in it.

Robert’s heart pounded. He knew that ring! It was the same one Mr. Douglas had worn and twisted when Robert had

first met him. “Isn’t the risk worth it?” Robert asked, with a calmness that he did not feel.

“Worth it? Of course it is worth it. The location of the Marquess and his traitorous French wife has been something I have tried to learn for over a year now. It is gold in my pocket, but if any of this points to me, my career is ruined, and you will be to blame.” He spun a ring around his finger with shaky fingers again.

Robert tilted his head up slightly, daring to see a little of the man’s face and confirm his suspicions, but the boss kept his head down, and Robert could only see the man’s hat. Suddenly, this moment became more dangerous than it had before. “You wanted the information about the whereabouts, and you wanted no witnesses. I accomplished both, and I expect to be rewarded.”

“Napoleon will pay handsomely for the information, and you will get your cut when I do. Espionage is a lucrative business, but patience will be required. I need to know the information is good first.”

Robert shook his head, disgust at the man that he had trusted threatening to make him sick. “I expect some payment up front.”

“You lot are the same,” the boss said. “Always expecting your piece before everyone else.”

“That is the price of doing business,” Robert said.

Mr. Douglas pulled out a heavy coin bag and threw it on the table. It made a satisfying clinking. “That is what I can give you now. I can guarantee the rest once we send the information on your ship. You know I am a man of my word.”

Robert wanted to plant a facer on the man for his lies and deception. “A man of your word, are ye? When you betray your own Crown and Countrymen to the enemy?”

“Keep your voice down,” the boss said. “You have no idea who you are dealing with. Now give me the information I came for.”

Robert pocketed the coin purse before Mr. Douglas could retrieve it, then he gave the signal by slapping his hand against the table.

Commotion broke out around them. Robert stood, blocking Mr. Douglas from leaving. Two other men held Mr. Douglas fast. “What is the meaning of this?” Mr. Douglas asked.

Other men came and joined in the fight. The room erupted into chaos, with a few people coming to Mr. Douglas’s aid. The rest surrounded him, making sure he did not escape.

Chairs were slammed against tables and broken, chair legs became clubs against their opponents’ heads. A tangle of weapons and fists.

One man delivered a sharp blow to Robert’s face, but he managed to move out of the way of another attacker and then planted a satisfying facer on Mr. Douglas, knocking his hat off in the process and revealing his identity.

“You!” Jeremy exclaimed.

The room went silent.

Mr. Douglas stumbled backwards, his hair mussed and his face flushed with anger. He growled at Robert, pointing an accusing finger at him. “I should have known you were behind this!”

Robert smiled grimly at the recognition; it was clear that Mr. Douglas knew exactly who he was now. He grabbed Mr. Douglas by the lapels of his coat and thrust him into one of his henchmen. “Yes, it’s me,” he said coldly as he stepped back to survey the surrounding scene.

Mr. Douglas sputtered in rage, yelling about his parents.

“You are wanted for treason,” Robert declared. His voice echoed through the room. “You have been feeding information to the enemy for some time now, and it is about time you paid for your crimes.”

Mr. Douglas’s face paled. He tried to break free from the men holding him, but they were too strong. “This is a mistake! I am innocent!”

“Oh, I do not think so,” Harold said, taking off his hat and revealing himself. “Your betrayal has cost us too much. You will be brought to justice.”

The men in the room looked on in shock. Robert gestured for them to come forward. “Take him away.”

As Mr. Douglas was dragged away, he shouted out one last thing. “You will not get away with this! I will get my revenge!”

Robert let the threat roll off his back. There was nothing Mr. Douglas could do now. Robert watched as the man was escorted out of the room.

“What do we do next?” Robert asked.

Jeremy shook his head. “*We* do nothing. This traitor will be taken to the highest ranking official at the office, and we will receive a report. Lie low for a few days, and we will soon know how to proceed.”

Robert nodded. “Are we out of harm’s way?” Robert asked. “My parents—my sister?” But mostly he thought of Lady Cassandra.

