

A man and a woman in 18th-century attire are embracing in a garden at sunset. The man is wearing a dark coat and a tan waistcoat, while the woman is wearing a purple dress. The background shows a garden with trees and a path.

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Lost Fortunes,
Found Love

A DREADFUL SECRET

ROSE PEARSON

A DREADFUL SECRET: A
REGENCY ROMANCE

LOST FORTUNES, FOUND LOVE (BOOK 4)

ROSE PEARSON

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A DREADFUL SECRET

PROLOGUE

“*A*re you ready, Miss Shaw?”

Tara lifted her head, her whole body trembling. She had no wish to do this, no desire to be the one forced into such an action, but she had no other choice. Her hands curled together, her fingers cold and clammy. She wanted to say no. She wanted to tell him that she could not do this, but even if she had the courage to do so, Tara was already aware of what the response would be. She would be reminded of her duties, told again what she had promised, and that she had no other choice but to do so.

“Ah...”

“Are you ready? You know what is required of you.” The insistence in his voice was greater this time, and Tara dropped her head as the man loomed over her. The next moment, hot breath brushed across her cheek, something rough coming straight after and she recoiled from him. “Miss Shaw. I will not ask you again.” Overwhelmed by his intimidation, Tara forced her head to nod. Nausea rose within her as she got to her feet. Had she actually eaten anything, she might be in danger of casting up her accounts, but she had barely touched her food all day. “Hurry then.”

“I... I do not think that I can do this.”

Her voice was weak and shaking as she struggled to put one foot in front of the other. Everything in her told her to sit back down, to refuse to do what she had promised, but there could be no escape for her now.

“And yet you must. You know what is at stake if you do not.”

Tara closed her eyes, shuddering at the reminder. She could not let it come to pass for she would never forgive herself if, by her failures, such a thing occurred. It was out of love that she had made this promise, and it was love that would keep her going.

“Yes...”

“Then, if you are aware of the situation, are you now to join me or are you to remain where you are?”

“I... I will join you.”

Her lifeless words brought a light chuckle from the man before her, and Tara shuddered violently.

“You have a good deal more sense than I expected,” he told her. “It will be over very soon. You recall what you are to do?”

“Yes, I recall it.”

Nausea roiled in her stomach again, but Tara dragged in a steadying breath, forcing herself to walk forward to make her way out of the room. She went along the hallway, which was lit only with one candle, and stepped into another room, the door of which was propped open for her. Bawdy laughter echoed up towards her just as a hand settled on her shoulder, and Tara caught her breath, biting back a shocked exclamation.

“You will do very well, I am sure. No one will know who you are. No one will recognize your face. I can promise you that.”

Tara nodded but said nothing. If she were truthful, she would tell the man that she had no assurance as to whether or not she could trust him but, fearing what would happen if she did so, she could not bring herself to say those words.

“It will be over within the hour. And then you will return to your father’s house, and you will be quite contented, I assure you. No one but I will know of your hand in this.”

“But I do not even know your real name.” Turning her head, she tried to look up at the man, but his features, cloaked by the mask he had worn throughout, were also half hidden in shadow. “How can I be sure of your word if I do not even know with whom I am speaking?”

Another chuckle ran down through her bones and she closed her eyes. This was not what she had wanted, not what she had planned. She had been meant to come to London to enjoy the Season and all the joy it would bring. Instead, she found herself caught up in the darkest of situations, and the man before her was one of the cruelest gentlemen she had ever met. He was not a considerate sort and had given her no choice *but* to do as he demanded, no doubt knowing that the consequences were much too great for her to refuse.

“It is just as well that you do not know my face, nor my true title,” came the response. “When we stand up together in society, you shall have no concerns as to who you are dancing with. I will know who you are, certainly, but I am a man inclined towards keeping secrets. You need have no fear in that regard.”

“These are all just words,” Tara replied, rallying her courage a little. “You say that you are a gentleman of honor, but I do not know that. In fact, your behavior speaks entirely otherwise. How can I believe you?”

“I suppose you cannot.” This did not seem to perturb the gentleman at all, for his hand squeezed her shoulder and Tara forced herself not to pull away, even though her instinct was to recoil. It might make him deeply upset with her if she did, and that could bring further consequences with it. “You are required to trust me, Miss Shaw, but I need not prove myself to you. That must be a difficult thing for you, given that you do not know who I am, but have I not proven myself thus far? I have kept my word, have I not?” Tara closed her eyes. There was a hint of mockery in the man’s voice. Yes, of course, he had kept his word, but that had only been because Tara had promised to do as he had required of her. Had she refused, then she was quite certain that the situation would now be very different. “Believe me when I say that I have no intention of

revealing myself to anyone. It is not just from you that I hide my face. No one can know of my situation here at present, just as they must never know of yours either. It is in my best interests for you to remain as you are at present, not knowing who I am. Provided you do as you have been instructed, then all will be well. You will be able to return to society and continue on as you have been doing for so very long. This is your third Season now, is it not?"

Tara let out a slow breath, closing her eyes and refusing to let the way her heart jumped about her chest show in even a flicker of her expression. Yes, it was gloomy and dark in this room, but that did not mean that the man could not see her face since he was so close to her.

"It seems a little unfair that you should know so much about me, and I so little about you, sir," she responded, keeping the tremble from her voice with a great deal of effort. "Yes, this is my third Season. What of it?"

The man chuckled.

"There is no need to be defensive. I have had to discover what I can about you, that is only fair. For it was important to me to discover whether or not you could be trusted before I made you this proposition. I am glad to see that it appears you are entirely trustworthy, which is why I know that you will do exactly as I ask, and that you will do so without hesitation." Steel had come into his voice and Tara closed her eyes. She could not escape this. She could not escape *him*. What he had laid out for her had to be done, or else the consequences would fall firmly down upon her shoulders and on those that she loved. "I believe you have a kind heart, Miss Shaw," the man continued as she opened her eyes and dragged air into her burning lungs. "That will not aid you here. It is because of your generous nature that you find yourself in this position. However, you must give no warning to the gentleman who comes across your path. You must say nothing to him about the reasons for your presence here this evening. In short, you must do nothing that would give yourself away. Do as you have been instructed, and all will be well... at least, for you."

His hand tightened on her shoulder and forced her forward towards the bed in the corner of the room, barely visible as moonlight streamed through the small, cracked windowpane. Tara wanted to scream, wanted to beg to be free of it all, but the consequence of doing so reared its head in her mind and she forced her steps forward.

I have no other choice. I must do this. Closing her eyes, she drew in another lungful of air, but it only made her nervousness grow all the more. *Even though I am about to do wrong, I am doing what is right.*

The gentleman's fingers tightened on her shoulder for a moment, as he sat her down on the bed, before lifting his hand and chuckling quietly. He was callousness itself, she was sure. To step away from him and his demands would cause nothing but trouble, and she could not permit that. Lifting her chin, she straightened her shoulders and stared straight ahead, not lifting her gaze to him but trying to gain a little strength.

There was no turning back now.

CHAPTER ONE

James buried his head in his hands. What was he doing here? He could not remember anything about the previous night. His head ached and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to push the pain away. How was it that he could not even recall where he was?

And where are my clothes?

Opening his eyes again, he looked around the room, but it was mostly dark, and he could not see anything that belonged to him. His signet ring was gone, his watch also absent. Where precisely was he? And why were his things gone? He was not the sort of gentleman who often engaged in behaviors that might lead to a situation like this, and therefore to awaken and find himself without clothes, and without knowledge of where he was, or *why* he was here, was most disconcerting. The pain in his head did not make the situation easier either. He could barely begin one thought before it would grow so steadily that it would push all sense from his head. He simply could not think clearly.

“Ah, you have awakened.”

James looked up, but there was nothing for him to see. The room was just as dark as it had been before, and whoever it was that had entered, he could not see their face, but only a mere shadow moving towards him.

“Who are you?” His gruff voice huffed out the words. “Where am I?”

“You mean to say that you do not remember?”

The voice was soft, telling James that he was in the company of a woman. Heat burned in his face as he yanked the sheet from the bed around himself. This should not be! He had never darkened the door of a brothel before. He would certainly not have done so last evening, whether or not he had been in his cups - for he had drunk more than his fair share of brandies on previous occasions and had never once thought to take a wench into his arms. It went against everything he had vowed on the day he had claimed the title, and James was quite certain he would not have done such a thing now.

“Where are my things?”

A hand clasped his shoulder and James jumped, startled. The lady’s hand was cold, her fingernails a little sharp as they pressed into his shoulder.

“You gave me your things, my Lord.”

“That is nonsense.” Gripping her wrist suddenly with his other hand, he shifted a little more, twisting himself around, refusing to stand up, but still able to show her the strength of his arm. “I know you are not telling the truth. I would never have come to a place like this.”

“And yet, you did,” came the soft response.

James opened his mouth to argue, but then closed it again, refusing to say anything about his vow and his father, for arguing with her about his presence here was quite foolish. There was no purpose in doing so, and certainly, nothing to be gained.

“Where are my things?” Speaking a little more brusquely, he squeezed his hand around her fingers. “Return them to me at once. I have every intention of departing from this place immediately.”

“But you have not paid me, my Lord. And given that you are not the first gentleman to refuse to do so, I thought to take hold of your things until I could be certain that payment was made.”