Jeremy put his arm around his cousin’s shoulder as they walked toward a carriage. “Time will tell. It is too soon to say just how profitable this was. We must wait to see what our superiors say.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Jeremy burst into the breakfast room the next morning. “My father just returned home,” he said. “He has news to share with both of us.”

Robert left his breakfast untouched and followed Jeremy to the study. His uncle waited in the room.

“You have done it,” Uncle said. “Both of you. This was a monumental effort to catch Mr. Douglas.”

“What happened?” Jeremy asked.

“Mr. Douglas was interrogated last night. It took quite some time before he cracked, but once he did, he confessed to everything, even bringing you in with the intention of finding out your parents’ whereabouts.”

“That is why he asked me to help with the War Office?”

Harold nodded. “No one above him approved the decision, and because of the way things were developing, he had used it to his advantage to keep that information from other superiors who would not have allowed you to help.”

“But I do not understand why Mr. Douglas would ask me to help in the first place. I did not know where my parents were. At the beginning, I did not even know they were alive.”

Harold shook his head. “Mr. Douglas did not believe that. He assumed you knew exactly where they were, and that was why you were writing coded messages to them at different addresses. He believed that he would be able to get the information directly from you if you helped in the endeavor. And then he figured that once he revealed that you were helping with the War Office, his superiors would give him the information that he was looking for, for your sake.”

“He wanted to know where they were so he could betray them,” Robert said bitterly.

Harold nodded. “That is true, but he had not counted on his plan backfiring—on you not knowing where they were, on his secret about the seals being uncovered. Others in the War Office became warier of sharing things when you joined, not less.”

“I suppose that is a good thing.”

Jeremy nodded. “And it is why he hired the seaman to come and do his dirty work and get the information about your parents. And we were able to intercept that.”

Harold nodded. “It was a risk leaving the note with the modified time on it, but I knew that if it was removed from the equation, there would be another drop somewhere else that I would not be able to get the information from. The only way to keep the suspect on the path to getting caught was to let them play out their hand.”

A wave of relief washed over Robert as he exhaled. “Is there anyone else that Mr. Douglas worked with at the War Office?”

Harold shook his head. “From everything we have gathered, no. He had a few other accomplices that were

apprehended yesterday, and two more that we caught this morning after he confessed to the location of a safe house. But we are confident now that everything else is secure.”

“What does this mean for my parents? They are the reason I became involved in the first place. I want to see them returned home safely. I have the direction that the seaman stole from the War Office. It should give us the information we need to rescue them. We could take a small party and go retrieve them.”

Harold shook his head. “That will not be possible.”

“Why not?”

“Because the direction is not accurate. They are no longer at that location.”

A knot formed in Robert’s stomach. “What do you mean?”

“Secret measures are being taken even now to retrieve your parents and ensure their safety.”

Robert blinked. “So, the information I received about their whereabouts is not relevant? Why was I not told before now?”

“We could not risk their safety. It still may take a few more weeks to get them securely across the border, but after the information regarding their location was stolen, we knew we could not keep them hidden where they were any longer. We immediately sent word that it was time to move them.”

Emotion filled Robert. “I do not know what to say. This is such happy news,” he said, choking out the words.

“Until it is finalized, it is best if we keep this information between us,” Harold said.

“I shall not tell Rosalie until we know for sure. I would hate to give her false hope,” Robert said.

“What will give me false hope, brother?” Rosalie asked from behind the open door of the study.

“You should not be eavesdropping on private conversations,” Robert said.

Rosalie smiled. “Then you should remember to close the door if you do not wish to be heard. But I already know what it is about.”

Robert blinked. “You do?”

Rosalie nodded. “It is very obvious, brother. You do not wish to give me false hope that things will work out between you and Lady Cassandra. And I do not blame you. You have been in such a melancholy state.”

Robert opened his mouth and then shut it again. Cassandra had been on his mind through this entire ordeal. But he’d had to push his thoughts and feelings about her aside. He’d had to solve this problem first. “It is true that I do not wish to give you or myself false hope in that matter.” He shook his head. He had made a mess of their connection and it felt irreparable. “I do not think there is anything I can do there though.”