“Pay?” James repeated, his eyes flaring suddenly. “Do you mean to say that I...?”

“That is precisely what I mean, my Lord.” Was it just his imagination, or was there a slightly teasing tone in her voice? “But all enjoyment must be paid for... at least in this end of town.”

“This end of town?” His hand yanked her around the bed to face him a little more, although he did not rise from where he sat so that the sheet might still cover him as much as possible. “Where precisely am I?”

The teasing note was gone from the lady’s voice.

“You are in the East End, my Lord. Do you not recall coming here?”

“I certainly do not,” James spat, his eyes closing. “I would never have come here of my own accord. Who brought me here?”

There was a moment of hesitation.

“No one, my Lord. I assure you, you came here of your own free will.”

James shook his head, refusing to believe it.

“Never. I would never have come to a place like this.”

“But you did.”

“No.” His growl was ferocious, and the woman made to step back, but he clung to her hand all the more. “When I gained my title. I swore to myself that I would be nothing like my father was.” His intention had been to remain quite silent on this matter, but his urge to tell her everything simply grew all the more. Somehow, there had to be some mistake, and the determination to defend himself grew steadily. “I would never have come here willingly. I know myself well enough for that.” There was a moment of silence before James continued. “I swore that I would not be the man he was. That is why I know I would never have come to a place like this: my determination is much too great. So I shall ask you again, who brought me here?”

“My Lord, I... I know nothing.”

Her voice was shaking now, and James dropped his head, biting down hard on the inside of his cheek. Of course, this young woman would know nothing. If it truly was as she said, then he would have been in this room *before* she had been sent to him. He could not expect her to know anything, and yet all the same, he refused to believe that he had spent a few hours enjoying her company. He never would have allowed himself to do such a thing, regardless of how much he had drunk, or how much he had taken in.

Something was very wrong.

“I need my clothes.” He did not release her hand. “I need them returned to me. Fetch them at once.”

“I cannot, my Lord. I am not allowed to do that.”

“And why not?”

“Because I must first be assured of your payment. I am not to bring such things to you unless you give the payment first.”

James gritted his teeth. He did not want to give anything to this woman, did not want to even admit that he was here, and that there *might* be even the smallest chance that he had done what she suggested. To admit that would mean paying her what she believed she was owed. But if he refused to pay, then he would find himself lingering in this situation for a long time. What would happen to him next?

“And how can I pay you anything if you do not give me my things?”

“Perhaps you might give me a vowel?”

James blinked.

“Does that not mean that you will send a request for payment to my house shortly afterwards?”

“No, my Lord. I will make sure that such a thing does not happen. If you sign this vowel, then it will be on your honor that you return to pay the debt.”

“I could simply scribble you something as a debt of honor.”

The young lady hesitated.

“I believe my master has a vowel already written for you, my Lord.”

James closed his eyes.

“I see.” No doubt a place like this had a Jerusalem room, where those knowledgeable in such things would write out legal debts for himself – and other more unfortunate gentlemen – complete with a legal stamp of enforcement. He would have to pay the debt regardless of his feelings on the matter. He lowered his head, his shoulders rounding. There was nothing for him to do but to agree. “And once I have signed this vowel, you will give me back my things?”

Her breath brushed across his cheek, making him start with surprise. Just how close to him was she standing?

“Yes, immediately.”

He heard the sound of something being unfolded, and James quickly realized it was the vowel he was expected to sign. They had obviously worked quickly, eager to make certain that he could not escape without paying it. Shame burned in his cheeks as he considered what it was that she was asking him to pay for. This was certainly not the sort of thing that the gentleman he believed himself to be would do, and James struggled with the sudden fear that he had been as foolish as to give into a carnal desire with a wench, even though he had sworn to himself that he would never set foot into such a place as this.

I cannot let myself believe that I have done so. There must be some mistake.

“By signing this, I admit to nothing.”

“Here, my Lord.”

Her hands were soft as they touched his. A quill was pressed into one hand and the paper into the other. After a moment the hiss of a match lighting caught the air and the faint glow of a candle illuminated the paper. James had no other choice but to sign it and, with a tightness to his jaw, James forced himself to do so. That paper would promise to

pay this young lady or the establishment the money which was supposedly owed for the time he had spent with her. Shame rose within him, but he closed his eyes as he handed it back to her.

I did not do this, he told himself silently. I cannot allow myself to believe that I did.

“Is that all?”

His brusque tone seemed to startle the young lady, for she caught her breath. James did not have much within him to care. He had not so much as glanced at her in the last few minutes.

“Yes, my Lord.”

A slight frown flickered across James’s brow as he heard what sounded like sorrow sweeping through her voice. It was as though by signing this, he had brought a great heaviness to her soul. That was not something he could comprehend, for surely, she would be very glad indeed that he had done as she requested? What else then could be the cause of her dissatisfaction?

“What is your name?”

Given her gasp of surprise, it was clear that James had surprised her as well as himself. What cause had he to ask her anything of the sort? It was not as though he cared for the wench.

“My name?” Her voice wobbled. “Why should you care for my name?”

James could not answer her, and the silence stretched out between them. The young woman seemed all the more disinclined to answer his question, for she did not give him any further word. Clearing his throat, James tipped his head, wishing that he could see her face. The candle gave only the smallest amount of light, and he could not garner even the smallest hint of her features.

“It is best in this situation, my Lord, to keep our names private.”

Shrugging, and embarrassed that he had found himself in such a situation, James made to stand up, only to remember that he had no clothes.

“Of course. My clothes, if you please, *and* I should like a copy of that vowel. I assume you will make a record of it.”

“The copy of the vowel will be sent to your home, my Lord. There is no need to concern yourself.”

Her words were spoken quickly, as though she was desperate to have them all said before he could make any further argument.

“I should like to take it with me,” James replied. “You can be sure that I am sincere in saying that I will pay it just as soon as I can. Therefore, I am quite certain that you will be sure to return my things – including the copy of my vowel - to me, just as soon as you are able. It is only that I much prefer to remain abreast of all of my circumstances, be they pleasant or otherwise.”

“As I have said, my Lord, the copy of the vowel will be sent to your home within the hour. If there is any cause for dissatisfaction, my employer will come to speak with you immediately.”

Opening his mouth, James was about to question this situation, aware of his growing dissatisfaction, only to close it again. Arguing would do nothing. The best thing for him to do in this present situation would be to make his way out of this house. Then, at least, he would be able to free himself from the embarrassment of his present circumstances. If there were any difficulties with his vowel or the like, then he could deal with them at a later date. For the moment, it would be best for him to return home as quickly as possible.

“My clothes and my personal items then, if you please.”

Keeping his tone sharp, he pulled the sheet a little tighter around his waist, lifting his eyes to hers in an attempt to make out her features more clearly.

“At once, my Lord.”

The tension in her voice had faded to a heaviness that he could not quite understand. Why was she not pleased that he was giving her all that she had requested and required?

“Is there something wrong?”

It was a very strange thing to ask, given his current situation, but James could not help himself. There was something very odd about the whole thing. He was still shrouded in darkness and could not see the lady speaking to him with any clarity. He had barely been able to see what he had been scratching out on the paper, given the single, flickering candle in the corner. The only brief glance he'd had of her was that she was slim, with large eyes, but he had not been able to make out anything more. What would he see if he looked into her face now? Then again, he considered that it was probably more than normal for young ladies in this profession to remain anxious. It must be difficult indeed to be certain of payment once the goods had already been delivered. There might well be some concern that if her actions did not gain what she had been instructed to collect. Then the consequences for her could be painful.

He did not expect to garner any sort of answer to his question. But much to his surprise, he found her fingers fumbling on his arm as if she were trying to reach out to him in the darkness, trying to comfort him in some way. Her fingers were cool on his arm, making him realize just how cold he was. To his surprise, he felt no embarrassment at his nakedness, despite his sheet. This was a business transaction after all. There was nothing personal here.

“You would be well to remove yourself from here, my Lord.”

Her voice was only a whisper, drifting close to his ear and making him shiver suddenly.

“This is not a place for gentlemen such as you.”

“And yet it appears that I have found myself here nonetheless,” he retorted. “I do not quite know how I have come to be present, but I can assure you that I will never return to this place again. I am heartily ashamed of my

behavior if it is what has brought me here. The vow I made has seemingly easily been broken.”

“You have not broken your word.” Her hand pressed lightly to his shoulder, and James caught his breath. Whatever did she mean by those words, and why was she speaking to him in such a fashion?

“How can what you say to me be true? I have found myself present in your company this evening and you have demanded payment from me. What could be the reason for that, if not because I have broken the vow which I made to myself? “

There was a moment of silence. James reached up, clasping her hand with his as it rested still on his shoulder, suddenly all the more determined to find out precisely what it was that she had been talking about.

“Lord Pottinger, I –”

Someone knocked at the door, interrupting her, and her hand lifted, pulling away from him. Too late did James’s fingers attempt to curl around hers, trying to pull her back, and he lurched forward as a sudden urgency took hold of him. As he reached out and fumbled in the darkness as she lifted her hand from his shoulder, his finger snagged on something but then quickly fell away.

“What?” he asked, his voice a hiss as he struggled to find her. “What is it that you were about to say? What was it you wanted to tell me?”

Someone rapped on the door again.

“I am coming!”

Her voice was not overly loud, but it was filled with an urgency that had James’s heart beating furiously. She was afraid. In his heart, he already knew that such a fear would keep her from speaking with him any further.

The door opened, signaled by the squeak of its hinges.

“Your things, my Lord.”

A candle flickered in the doorway as she set his things on the bed, refusing to come near him any longer.

“What were you to say?” he asked quietly, but she was already moving back towards the door and the figures clothed in shadows who stood there.

“Another candle will be brought to you in a moment.”

Another voice, a harsher voice, spoke to James, and he narrowed his eyes, trying to work out exactly who was speaking, but he could see no one. The next moment, the candle in the doorway began to fade away. The young lady picked up her own and began to walk away, leaving him to linger in the darkness James wanted to call out, wanted to demand that the young lady return to him, stating that he would be willing to pay a small fortune for her company, but the words stuck in his throat. Confusion tied itself around him, pulling his chest tight. He had no understanding of why this young lady had spoken to him in such a manner, nor what she had meant by any of what she had said. Closing his eyes, he pinched the bridge of his nose, anger and frustration flooding him.

And yet in the darkness, James was certain he heard one final whisper.

“Forgive me.”

CHAPTER TWO

Tara pressed one hand to her stomach. She was well used to fading into the background, given that this was her third Season and no gentleman had ever really looked in her direction, and yet she was still afraid that someone might see her. They might take in her pale features and her wide eyes, and be able to tell that she was riddled with guilt.

It had been a little over three weeks since that dark night, and she was still unable to forget everything which had taken place. Lord Pottinger had not returned to society, nor had he shown his face in any part of London, as far as she was aware. No doubt he was currently coming to terms with the heavy weight that she had placed over him. He would have no other choice but to pay what was demanded, or else face the wrath and mockery of society which would ruin him in more than one way.

Perhaps he had already paid it, although no doubt the amount due would have crippled him. Silently, Tara almost continually prayed that it would not be too much for him to bear. Perhaps he was a wealthier gentleman than she knew. Perhaps this would not cause him as much difficulty as she feared it might.

“Why must you always hide away?” A gentle voice made Tara start violently, so lost in her thoughts had she been that she had not even noticed her own sister coming to speak with her. “If anyone has cause to hide themselves away, then it is I.”

“Nonsense.” Trying to push away her overwhelming thoughts, Tara smiled at her sister, reaching out to squeeze her hand. “You are unused to London society and were taken in by someone who ought not to have used your naivety to his advantage. I do not blame you.”

“But you did not have to attempt to save me as you did,” came her sister’s quiet reply. “You will not speak of it with me, though.” Again, she began the line of questioning that Tara knew would only bring both disappointment and frustration. “I must know what took place, dear sister. If you are in any difficulty because of me, then –”

“And I have told you already, the gentleman does not require anything of you.” Tara smiled softly, having no desire to argue with her younger sister. “You are quite safe, as am I. Now you can go on to enjoy this Season and find yourself a most amiable husband, for I should like you to have naught but happiness, my dear.”

“I would say the very same to you,” was her sister’s response, her hazel eyes – so similar in color to Tara’s – holding steadily to hers. “I have the distinct impression that you are not telling me all of the truth about everything, that you are hiding something from me.”

“What would there be for me to hide?” Tara forced another smile, covering the lie somehow. “You need not concern yourself with this matter anymore, Mary. The only thing for you to do at present is to put all of your efforts into finding a suitable gentleman.”

Her sister sighed.

“Yes, Tara, I know.”

This time, Tara’s quiet smile was not forced. Mary had always been the beauty of the family, while she herself was a little lacking, not only in beauty, but in confidence. Her father, who had already settled his eldest son, and his eldest daughter, in matrimony, now seemed to care very little for Tara and Mary’s situations. Without a mother to care for them, it fell to Tara to make certain that Mary was given the very best of Seasons and, with any luck, would make a suitable match.

“But what have you?” Mary replied, grasping Tara’s hand. “You are on your *third* Season. You *must* wed this year, surely.”

“And as I have promised you. I will not do so until you are settled.”

This was not a decision that had been forced upon Tara, but one that she had chosen to make. It appeared to be the right one for, given what had occurred, Tara was all too aware that she would have to keep a much closer eye on her younger sister so that she would not be pulled into such an unfortunate circumstance again.

“If you are worried about me, then you need not be so.” Mary spoke as if she understood all that Tara was thinking. “I would not allow myself to be so fooled again.”

“Many gentlemen in London cannot be trusted,” Tara remarked, her lips tugging downwards. “Many are considerate and kind, however, but you must always be on your guard. Generous words and a kind smile can hide a great deal. It is better to know the gentleman’s character well before committing yourself to any sort of... furthering of your acquaintance with him.”

“Something which I have already learned!” Mary protested. “You are much too concerned for me. I will never give you cause to doubt me again.”

“Be that as it may, my decision is still the same,” Tara replied firmly. “My words are not meant to weigh you down, however, but only to encourage you to take as much time as you require when it comes to making a match. Do not simply decide on the first gentleman who wishes to call upon you, for I will not be glad about that. Any gentleman who seeks your hand must be worthy of you and indeed, must prove himself of worthy character also.”

“I understand.”

There was no smile on her face, however, and her eyes were rather solemn, looking back at Tara, as though she were

desperate to discover a way for Tara herself to find the very same happiness which she encouraged for Mary.

“I beg your pardon for interrupting your conversation.” Lord Talbert appeared beside them, smiling not at Tara, but at Mary. “It is the waltz, Miss Shaw.”

A gentle pink danced about Mary’s cheeks.

“So it is, Lord Talbert,” she answered.

Tara closed her eyes for a moment, aware that, despite what they had just spoken of, her sister was much too easily swayed by even the smallest bit of attention – which was one of the reasons behind her previous difficulties. Lord Talbert might very well be an excellent gentleman, but should he wish to court Mary, or even come to call upon her, then Tara would do everything she could to find out about his character and whether or not he would be worthy of Mary.

A sharp pang of envy ran around her heart as she watched her sister step out onto the floor with Lord Talbert. How long had it been since she had been in the company of a gentleman? How long since she had been asked to dance?

Much too long. I cannot even recall what it feels like to take a gentleman’s arm.

A sudden forceful memory of how she had settled a hand on Lord Pottinger’s shoulder that dark night encompassed her mind. Fire built in her face, and she turned her gaze away for fear that someone would notice her red cheeks and wonder at them. The last thing Tara wished for was to bring attention to herself. Her eyes closed for a moment as mortification ran through her. That despicable gentleman, the one who had forced her hand, knew all that she had done, and she lived in great fear that he might choose to reveal it and, if he did so, she would be quite ruined.

There is no reason for him to do such a thing, for he has already used me for his own purposes.

There would be no reason for him to mortify her all over again, she told herself silently. No reason at all.

My duty is done. Mary is safe. I need not to think about this any longer.

“Did you hear about Lord Pottinger?”

Tara jumped visibly as a voice caught her ears. Two ladies were standing to her left, their heads close together. They were not speaking to her, of course, but to each other, making no effort to lower their voice.

“What of him?”

Despite her determination to put the entire situation from her mind, including the gentleman himself, Tara could not help but listen, her ears straining to pick up every word.

“He has returned to society! He was seen only yesterday.”

The second young lady twisted her head around to look at the first, who nodded fervently.

“Has he now? That was a very strange absence, was it not?”

“I suppose it could be considered a little odd, yes,” came the reply. “For to come to London and then to depart again so swiftly, only to return some weeks later without explanation, is a little unusual.”

“More than a little!” The second young lady laughed and shook her head. “He is one of the most eligible gentlemen in all of London, and I am sure that a great many of us will be delighted to see him again.”

“And do you include yourself in that?”

A slightly shy giggle came to Tara’s ears.

“Perhaps, although I would admit it to none other than you.”

“I cannot blame you. I suppose,” her friend replied as Tara closed her eyes. “Anyone would be lucky to be in company with Lord Pottinger. I do not think he has ever courted any young lady, however.”

“And that is what makes him all the more desirable,” giggled the second. “I do look forward to seeing him again in

the hope that I shall be able to encourage him towards me a little more. Perhaps that is why he has returned! Perhaps he has decided to seek out a bride after all.”

They moved away and Tara was left with a burden of guilt settling upon her shoulders. Lord Pottinger could not possibly have returned to find himself a bride. She knew precisely what it was that she had made him sign. She had not wanted to but there had been no other choice... her hand had been forced, just as she had forced his. And now Lord Pottinger would be in a pit of great despair. He would not be able to find himself a bride, not when he had very little money left.

Then why has he returned?

Shaking her head to herself, Tara let out a slow breath in an attempt to remove the wriggling anxiety from her stomach. She had no reason to involve herself in Lord Pottinger’s affairs - she had done more than enough already. At least there was very little chance of him recognizing her, not only because she was akin to a wallflower, but also because the darkness had hidden her face from him that night. She realized that she had never clearly seen the gentleman, for she had not been able to look into his face as he had been brought into that room. That was not because of the lack of light – for there had been a good many candles when he was being placed on the bed, but rather because her shame had been too great. It was more than just his wealth she had stolen, she realized. Yes, his coin was greatly diminished, but in doing what she had done, she had stolen his future from him. No longer would he be able to wander through society with everyone eager for his conversation and his company. Once they discovered the truth about him, they would do nothing but push him away.