“Nonsense,” Rosalie said. “The two of you are good for each other, and I adore her. I could not pick out a better person for you to marry. She is exactly the sort of sister that I want in our little family.”

Robert shook his head. “I know you like her, Rosy. I like her too. Unfortunately, I messed up my chance with her.”

“Try to win her back, Robert. I believe she has been just as heartbroken as you have been. I saw her out a few days ago, and she looked absolutely dreadful.”

“I cannot imagine she would ever look dreadful,” Robert said defensively.

“I only meant her spark and excitement was very much lacking. She still smiled, but it was not the same. It looks the same way you have looked. You have been pretending, but I know that you are affected by it.”

“Rosalie, I have had many things on my mind. My melancholy is not solely because of Lady Cassandra. Explain it to her, Jeremy, so that she knows that she is wrong on this point,” he said, looking to his cousin for support.

Jeremy smiled and took a step closer to Rosalie. “I am afraid I side with my younger cousin on this point. I believe a lot of your turmoil *has* been about Lady Cassandra, although you feel you are justified in putting the blame elsewhere.” He raised his eyebrows and gave Robert the most incredulous look.

Robert shook his head. “The two of you are impossible. She will not forgive me after the things I said. It is better that we part. Trying to reconcile will only make things worse.”

“That is the most absurd thing I have ever heard in my entire life. If Papa and Mama were here right now, God rest their souls, they would agree with me. Go and make things right, for yourself, not just because I have always wanted a sister.”

A tightness formed in Robert’s chest. “I do not even know where to begin.”

“An apology, man,” Jeremy said. “Then groveling, followed by flowers, and more groveling.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



Cassandra traveled in her carriage with her mama and sister, grateful to be headed back to the quiet of their country estate in Macclesfield. Her twin brothers rode their horses, accompanying them back to the country. Emma had decided to remain by her husband's side in Town. Even in her delicate situation, she felt it best not to be separated from James.

The last week had been a blur for Cassandra. She had attended a few functions, and though she had been asked to dance by a few gentlemen, her heart was not in the process of wanting to find a match.

The idea of a fourth season did not appeal to her at all, and she sat with the heavy weight that her station and place in the world should have alleviated. She turned her thoughts to James and Emma. Perhaps after the baby was born, she would tend to it, doting on the infant and embracing the new situation of being an aunt.

Her mother and sister talked about very mundane topics, like the weather, and who had recently become engaged. Cassandra leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes, feigning sleep so she did not have to participate in the conversation.

Sometime later, Cassandra bolted awake. She had not meant to actually fall asleep. She looked at her mama and sister, but both of them had also decided to take a rest in the carriage.

Left alone with her own thoughts, Cassandra looked out the window, admiring the springtime in the English countryside. The rolling hills were blanketed in bright green grass, while the sky was adorned with white clouds strewn across its majestic blue canvas. The gentle breeze carried the scent of lilac, and the roads were lined with majestic trees. Birds sang the sweetest of melodies.

Cassandra smiled. Going back to the countryside would do her good. It would help her refocus. After all, she was a duke's daughter. She did not have to marry early or even at all to secure her status in the world. She was still heartbroken over Robert, but surely, in the country, that sentiment would fade, would it not?

An ache pounded inside her chest, disagreeing with her thoughts. It would take much more than a countryside to get over the man she had fallen for.

The carriage stopped abruptly; the force waking her sister and Mama.

“Are we at the inn already? I had expected we would not arrive until almost nightfall,” Lizzie said.

“I am not sure what the trouble is,” her mother said.

Cassandra tapped on the roof to get the driver's attention. When he opened the small hatch, she called to him. “Why have we stopped?” A panicked feeling fell around her, but surely nothing would happen to them when her brothers were

escorting their carriage on horseback. If there was trouble, they would not stop for it, would they?

“It appears there is another rider behind us. William is back talking with him now, and has signaled for us to stop.”

“This is highly unusual,” her mother said.

“I hope there are no highwaymen on this road,” Lizzie said with fervor.

Cassandra’s heart thumped against her chest. The brief time she and Robert had been tied together in that terribly damp room had been scary, but she had not told her sister the whole of it. She put on a brave face. “You read too much,” Cassandra chided her sister. To the driver, she asked, “What does Edward think of it?”

Edward came to the window, poking his head close. “There is no threat, but Cassandra, you are requested outside of the carriage to have a conversation.”

“I do not understand,” Cassandra said, looking to her mama.

Mama nodded. “If Edward says it is safe, you may believe him, my dear.”

Cassandra turned to Edward, who had dismounted his horse, and opened the carriage door, an outstretched hand to help his sister down. “Why should I be needed and not Mama? For it is not as if I can make decisions for the entire carriage.”

Edward helped his sister down, then walked with her away from the carriage. “Because, dear sister, it is not about the carriage in general, but about you specifically.”

“I still do not—” Cassandra cut off her own statement and stared at the man in front of her. A hand went to her chest

where her heart continued to be rapidly. “Robert? What are you doing here?”

“Cassandra, I need to speak with you.”

“Want me to give him a black eye to match the one he already has?” Edward lifted up his hands as if he would plant a facer on Robert at any moment.

Cassandra held her mouth in a line, though her lips wanted to twitch into a smile at her brother’s protective side. “Edward, he does not need a facer yet. But I shall advise you presently.”

Robert looked toward her brothers, who stood within arms’ length of both of them. “Might we walk a short distance away and have our discussion with some privacy?”

Her brothers looked to her for confirmation before they both nodded like soldiers and stepped back a few paces. “We shall be here if you need us, Cassandra,” William said.

“Thank you, William,” Cassandra said, before walking with Robert. Seeing him again brought forward all the emotions from the last time they had been in company together.

He held out a handful of wilted flowers. “I brought you these. They are from Town. It took me longer than I anticipated locating you. I had not realized that you had left until I stopped at Falsted Manor.”

She accepted the flowers from the man who had broken her heart. Pride warred inside her. She did not want to give him a chance to explain his position again. It had been too painful the first time. She kept her emotions in check, stopping next to Robert on the side of the road out of earshot of her sentinel brothers. She forced herself to look into his eyes, but the effort of looking into them felt painful.

Finally, she took a deep breath and said, “I cannot imagine why you would seek me out again, or what you can possibly say after our last conversation.”

He cleared his throat. “What I said before—”

She cut him off. “Please do not repeat your prior sentiments. I assure you I remember them very well without hearing the words again.”

“I am sorry I caused you such pain. I hope you will come to understand that I had a very particular reason for saying what I did.”

The edges of her eyes began to prick with the tears. But she shoved them away, as if she had been packing a trunk. “You gave your reasons very clearly. You already broke my heart once; now if you will excuse me, Lord Pembroke, we really should be on our way.” Cassandra was a puddle of confusion, but she spun around to walk back toward the carriage. Why would he ride here to reiterate his prior statements?

Lord Pembroke moved around her, his hands with palms toward her, a sign of surrender. He gave her a pained look. “My parents are alive.”

Of all the things that she had expected to hear from him, that was one she was completely unprepared for. “What?”

He took a tentative step closer to her, his hands reaching for hers until they found them. He clasped her hands gently. “My parents are alive. I did not know until this winter when I came to Town with my cousin. It was then that I learned that not only were they alive, but my father had worked for the War Office. It was the perfect cover for him because my mother was born in France. They still traveled across the

channel quite often to visit her relations. My father was involved in spying on Napoleon's camps and relaying messages back and forth to help us in this war effort. Somewhere along the way, there was a spy within our own War Office, and my father and my mother were pronounced dead, though they were actually in hiding."

Cassandra opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out immediately. "I-I cannot imagine how shocking this is for you. Have you made contact with your parents? Does your sister know?"

"I must answer both of your questions in the negative. There was no way for me to make contact with them. My sister will not know the truth of my parents until they are home safely on English soil."