“I am sorry,” she murmured to herself softly, as though, somehow, he was able to hear her. “I am so very sorry.”



“I DO hope Lord Talbert will join us soon.”

Tara resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“My dear sister, you must not be so eager. You danced with Lord Talbert only two days ago and he has come to call upon you once since then. I am certain that he will be eager to seek out your company, of course, but pray do not think that he will be the *only* gentleman who will do so - and certainly do not give the impression that he is the only gentleman you wish to speak with.”

“But he is a most admirable gentleman, is he not?”

“I am certain that he is, but that does not mean that you must pursue him. If he is desirous of your company, then he will seek you out. You must do all you can not to appear overeager,” Tara warned, a little concerned that her sister was not listening to her. “You do not know the gentleman particularly well.”

“Which is precisely why I must spend a good deal more time with him,” came the rather sharp reply as Mary swiveled her head around, in evident search of him. “He is very handsome and *clearly* keen to spend time with me.”

“Be that as it may, you must still be cautious. I will speak to a few of my acquaintances and discover more about Lord Talbert. If he approaches you and wishes to spend a little more time with you, then by all means speak with him. But do not let your heart yearn for him - it is much too soon for that. Find out more about him first, discover whether he is truly worthy and if his character is of an amiable sort. You must realize, my dear sister, that marriage is an everlasting situation. You cannot simply march into it believing that you know someone well, when in truth you do not.”

Her sister let out a heavy sigh but eventually gave a small nod.

“You are warning me to be careful, which I accept. After all, I have put you through, I quite understand your concerns.”

Allowing herself a small breath of relief. Tara gave her sister a quick smile.

“Thank you. I am sure that this soirée will be most enjoyable, regardless of whether or not Lord Talbert arrives.”

Her sister stepped closer and linked arms with Tara.

“Mayhap you might consider also making your way into conversation with someone other than the other wallflowers?” she put to Tara, one eyebrow lifting gently. “There is no reason for you not to engage yourself in company, and there are certainly a good many people here who I am sure would be very glad to make your acquaintance.”

“I *do* engage myself in company,” Tara protested, weakly. “It may not be as much company as you enjoy, but I still do have a few acquaintances.”

The conversation was cut short as Mary suddenly grasped Tara’s arm all the tighter.

“Look!”

Tara blinked in surprise at her sister’s sudden exclamation, turning around to look in the same direction as Mary. The only thing she saw was a broad-shouldered, distinguished fellow coming into the room, led forward by their host for the evening soiree, Lord Bannister. She considered him, a little surprised at the sudden rush of heat which began at her toes and then swept upwards through her.

Their eyes suddenly met and, despite the strangeness of the moment, Tara found herself smiling. The man’s lips quirked, and his eyes sparkled as they continued to look at one another. And then he was forced to turn away as his host said something, leaving Tara to return her attention to her sister, a smile still present on her lips. She had never felt such a thing before and to be so suddenly aware of that gentleman, to have her heart beat a little quicker and her body warm itself in such an odd fashion was very strange indeed, although it was not a sensation that Tara disliked!

“You saw him then?”

Tara nodded.

“I did. What about him is important?”

“Did you not hear?” Mary released Tara’s arm and clasped both of her hands together. “I am certain that they just

announced the arrival of Lord Pottinger! I have heard so very much about him, have not you?"

In an instant, every single bit of happiness she had felt shriveled up and blew away as Tara looked first at her sister, and then across the room to where the gentleman now stood.

"I do not – I have not heard much about him," she answered as her sister threw up her hands and let out such an exclamation so loud that Tara's face burned with embarrassment, and she turned away a little.

"How can you not know of him? All of society has been speaking of Lord Pottinger's return! Apparently, he is one of the most eligible gentlemen in all of London for, whilst he is a Viscount, he is known to be extremely wealthy and owns a great deal of land and property. He has been gone for some weeks and no one knows why he left society and now, why he has returned so quickly. I am certain that there must be a reason for it, however."

"That does not mean that you have to be the one to find it."

Mary laughed.

"Indeed not, but can you imagine if *I* was the one to capture the heart of Lord Pottinger?" Her sister clasped her hands together, letting out a sigh of evident contentedness. "That would be extraordinary!"

"And yet it is not something that you ought to set your sights on. Wealth does not matter as much as his suitability." Turning her face directly away from Lord Pottinger, Tara forced a smile in her sister's direction, suddenly desperate to step away as quickly as she could from the gentleman. The last thing she required was for her sister to make introductions which would lead to her being acquainted with the very person she had stolen from.

"Come, let us go in search of Lord Talbert. Perhaps he has already arrived, and we are not aware of it as yet."

Her sister's eyes flew wide, and she made to smile only for concern to flicker across her brow.

“But only a few moments ago, you were discouraging me from him. I do not understand the sudden change.”

Tara forced a smile and shrugged, searching for any excuse which would come to her lips.

“Perhaps I was overly harsh in my response to you, my dear,” she replied as her sister immediately began to beam. “I am concerned for you, that is all. But perhaps I should give Lord Talbert an opportunity to prove himself before I make any particular judgments.”

“That would be most pleasing,” her sister replied softly. “Thank you - although might I say you also look very pleasing this afternoon. I must hope that Lord Talbert will not become distracted by your beauty also!”

Tara laughed and shook her head, relieved that she had been able to pull her sister away so quickly.

“Now I know you are attempting to flatter me, but there is no need for you to do so, I assure you.”

“I am speaking quite truthfully!” Mary protested, appearing a little hurt as her shoulders dropped and her frown grew. “I would not speak ill of you, nor would I lie about such things. You do look very pleasing this evening, although I am a little surprised that your pendant necklace is not about your neck, as it usually is.”

“My pendant necklace,” Tara repeated suddenly, scrabbling for it around her neck. It was something she always wore, something that had belonged to her mother and was the only thing she had of her that remained hers. She very rarely removed it.

“Come to think of it, I do not recall the last time I saw you wearing that particular item,” her sister continued as Tara struggled to find any sort of response. “What has happened to it? I know it is very dear to you.”

Fire burned in her throat and Tara could not answer. The truth was, she had no idea where her mother’s pendant might now be. She had not even noticed its absence, but then again, she had been so distracted and quite frankly terrified, about all

that had taken place, that it did not come as any surprise to her that she had been unaware that it was gone.

“I am sure it will be at home somewhere,” she said, without truly feeling the confidence that she spoke with. “The Season has brought a great many changes and I have found myself a little distracted, I confess.”

This seemed to satisfy her sister, who nodded and then immediately began to speak of something else whilst Tara’s thoughts remained solely on where her necklace might be. She could not remember the last time she had removed it from her neck. It was so very precious to her that it would be most unusual for her to remove it from her person, and then not recall where she had placed it.

The memory of Lord Pottinger’s hands reaching for her, grasping for her in the darkness came flooding back into her mind and she caught her breath. A deep and sudden fear tore through her - could it be? Was there any chance that Lord Pottinger had wrenched it from her without realizing what he had done? Was her pendant necklace now in the hands of Lord Pottinger? Did he hold onto it now, looking at it, wondering how he could use it to find the lady responsible for so much of his pain and distress? Perhaps he had returned already to that dark and dangerous house in search of her. What would have been said to him about that night?

Her breathing was coming so quickly now that it was not until her sister said her name that she realized just how distressed she had become. Forcing a smile and entirely unaware of what her sister had said, Tara tried her best to overcome her fear. Most likely her pendant was simply misplaced, even though she had never misplaced it in the course of her life thus far. But then again, these last few weeks had been nothing if not extraordinary.

It must be somewhere at home. And when I have discovered it, I will remind myself of this moment, telling myself how foolish I would have been to have lost it more completely.

Swallowing her fears, she dared a glance over her shoulder to where Lord Pottinger still stood. As if he knew that she would be looking at him, he also turned his head and for a brief moment their gaze met. That strange warmth began to rise in her again, only for guilt and fear to capture it, making the air seem thick and difficult to breathe.

Surely he had not recognized her? There was very little chance that he had done so, but if he had, then that would mean the end of everything, not only for herself, but for her sister also.

It was almost too much to bear.

CHAPTER THREE

“*T*he only reason I am here is because of your encouragement.” Shaking his head, James passed one hand over his eyes. “I am still not altogether convinced that it was the best idea to return to London. My situation is not exactly the same as the rest of you.”

“You have lost your fortune just as the rest of us have done,” one of his friends stated, although James was quick to shake his head. “Just because you are yet to hand it over does not mean that you are not also in the same predicament as we are.”

Lifting his head, James let out a sigh and spread his hands.

“I do not see what can be done. I have only two choices before me. Either I do as I am bid and pay the vowel, which is far more than I ever expected, or I do not and face the embarrassment and disgrace which will come with everything they will soon reveal about me thereafter.”

“And what exactly would be said?”

Scowling, James did not answer Lord Stoneleigh’s question. His shame was still far too great.

“We will not think any less of you,” Lord Wiltsham put in. “We were all taken in. We were all deceived. In many ways, I feel as though I bear some of the guilt, for Lord Gillespie was my friend, and I was glad to go along with him - and yet he was the one who betrayed us all so very badly.”

Again, James shook his head.

“You do not bear any further responsibility. You are not the one who forced us there. We all chose to make our way into what now appears to be the very jaws of a lion.”

“But you will not speak of what happened to you?” Lord Stoneleigh asked as James shook his head. “I am aware that you must feel a great deal of shame, but we all do. We are here eager to help you rather than hinder you. Do you not trust us?”

James let out a slow breath before covering his eyes with one hand.

“Of course I trust you. It is only that I find this situation a little humiliating, and I am not certain that I can speak of it to anyone. You all had your fortunes taken from you during a game - gambling of some kind, whereas I found myself in a very different situation.”

“But I am sure you will be able to recover what you have lost. We have proven that it is possible thus far, have we not?” Lord Wiltsham said encouragingly. “I am certain that you will be able to find yourself in the same position as we are at present, where your fortune is regained, and your shame is gone completely. You will not have to pay this debt. There will be a way to prevent it, I am sure.”

“That is where we differ,” James returned. “I signed that vowel. I *signed* it, in the belief that I was required to do so as payment for... what might have taken place. I did not ask for the lady’s company and certainly do not recall receiving it, but payment was demanded nonetheless.” Glancing up, he saw his friends exchange a glance and scowled darkly. Sighing heavily, James passed one hand over his eyes, resigned to the fact that he was going to have to be truthful. Thus far, he had kept the entirety of the situation to himself, agreeing with his friends only that he had lost his fortune. “I shall be truthful,” he muttered, even though his mind immediately began screaming at him, demanding that he stay silent rather than reveal his mortification.

“Please, speak freely. We have no desire to shame you.”

James nodded.

“I am assured of your lack of judgment of me, whatever I may have to tell. I know that. It is only that I am so very ashamed that I find it difficult to even speak honestly about what seems to have taken place.” His two friends nodded solemnly but said nothing, waiting for him to explain. Closing his eyes and with shame burning in his face, James began. “Yes, I attended the same gambling den as you. I recall going into the place, I recall seeing you all standing there laughing. I remember going to pick up a brandy or some such thing from the counter. Thereafter, I remember very little.”

Lord Wiltsham scowled.

“That is because there was something placed within our brandies. It rendered us half senseless, I believe.”

“I am certain it was done to make us more amenable to our fortunes being stolen,” Lord Stoneleigh added. “Obviously, none of us would have put up our fortunes without a fight.” He gestured to his shoulder, then winced. “I obviously must have put up something of a struggle, even though I do not recall doing so.”

“And how is your injury?” James asked, only for Lord Stoneleigh to wave a hand.

“I am quite well. Pray continue.”

James nodded, aware that he had been trying to change the course of the discussion. Taking in a deep breath, he sat back in his chair.

“When I came to myself, I was not in the gambling den, nor was I alone. There was a young woman present, who demanded that I pay her for the services I had received.” Catching the slight lift of Lord Stoneleigh’s eyebrows, James dropped his head. “You know that I am not a gentleman inclined towards such things. I am sure, in fact, that I have spoken to you about my determination not to behave in the way my father did. That is why I am all the more ashamed to say that I woke up in the presence of a young lady of the night. She stated that I was required to pay her for what had occurred. I protested and said that I did not recall anything

which had happened, but my excuses meant nothing. She told me that I had no other choice but to give her what was owed.”

“And that is when you signed your fortune away.”

“That is when I signed what I believed was only a vowel for a minimal amount,” James admitted. “It was dark. I could barely see anything. I did not believe that it was my fortune I was giving her. The paper had already been made up and is quite legal, unfortunately.”

Lord Wiltsham shook his head.

“You were obviously chosen specifically, as you are known to be a gentleman of great wealth.”

James nodded.

“The young woman was quite insistent. There was a genuine fear in her voice when she spoke to me and despite my protests, I knew that I could do nothing. It was not as though I could claim that she was mistaken in requesting this of me.”

“Why not?”

Squeezing his eyes closed, James blew out a long breath putting his head in his hands.

“Because I was without my clothes. There was a sheet, yes, but that was all.”

Silence crossed the room, spreading from himself towards his friends. Mortified, James kept his head low, unable to look at any of them. They knew the promise he had made to himself to not be anything like his father. They would think poorly of him now.

“You must have been in a very desperate situation.” Lord Wiltsham did not sound as though he were criticizing in the least. “They would not have given your things back unless you signed this vowel, I expect.”

“Yes, that is so.” James sighed and rubbed one hand over his face before lifting his gaze. “You cannot imagine my shame. Everything I had believed about my character was gone in a moment. I realized that I was not the person I

thought myself to be. It is only now that I find myself at the end of this situation that I wonder whether or not such a thing was done deliberately.”

“Yes, of course it was!” Lord Wiltsham spread his hands, balancing his elbows on his knees. “I am not suggesting that those responsible knew anything about your own particular vow, but certainly they would have used your embarrassment and mortification for their own dark intentions. They would have made certain that you were made to feel as lowly as possible. They would have wanted to injure you, my friend. They used your mortification and shame to force your hand.”

James allowed himself a small breath.

“Be that as it may, I still did as I was instructed. I signed what I believed was a relatively small vowel. My things were returned to me, and it was only when I managed to find my way home and met with all of you that I realized what had happened. The vowel was not for some small amount as I had allowed myself to believe. Instead, it was for a very large amount. An amount that I have not paid as yet, I might add. I have no doubt that if I do not do so soon, then it will cause me great difficulty – both legally and otherwise. But at present, I cannot bring myself to do so.”

“You have not paid it?” Lord Stoneleigh’s eyes widened. “And has anything occurred because of that?”

“I have received only reminders, requiring me to pay by the end of the Season at the very latest.” James rubbed out his eyes. “Mistakenly I thought returning to my estate would hide me. It did not. They know who I am and have written to make certain that I cannot do anything to escape them. They state that I must pay what is owed and what I agreed to, or else there will be all the more difficulty for me. There is nothing specific done as yet, but I am certain it will come. There could be legal matters and all of England will, no doubt, hear of it if they choose to make it so. I would be ruined completely.”

“I have no doubt of that,” Lord Wiltsham agreed softly. “I do not speak to injure you, but warn you that these people, these men, will do whatever they must to gain what they

believe is now theirs. The men whom we have discovered thus far to be involved are very much of the callous and cruel sort. Whatever they want, they will take, regardless of how badly it will injure you.”

“Yes, I can well imagine,” James scowled. “After all that they have done thus far, it would not surprise me if they were to do more.”

“So what are your intentions?”

Lord Stoneleigh rose and made to pour brandy for them all, which James accepted with a smile of relief. It had been decidedly difficult to speak openly of all that had occurred, but he was now glad that he had done so.

“I am not yet certain. I returned to London because of the hope expressed in your letters.” Both gentlemen had written to him as well as Lord Foster. It had been on their encouragement alone that he had made his way back here. “My shame and anger had encouraged me to remain precisely where I was, but the more I have considered it, the more I have learned from you, the more I begin to realize that this situation is not of my doing.” Swirling the brandy in his glass, he fixed his gaze on it. “There is still a chance that I did not break my vow.”

“More than a chance, I would say,” Lord Wiltsham remarked, before taking a sip of his brandy. “You are a gentleman of honor. It would be most unlike you to do anything like that which you have described. You made that vow some five years ago and you have not slipped even once. I would be utterly astonished to hear if you had done so now.”

“Your confidence in me is encouraging.” James threw his friend a quick smile. “I myself... I am not so sure. Perhaps years of refusing to do such a thing led me to that weak moment when I had consumed a little too much brandy.”

“Brandy that contained something which ought not to have been there,” Lord Stoneleigh reminded him. “Well, you are returned to London at least, and we are here to be of aid to you – although Lord Wiltsham is soon to be married, so he may miss some of whatever takes place.”

Lord Wiltsham grinned.

“I believe my dear young lady’s brother was eager to push me away from the idea of marrying his sister and thus delayed our wedding for as long as he could. Now, however, he has been forced to accept that I will not be put off and therefore we are due to wed within the month. I believe we are to remain in London, however.”

“I am sure it will be a very happy occasion indeed.” Truly glad that his friends had found such happiness, James spread his hands wide, one hand still clutching the Brandy glass. “That may give me another reason to pursue this matter. Thus far, those of you who have done so have managed to find themselves very suitable and lovely young ladies, it seems.”

The lightheartedness was a relief from the previous heavy discussion.

“Yes, indeed we have.” Lord Stoneleigh shared a smile with Lord Wiltsham and James fought back the kick of a jealousy. He had thus far had plenty of opportunity to wed, but had chosen not to do so. The *ton* knew of his suitability, of his fortune, of his title, and evidently that he had a genial character and yes, he had been pursued, but his refusal to consider a bride had seemed to make him all the more pleasing. Now, however, he felt himself a fool for not having married already. The chances of him finding a suitable bride when society learned of what had happened were very slim indeed. The sudden memory of a young lady with a dark gold crown of hair smiling back at him across the room flooded his mind and his frown grew all the more. That particular lady he now knew to be Miss Shaw, but how could he ever consider even *courting* her if he had no wealth? All of society would turn from him if he were to tell them all that had happened – and that would include Miss Shaw also.

“Perhaps society need not find out.”