"What a burden," she said.

"When Rosalie was captured, I am afraid my emotions got the better of me."

"That is very understandable. She is your only sister, after all," Cassandra said.

He shook his head. "I was concerned for my sister, it is true, but what frightened me more was the fact that my actions put *you* in danger. Coping with the loss of my parents was difficult. And yet, as I examined my feelings for you, I could not let you become more of a target. I apologize from the depths of my soul that I wounded you so greatly, but given the circumstances, I would do it again if it meant keeping you safe."

"Nothing happened. I *was* safe. We were able to get out of that situation. You were a hero. We had already succeeded."

He shook his head. “Only on that one front. The rest was much more complicated. Less than a week after we caught the thief, three people from the War Office were found dead.”

Cassandra swallowed. “*Dead?*”

“It was a warning. There was another threat issued—the same fate would befall my sister, my parents, and ... *you*. I could not keep you safe, even if you were with me all the time. I had to create some distance. I did not want to lie to you, but considering the gravity of what we were up against, I could not do anything else.”

“You lied to me? You promised you would always be honest with me.”

“I was worried for your safety because you were so connected with me at all social functions. How could I have professed my love for you at that moment when so much uncertainty surrounded the situation? I had to keep you safe at all costs.”

Cassandra blinked. “You were going to profess your love to me?”

“Of course I was. Until the War Office incident made me reconsider what that would mean.”

“Has something changed at the War Office?”

“We caught the spy and the traitor who was delivering all the spy’s messages this week. It was quite the story that I hope to share with you later. But the War Office has assured me that all the people involved with threats towards my parents, and by consequence, me and my sister, are now neutralized.”

Cassandra breathed out slowly. “That is a lot to take in.”

“I stopped at your Falsted Manor this morning, after I had been given the information from the War Office. But your brother said you had already left Town for the Season. I knew I needed to catch you and tell you in person how sorry I am for my behavior.”

“Is that the only thing you wanted to tell me, Lord Pembroke?” She gave him a small smile.

“Not even close, Lady Cassandra. But until I can obtain your forgiveness, I doubt professing my undying love to you will do much good for my position.”

“I forgive you. What position?”

“I should very much like it if you would do me the honor of being my wife. I would love nothing more than to be your husband.”

“I suppose that is a good enough reason as I have ever heard for stopping a carriage in the middle of the road.”

“I have been falling in love with you for quite some time,” he said sincerely. He took her hand in his and gently placed a kiss on her palm.

Her breath caught. “Have you?”

He still held her hand and looked deeply into her eyes. “I have.” He lifted his other hand and softly caressed her cheek.

His touch sent warm tingles down her skin. She took a shallow breath. “What a wonderful coincidence. I have been falling in love with you for quite some time as well.”

His intense gaze stayed on hers, then dropped to her lips. “There is something I have wanted to do again since meeting you under the secrecy of masks.”

She smiled, granting him the permission he was seeking, and he lowered his head, his lips covering hers. Her lips tingled from the pressure, and felt the comfort of being held with a gentle tenderness. “I think I prefer kissing you without the mask,” she said.

Robert brushed an errant curl away from her cheek and tucked it behind her ear. “I could not agree more.” Then he bent down to kiss her again, this time with a greater passion than before.

Cassandra wrapped her arms around his neck as he pulled her closer to him. Time seemed to stand still. A rush of emotions came in every direction toward her all at once. The sadness and the heartache melted away into the breeze, replaced by the love and tenderness. Robert loved her. And she loved him.

They broke the kiss, both breathing heavier than before. “I believe we have an audience,” he said.

She looked around. Her brothers were discreetly looking in a different direction, but she could see Lizzie’s face peering out the window of the carriage. “That is what happens when you stop a carriage on the road. But I am not complaining. I have a feeling we will have many adventures together.”

“I like the sound of together.”

“As do I.” She brushed her lips against his once more. “We should tell my family the happy news.” She wrapped her arm through his and headed to the carriage, her heart happy, and her world so completely changed from what it had been this morning. She shook her head. “And to think I thought you a thief.”