“We will do all we can to hide it from them.” James lifted his head sharply, not realizing that he had spoken aloud. “And I am certain that you will find someone to marry you,” Lord Stoneleigh continued. “I have spoken to the proprietor of the

red-doored gambling den where we first went. There was something about him and the way he spoke that could do with further questioning.”

James shook his head.

“There is very little point in me making my way there if I did not remain there. As embarrassed as I am, I must find my way back to that dark establishment where I awakened, and perhaps to the young lady with whom I *supposedly* spent time.”

“That is a wise consideration,” Lord Wiltsham agreed. “Do you know her name? Would you recognize her face?”

“No.” Shrugging, James threw his friends a small, rueful smile. “She would not give me her name, and because it was on the whole, almost entirely dark, I doubt I could recognize her even if she stood right beside me.”

“Then your intention is simply to make your way there and demand to speak with her?”

“Yes.” Clearing his throat, James fumbled in his pocket for a moment, then pulled out a small, delicate pendant. “I also have this. I did not realize until some minutes after the door had closed and the young lady and whoever was with her had taken their leave, but this must have been around her neck. I did not injure her in any way, nor seek to cause her pain. Rather, I simply reached out in the darkness for her.”

“Why? I would have thought you would have been eager to separate yourself from her and that situation.”

James pulled his mouth to one side as he considered Lord Wiltsham’s question.

“It was because she said something to me that I simply could not ignore. In fact, I believe that she was on the cusp of saying something even more substantive, for she spoke my name to me, only for this other fellow, whoever it was, to call her out of the room. As I reached for her, this must have caught in my hand. Under the guise of returning it to her, I will ask to speak with her again.”

“She said something to you?” Lord Wiltsham frowned as James nodded. “She spoke your name also?”

“Yes, she did both. I assumed that I had given her my name.”

“Mayhap you did, mayhap you did not.” Lord Stoneleigh murmured, looking suddenly interested, for his eyes had flared a little in surprise as James had continued speaking. “I might well be mistaken, but it is not common for gentlemen to give their names in such establishments. Not their true titles, at least.”

“What was it she said to you?” Lord Wiltsham’s interest was obvious as he sat forward, clasping his hands together. “Was it of any importance?”

“I was entirely unsure during the conversation, but upon realizing my fate, I understood what she was trying to say. She was warning me.” James shrugged his shoulders, seeing his friends exchange a glance. “She begged me to remove myself from that establishment, speaking with concern and perhaps a little conviction at her part in this scheme. Yes, she used my title and yes, there was more for her to say, but before she could do so, she was forced out of the room, commanded by that dark and shadowy voice who I no doubt now believe was the gentleman behind all that has taken place. However, if I return to that place and find her again, perhaps I can persuade her to speak openly. I have her pendant after all.”

Again, there came a short silence and James’ heart began to turn over with concern as his friends both frowned.

“That pendant does look very expensive. Might I have a closer look?” Holding out one hand, Lord Stoneleigh rose and made his way across the room to James, who quickly obliged him. Lord Stoneleigh nodded slowly as he looked over the pendant. “I believe this is, in fact, a real sapphire. A most unusual item for a lady in that sort of establishment to own.”

“And yet that was what I took from her neck,” James murmured in confusion. “I do not understand what you are suggesting.”

“I am suggesting that this lady, whoever she was, may not be found at this establishment. It may be that she was part of this scheme in a way that we have not considered thus far.”

Still a little confused, James’ frown grew.

“You mean to say that she is not a wench?”

“I would suggest it unlikely, although it may well still be as you have stated.” Lord Stoneleigh shrugged. “All that you have said makes me think that she might be involved in the scheme in a more obvious way than we have first thought. These gentlemen have shown themselves to be worthy of almost any wickedness to gain our fortunes from us. It would not surprise me if they were to use some unwilling sister, daughter, wife, or niece to their own advantage.”

“You truly believe they would do such a thing?”

Lord Wiltsham grimaced but nodded.

“Yes, of course. They are cowards at heart. The gentleman responsible for Lord Foster’s downfall fled to the continent, and the guilty fellow who stole *my* fortune is saying nothing and it is only for the love of his sister that I cannot bear to pursue him any further. The third, the one that has only just been discovered by Lord Stoneleigh, has fled back to his own estate. Pursuing him will do very little, for he can easily have us thrown from his house – although society has shunned him already. None of them are willing to say anything more. Their shame is so great that they cannot bear it. The sooner I can wed Miss Carshaw and take her to my estate, the better, for then I will never have to see her brother again, and that will be a great relief to us both.”

Blowing out a long breath, James passed one hand over his eyes, his courage failing suddenly. What hope did he have? If this young lady was not as he had thought, if she was not at the establishment, then what else was there for him to do?

“You must discover that truth first,” Lord Stoneleigh stated as if he had understood everything James had been thinking. “Continue on as you have planned. Make your way back and

search for the young lady. Use the pendant if you must, but do not be surprised if she is no longer there.”

James nodded slowly, his jaw tight.

“And what do I do if she is not? I have nothing further to go on.”

“We will consider that, should it happen,” Lord Wiltsham said, firmly. “One step at a time. In this strange darkness, that is all we can do.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“We are going to be late!” Tara threw up her hands, as her sister continued to pull items out of drawers in search of a pair of grey gloves that she simply *had* to wear that evening. “Father will be most frustrated if we are tardy.”

“Father will not care a jot.” Her sister threw back at her as she continued to search. “You know that as well as I. He will be quite contented sitting in the drawing room with a book waiting for our arrival before we make our way to the ball. Thereafter, he will make his way straight to the gentlemen’s rooms and will sit there to converse with his friends whilst you chaperone me, even though you are of eligible age.”

A little surprised at her sister’s vehemence, Tara sat down on the edge of her sister’s bed.

“Are you truly this upset about your gloves? I am certain that I have a pair that I could lend to you.”

“It is not just about the gloves.” Whirling around, Mary fixed Tara with a slightly narrowed gaze. “It is frustration with our father. It is the fact that you are having to chaperone me when you ought to be enjoying the Season as much as I. I find the disparity deeply unsettling. Of course, I will admit that I have been foolish and that you have helped me recover - and I am all too aware of everything that you have been forced to give me because of it. But I am also aware that Father is not doing his duty as regards you. Nor I, for that matter. But you have set yourself in his place for me and while I am grateful for that, there is no one to set themselves in his place for you.”

Having had no expectation that her sister would speak so, Tara merely shrugged.

“But I have never given you any cause for concern. I have not cried over my own situation. I assure you I am content.”

“And yet I know that you are not *fully* content.” Her sister flung up her hands again. “I know that you have been forced to spend your own pin money on these gloves since Father has quite forgotten to give me any, *even* though I have approached him. And once more, you are forced to step in.”

“I would not say that I was forced,” Tara began, but her sister was not quite finished.

“You give, and you give, and you *give* of yourself, and I am the one who will find happiness, not you. That does not seem fair, Tara. That is not right in my eyes, and I am not sure that I can continue to be so satisfied.”

A little confused, Tara frowned as her sister finally found the pair of gloves she had been searching for, holding them aloft, almost triumphant.

“What is it that you intend to do? I have told you that there is nothing you need to do as regards my situation. Is there something more that I can say which will help alleviate your doubts?”

“No.” Mary pulled on her gloves, then marched directly towards Tara, her expression set into such a look of seriousness that Tara’s heart quickened a little, as she became a little concerned about what her sister had planned. “Come now. Let us go to the ball.”

“Mary, wait.” Tara reached out and caught her arm, but her sister merely continued, pulling Tara with her. “If there is something you have intended, then pray, speak to me of it. I do not wish to—”

“We will be tardy,” came the short but rather brusque reply, “and we cannot keep Father waiting. Come now, sister. Let us make our way to the ball.”



IT WAS with some trepidation that Tara stepped into Lord Franklin's ballroom. Her sister was still with her, of course, but she had said not a word during the carriage ride. Tara had attempted to make some sort of conversation, but had been forced into silence due to her father's lack of interest in their conversation and Mary's stubborn determination to remain silent.

It had been precisely as Mary had predicted - the moment they stepped into the ballroom, their father quickly made his excuses and took his leave of them. This was not unexpected, but what had come as a surprise was Mary's heavy-hearted sigh and the way she shook her head.

Now, however, they found themselves arm in arm as they wandered through the ballroom, just as they usually did. Any time Tara attempted to speak to her sister, however, there came not a single word of reply. It was as though Mary was quite determined to keep her own counsel, no matter what Tara asked. It was incredibly disconcerting.

"Good evening, Mary, and to you also, Miss Shaw!"

Tara's attention was forced back to their surroundings when a voice greeted them both. She smiled quickly, just as her sister beamed back at the young lady in question. This, at least, brought a smile to Mary's face, perhaps pulling her away from thoughts of their father and his lack of consideration for them both. A little relieved, Tara allowed her sister to fall into conversation with her good friend, Miss Eleanor Duncansby whilst she took a small step back.

"I am so very glad you are here." Miss Duncansby grasped Mary's hand as Tara looked on. "Lord Talbert is in attendance, and I am certain will come to seek out your dance card in only a few moments. But you will be glad to know that Lord Pottinger has also shown his face! He has not danced yet, of course, but I am sure that he shall."

"Has he indeed?"

Mary's eyes glittered as Tara's stomach dropped. She forced a smile, glancing towards Mary and trying her best to be relieved that there was something of a distraction for her sister this evening, for if she were caught up with Lord Talbert and Lord Pottinger, then she would become distracted from whatever thoughts she had about Tara herself.

"Are you acquainted with Lord Pottinger?"

Miss Duncansby shook her head.

"Not particularly well, although we have been introduced."

"Then I am sure you would be able to introduce both myself and my sister to him, would you not?" Mary continued as Tara's eyes flared. "You know how envious I shall be of you otherwise!"

This made Miss Duncansby laugh, and she quickly promised to do so, even though Tara's stomach began to churn with a furious fear that she would soon be discovered and thereafter, denounced by all of society, given what Lord Pottinger would say of her.

"There is no need for us to be introduced, Mary," she interrupted. "You may very well be eager to be, but I cannot see a need to."

Her sister turned her hazel eyes towards Tara, a small smile drifting across her lips.

"But you know that I cannot be introduced to him without you being present."

Tara opened her mouth to protest but immediately was forced to snap it shut, knowing that her sister said was correct.

"Besides which, I am sure that you *would* like to be introduced to him, even though you may not admit it!"

Tara did not miss the way that Miss Duncansby's eyes sparkled with interest, and thus she had to satisfy her sister's remark with only a brisk nod before looking away. Were she to be truthful, she would state that she had no desire whatsoever to be introduced to Lord Pottinger, but it was not as though she could say such a thing with any honesty. There would be

questions as to why she did not wish herself to be introduced to the man, and as yet, Tara could think of nothing particular to say which would be at all understandable.

“Wonderful. I am sure that Miss Duncansby can make the introductions when there is an appropriate opportunity.”

Mary smiled, but there was a slight glint in her eye that caught Tara’s attention. Her sister still had some sort of intention for the evening, related to Tara herself, but thus far Tara had very little idea as to what it might be.

Soon Mary and Miss Duncansby were caught up in conversation and Tara, as she usually did, stepped back a little more, allowing them to speak freely while remaining in clear sight of her sister. Her eyes moved idly around the room. No one paid much attention to her. They never had done. Her sister was the one with the beauty, and she was much too quiet to be noticed. Her eyes settled on a gentleman whom she was certain she recognized. When he turned, she realized at once that it was Lord Talbert. He was talking to three young ladies, and that made Tara’s heart twist. It was not because there was anything wrong with his doing so, but more the fact that her sister might find herself a little heartbroken, should she see him so eagerly in conversation with them.

That was Mary’s greatest foible. She considered that every gentleman who so much as smiled at her was deeply interested in furthering their acquaintance to something more. She was desperate to fall in love, desperate to have that deep affection from one singular gentleman. It was certainly an understandable situation, but Tara always pushed her to be cautious. Mary wanted to see good in everyone, and was eager to assume that every gentleman’s intentions were honorable. Having spent two previous Seasons in London, and before that, having spoken to her elder sister, Tara understood a good deal more about society and the gentlemen it contained than Mary did.

“An excellent opportunity has presented itself!”

At the very next moment, Tara found herself pulled away, her sister’s hand tight on her arm. She stumbled slightly, heat

burning in her face as she tripped over the hem of her own gown. Such was her sister's haste that Mary herself did not even realize what had happened but continued to tug Tara along with her. It was not until they came to a stop directly in front of Lord Pottinger that Tara understood what Mary had meant by 'an excellent opportunity'.

"Miss Duncansby, how very good to see you this evening." Lord Pottinger was not looking at Tara and instead had fixed his gaze on Miss Duncansby, but for whatever reason, Tara could not seem to look away from him, despite her trepidation. She took in his features, seeing the strong, square jaw, the broad nose, the flashing blue eyes, and the thick crop of very dark hair which was swept to one side across his brow. He was handsome, and given that she had heard he had nothing but a genial manner, it came as very little surprise to Tara that he was so sought after by the young ladies - and their mothers - of the *ton*. The heat which had run through her before began to grow in her again, although held back by her own fears and steady guilt.

When he looked at her, it was as though her world seemed to stop.

Tara was almost certain that she heard thunder just outside the window as his bold eyes alighted on hers. Her skin covered itself in goosebumps and everything went suddenly very hot and very still. Her heart was torn in two directions – she was drawn to him and yet was desperate to remove herself from his presence. The way his blue eyes dazzled her had her breath swirling in her chest and yet the guilt was like a heavy thunder-cloud, hanging ominously over her head.

"Tara."

A gentle nudge from her sister made Tara's breath hitch again. Had the introductions been made already? She had not been able to hear a single word of what had been said and now, it seemed the expectation was upon her. Even Lord Pottinger's eyebrows were lifted.

"I am very glad to make your acquaintance."

Mumbling, she dipped into a curtsy. It was certainly not one of her best, but it was adequate enough and she was quickly able to drop her gaze from his face, clasping her hands behind her back and making to take a step away so that her sister could continue the conversation while she confronted her battling feelings.

“I am glad to hear that you like dancing,” Mary continued, her voice bright and airy, a stark contrast to Tara’s fear and confusion. “I do hope you will step out with many young ladies this evening.”

Lord Pottinger chuckled, but a quick glance towards his face told Tara that he was not particularly enamored of such a suggestion, for there was no light in his eyes and his lips dropped back into place at the very next moment.

“If you are requesting a dance from me, then I should be very happy to oblige, Miss Shaw.”

Again, Tara found herself less than convinced by this statement, but if it would take Lord Pottinger away from her, then she was very relieved indeed. To be so near to him was confusing her, for whilst guilt tore at her, she also found herself considering how attractive a gentleman he was.

“I should be very glad to dance with you, as I am certain would Miss Duncansby *and* my sister.”

Tara’s pulse began to race. Surely her sister had not said such a thing as that? Not only was it forward, but it was also highly embarrassing. She had no wish to dance with anyone, least of all with Lord Pottinger! It would only unsettle her even more!

This must have been Mary’s intention. From the very beginning of this evening, she has intended me to dance with at least one gentleman – but why did it have to be Lord Pottinger?

Her eyes closed, but she could not bring herself to say a single word. All she wanted to do was to turn around and state that she certainly could not stand up with anyone, but that would make the situation even more unbearable.

It was not until Lord Pottinger's hand reached out to hers that she realized he was asking for her dance card. Such had been her mortification that she had not even heard him accepting the suggestion from her sister and nor had she looked into his face to see whether or not he was pleased. Given the way his smile had faded at the first suggestion her sister had put to him, Tara was quite sure that he was not pleased with the situation, but she had no other choice but to hand him her card. A dreadful fear that he recognized her battled in her heart, winding its way through her veins like thick black soot which permeated everything.

“The polka.”

His voice held no anger as he spoke to her, returning the card, and when she glanced at him, there was no flare of recognition in his eyes, nor a frown of disgust.

“Thank you.”

Quite how she managed to get the words out, Tara was unsure, for her lips felt bruised, her tongue a little large. Glancing at her dance card and mortified that there would only be one name upon it, she quickly slipped it onto her wrist and kept her head low. She would only stand up with one gentleman the entire evening.

“My sister is much too good to me, Lord Pottinger,” Tara heard Mary continue, even as she silently willed her to stop talking. “She has given up her own Season to make certain that I am well cared for and that I find myself a suitable match in due course. That is why you will find yourself as the first name on her dance card, although I am determined to make certain you are the first of many!”

“Mary, please!” Grasping her sister's hand, Tara gave her a small shake of the head, but the words had already been spoken. Daring a glance towards Lord Pottinger, Tara caught the slight lift of his eyebrows, his blue eyes a little confused. No doubt he was wondering why Mary did not have a chaperone of her own, so that the burden would be lifted from Tara's shoulders.

Or perhaps it is that he has recognized me and is now wondering why a lady of the night is parading herself in the London ballrooms.

“A generous gesture, I am sure.” Lord Pottinger’s quiet murmur made her cheeks flush, and she dared not look at him any longer. Dark memories were beginning to surface, remorse settling on her shoulders. Thus far, he did not appear as though he was a gentleman without fortune, but she knew the truth. She knew it could not be as it appeared. No doubt in his home, there was a great deal of turmoil, and all because of her actions. Her decision to do as she had been bade had caused him to lose his fortune, and she had done such things willingly, in many respects. At present, it did not appear as though he recognized her, but there then again, he might simply be a sensible gentleman, and wary of making a scene in front of the *ton*.

“I am sure that there will soon be a great many other gentlemen to sign your sister’s dance card.”

Lord Pottinger smiled quickly, although it was not directed towards Tara, but rather at Mary. Was it because he could not bring himself to look at her? Because he knew what she had done? Or was she seeing more in the situation than there truly was?

“Thank you, Lord Pottinger.”

Mary smiled warmly and Tara forced herself to mumble the same sentiment, before watching the man turn away. He walked swiftly across the ballroom, and Tara could not drag her eyes from him. It was foolish indeed to be drawn to a gentleman who could have nothing but anger against her, and yet her heart appeared quite determined. Sighing inwardly, Tara closed her eyes, wondering what excuse she could find for the polka.

“He is quite wonderful, is he not?”

Miss Duncansby immediately began to exclaim over Lord Pottinger, but Tara could not help but allow her anger to bubble at her sister’s actions. The moment Miss Duncansby took a breath, Tara grasped her sister’s hand.