He covered her hand with his, pulling her close to him. “I daresay, I am quite glad you did not turn me in that night in your brother’s library.”

“Ah, you were not the thief then, but you might be one now.”

He stopped walking and turned to her. “Me? Never.”

“It is true. You have stolen my heart.”

He lifted her hand and placed another kiss on her palm. “That cannot be helped. But you have stolen mine too, so perhaps we are even.”

EPILOGUE

KENT - THREE MONTHS LATER



Lady Cassandra Cavendish, Marchioness of Pembroke, stood at her husband's side two months after they were married.

She wrapped her shawl tighter around her as the salty evening breeze came off the sea. She rested her head on her husband's shoulder, watching the horizon. "Is that the ship?"

Robert put an arm around her. "It is hard to say at his distance, but I hope so."

"I look forward to meeting your parents, Robert. I hope they like me."

He placed a small kiss into her hair, the gesture immediately calming her. "They are going to love you, my darling Cassandra."

"I am so glad we made it back in time to welcome them home."

"As am I, my love," Robert said softly.

They had taken a wedding trip to the Lake District, and then they had traveled to her childhood home Cheshire Park. They had spent time with her family until news came that a ship carrying something very particular was en route. They

had changed horses often and had traveled with great speed all the way back from Macclesfield.

Soon Rosalie, Jeremy, and Robert's uncle and aunt were standing near the dock as well. Anticipation hummed in the air as the ship continued to move closer to the shore. All at once, the ship was docked, and there was commotion everywhere.

A man dressed plainly in a sailor's uniform who could not have been older than Robert disembarked first. He bowed to them, but as he approached, his eyes seemed to take in each person on the dock, as if he were looking for danger.

"Lord Pembroke, I presume," the man said in a heavy Italian accent.

"I am Lord Pembroke," Robert said. "Who are you to address me?"

The man smiled widely, showing all of his teeth, and held out his hand. "I am Antonio. Your father guessed you might wonder at the reception. I have never met you before and needed to be aware of who was waiting on shore." He whistled, and more people disembarked. Antonio gave orders rapidly in Italian, then turned back to the group. "Have you a carriage ready?"

"Yes, just beyond the tree." Robert pointed into the darkness.

"How are my parents?" Rosalie asked, her voice a tremble in the air. She had only learned that her parents were alive a few hours ago, and she had been in a state of shock since.

Antonio smiled at Rosalie, took her hand, and kissed it. "You look the very picture of your mother, Lady Rosalie. Your parents are well. They will be cloaked until we get to your home, but they are well. I shall go and retrieve them from the

ship myself.” He boarded the ship, and a few minutes later, Antonio disembarked for the second time along with two other cloaked figures.

“We must not talk here,” Antonio warned.

With great speed, everyone moved toward the carriages, while the crew busied themselves about the ship.

Once they arrived at Chateau Le Mer, there was a flurry of embraces, smiles, and tears. Robert introduced Cassandra to his parents, both of them wrapping her up in a warm embrace.

“You have no idea how good it is to have you home,” Robert said, his words full of emotion.

His father hugged him. “It is good to be home, if only for a few hours.”

“A few hours. What do you mean?”

His father looked at Harold. “Did you not explain the situation?” he asked his brother.

Harold shook his head. “I was not sure how to.”

“Robert, Cassandra, Rosalie. Your mother and I cannot stay here. We came at great risk to see you.”

“And we are so thankful we were able to meet you, Cassandra. I can tell that you have made my son very happy.”

Cassandra smiled. “Thank you, Lady Pembroke.”

She smiled. “I do not go by that name anymore. The titles belong to you and Robert now.”

“But you are back. You can be reintroduced into Society —”

His father shook his head. “That is not possible, Robert. At least not at the present time. There is still too much at stake.

And your mother and I are helping with this effort. We cannot come back and be a target.”

Rosalie ran to her mother and embraced her tightly, speaking rapidly in French. “I do not wish to be separated from you again.”

“My beautiful Rose, it is only until the war is over. I pray it will not last much longer.”

“Then I want to come with you,” Rosalie said. “Please. Take me with you.”

“It is much too dangerous,” her parents both said at once.

Rosalie raised her chin. “I have lived through danger here. And I want to be with you. Where are you going?”

“We will not be able to give our exact location, but Antonio has a place in mind in his country that we will stay for a time.”

Rosalie’s eyes filled with tears. “Please let me come with you. I cannot be separated from you again.”

Her parents exchanged a glance, then her father nodded. “Very well, Rosalie. You are determined, and I would rather know that you are coming, instead of finding out that you have stowed away.” He gave her a pointed look, but smiled.

Rosalie wiped the tears from her eyes. “That was only one time, Papa. And I was eight.”

“And you about gave me a heart attack in the process.”

“I promise I will not do that again. As long as you let me come.”

“Very well. There is not much time. We will leave when the tide goes out.”

“That is hardly any time at all,” Robert said.

“It is what we can do. When the war is over, things will be different. Perhaps you and Cassandra will come visit us, and hopefully after the war, we may return to life in Society.”

Hours later, the party was still assembled, dining together and talking about many of the things that had happened since Robert and Cassandra had met. The time slipped by too quickly and soon they were saying their farewells at the door. Once again, tears, embraces, and smiles were exchanged.

Finally, Antonio stood before Robert. He bowed with a grace that looked almost regal. “Do not worry about your parents. Or for your sister. I shall take care of them like they were my own family.”

Robert nodded. “Thank you, Antonio.”

“It is my pleasure, Lord Pembroke. I shall write to you every now and again. I have ways of getting messages securely to England, even while war rages. Your family will be protected.”

Cassandra put her arm around Robert’s waist as they watched the carriages head down toward the docks. “I shall miss all of them. Very dearly. I had not expected that they would leave so soon.”

“Nor I. But I think it was wisdom on my uncle’s part not to tell us ahead of time. I do not think I would have handled it well.”

“At least we were able to visit for a short time together.”

Robert led his wife back through the front doors of their house. “Have you given more thought to how we should introduce you to everyone in the neighborhood? A ball, perhaps?”

She turned to her husband and kissed him. “A ball sounds absolutely enchanting. You have a beautiful estate for such an event.”

Robert pulled her in closer. “I believe you mean *we* have a beautiful estate. This is your home now too, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I like that sound of that,” she said. She lifted a shoulder slightly, her mouth turned up in a radiant smile. “And perhaps we should make it a Masquerade.”



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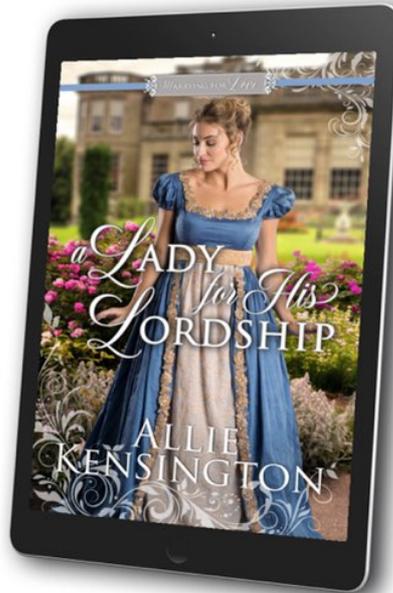
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Cheers!



ABOUT ALLIE KENSINGTON



Once upon a time Allie fell in love, quite by accident. She was blinded by a deep friendship, which happened to be the perfect recipe for a love match to grow right under her nose, without her noticing.

The Regency era speaks to her with its rules, etiquette, and charm. Of course, the top hats and cravats are sure winners. She can quote the BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* with 98% accuracy, plays the pianoforte with moderate proficiency, and has an affinity for the beneficial exercise of walking.

Allie is a famous author—*at least in her own home*—where her very own Mr. Darcy dotes on her and where their children play without the supervision of a governess.



Allie loves to connect with her readers! (It makes the long hours of typing in isolation worth it!).



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