“How could you do such a thing?” Keeping her voice low, she sent a hissed whisper in her sister’s direction. “I have no wish to dance. You know that I am here as your chaperone!”

Mary’s hazel eyes darkened a little.

“That is because you *tell* yourself that you are here as my chaperone, but you are well able to take part in the Season just as much as anyone else. I dislike seeing you so excluded. Can you not, for one evening, allow yourself a little enjoyment? Can you not permit yourself a few dances here and there? If you are so determined to only wed once I am settled, then you must make yourself known to the gentleman here *this* Season, else how will they know that you are seeking a match when the time comes?”

The anger which burned in Tara’s heart quickly died away to nothing but smoke and ashes, blown aside by the wind of her sister’s kind intentions. She had not done this out of a desire to embarrass Tara, nor to bring her any shame, but rather to encourage her. It had been very well meant, and yet Tara still battled with her feelings of upset and embarrassment. Her sister could not know, of course, of the strange situation that Tara had been in, previously, with Lord Pottinger, and thus could certainly not be aware of the tension which now flooded her.

“You were very forward, Mary.”

“Yes, I am well aware that I was, but it is not as though *you* were about to do anything like that, were you? You are not about to put yourself forward to dance with the gentlemen. No, you would rather stay back, hiding away as though you are not worthy of notice.”

Mary blinked rapidly and much to Tara’s surprise, there were tears in her eyes. Did she really feel so much for Tara’s significance - or lack of it – amongst society?

“I thank you.” There was nothing else for Tara to say, and her irritation faded as she found herself grateful for what had been shared between them. “You are very kind in your intentions, but I would much have preferred to have known about your plans prior to our meeting with Lord Pottinger.”

Her sister laughed softly and shook her head before wiping at her eyes.

“But you would have made quite certain I could not have done such a thing if I had told you of my intentions, and you could not convince me out of them, then I suspect you would have refused to attend. Is that not so?” Tara shrugged and turned her head away, her heart telling her that her sister was speaking the truth. That would have been precisely what she would have done. “Then come.” Smiling still, Mary linked arms with Tara before turning a quick smile towards Miss Duncansby. “Let us go in search of yet more eligible gentlemen with whom we might *all* be able to dance!”

Tara’s heart lifted with the warmth of knowing she was cared for and considered by her sister. Perhaps Mary had learned from that difficult situation after all. Perhaps she *could* permit herself to enjoy the Season a little more - although she would much have preferred *not* to dance with Lord Pottinger.

“I am sure that Lord Talbert will be glad to dance with you,” Miss Duncansby remarked, but much to Tara’s surprise, Mary shook her head.

“If Lord Talbert wishes to dance with me, then he may approach me himself,” she declared, turning her head to smile at Tara. “He is a gentleman who is very pleased with the attention he receives, rather than being eager to share his attentions with one particular young lady, I think.”

Tara turned her head to look at Mary as her sister smiled, relief pouring into her heart.

“I quite agree,” she murmured as Mary grinned. “You must always find a gentleman worthy of you, one who is willing to give you every single modicum of his attention.”

“I have every intention of doing so.”

Tossing her head in a rather spirited fashion, Mary immediately began to walk across the ballroom, having seen someone else with whom she might converse. Tara allowed herself to be led forward, despite her inner struggles. It could

be that her sister was correct. Perhaps it was time to allow herself a little fun.



“ARE you ready for the polka? I confess that it has been some time since I have danced it, so you will have to forgive me if I make a mistake here and there.”

I am certain that he does not recognize me, despite my fears.

“I find myself in much the same situation, Lord Pottinger,” Tara managed to say, trying desperately to push aside the guilt that threatened to cling to every part of her, sending anxiety and fear into the very depths of her soul. She was much too close to him, and her senses were already swimming. “I have not danced in some time.”

“But how can that be?” Lord Pottinger smiled, and his eyes lit up to a brilliant blue. “A young lady in society such as yourself? I cannot understand why any gentleman would not seek you out to dance.”

Her cheeks warmed and she looked away, a little embarrassed by his compliments. Telling herself that many young ladies in London would have received similar remarks from him, she managed to murmur a quiet thank you. She was herself entirely unworthy of any kindness from him.

Tara managed to glance at him, seeing him smile. That smile sent something molten into the pit of her belly and she immediately had to look away, relieved when the music began. Stepping forward determinedly, for the polka was a rather energetic dance and there was not a lot of time left for conversation, Tara sank into a curtsy. Lord Pottinger’s forehead was lined with concentration, although his steps were sure and, throughout the dance, he made very little by way of mistakes. It did not seem that he had forgotten any of the steps at all. Tara forced her mind to remain solely on the dance, so that she would not become distracted by Lord Pottinger’s presence. When the dance came to an end, she curtsied and

managed another smile, truly relieved that she would have no cause to step out with him again, nor deal with any further conversation.

“An excellent dance, I think. I quite enjoyed that.” Offering her his arm, Lord Pottinger led her away to the side of the ballroom, near to where her sister and Miss Duncansby were standing. She made to thank him for the dance and return to their company, only for him to release her arm, but instead drop his hand to catch her fingers. “Forgive me for being so forward, but there is something about you that...” Trailing off, he shook his head. “What I mean to say is that there is something about you that I find familiar. Pray tell me, have we been introduced before? I am aware that your sister’s friend, Miss Duncansby, made the most recent introductions, but perhaps that is because there was no obvious awareness on my part. Forgive me if that was so.”

Tara blinked, nausea beginning to roll around her stomach. Was he genuine in his question, or was this a way of forcing the truth from her by unsettling her, rendering her worried and afraid about what he knew? She could not blame him if the latter were the case, for her behavior more than merited it.

“I am afraid we have never been introduced before.”

The smile that had lit up his eyes immediately retreated, and his brows pulled downwards. That was the truth, at least. She did not want to degrade herself further by issuing a lie from her mouth. He deserved as much of the truth from her as she could give him.

“Are you quite certain? It seems to me that there is something that my heart or mind understands about you.”

“I am quite sure that we have never been introduced.” Tara demanded that her lips curve into a smile, but her heart sank when they refused to obey. “I am certain that I would have remembered it, had I been introduced to one of the most amiable gentlemen in London, for that is how you are known.”

This seemed to draw a smile from Lord Pottinger, and he immediately followed that line of conversation and did not again wonder aloud as to their possible previous meeting.

“Is that so? I am glad to hear of that at least.”

Tara said nothing more, and it was to her relief that her sister and Miss Duncansby quickly came to join them. The conversation drew onto another subject and Tara moved back a little, so that she might once again stand silently. Her whole body was shaking, tension crackling around her and her mind filled with a furious buzzing that demanded quiet, even though she had no possibility of gaining such a thing.

“Alas, I must take my leave of you. I am promised to another for the cotillion.” Lord Pottinger clicked his heels together, bowed, and kept that warm smile on his face. “I am now to dance with Lady Helena, but it has been a pleasure to step out with the three of you.”

“The pleasure has been ours, I assure you,” Mary replied, allowing Tara to remain silent. “Thank you, Lord Pottinger.”

Tara lifted her eyes to his face for another moment, fully expecting his attention to be on her sister, but instead he smiled only at her. Something heavy fell into the pit of her stomach and she turned her head away. Lord Pottinger left their company and Tara finally felt able to draw in enough of a breath to push away some of her fears.

What exactly did Lord Pottinger mean by his questions?

Was he genuine in his uncertainty, or was he merely seeking a way to force the truth from her already heavily burdened soul?

Tara told herself to believe the former, but as she dropped her head even lower, a great despair captured her. Despite her sister’s determined intentions, she would have to stay far from Lord Pottinger, for that was the only way that she would be able to keep herself safe from him. She could only pray that he would not seek her out for, if he did so, then Tara had no thought of what she might do to avoid the revelation of the truth. What if he was to recognize her and realize why he had previous knowledge of her? Yes, they had not been introduced but Tara knew far more of him than he was aware of at present. She did not believe that there could ever be enough forgiveness for that.

CHAPTER FIVE

*I*t was all very strange to be dancing with the young ladies of society, knowing that within only a few short weeks, he would be penniless. James sighed heavily to himself, struggling with a deep sense of impending doom. Muttering to himself, he made his way from the window back towards his desk, sitting down heavily in the straight-backed wooden chair. It offered him very little comfort, but comfort was not what he required at this present moment. Last evening had been an excellent one, but he had lost himself for far too long. It was as if he had been back within society without a single thing to trouble him, as though he had not the smallest difficulty to distress him. He had smiled and laughed and danced and done all that a gentleman in London ought to do. He had found himself new acquaintances, had reunited with old, and had completely forgotten all about his present difficulties.

Now, however, he returned to face his future. A future so very dark that James shuddered every time he considered it. The vowel that he had signed sat quietly on his desk, mocking him for his lack of progress. He had been in London near a fortnight and yet still had done very little regarding his present troubles. Yes, he had spoken to his friends, and they had urged him to act, but thus far, he had done very little else. It was as if he were afraid to even begin - and yet, James was all too aware that the longer he went without paying off his vowel, the more difficulty he might find himself in. He was uncertain of what threat might be leveled at him should he refuse to pay, legal or otherwise, but at the very least, the person responsible

for all of this could ruin his reputation entirely. All it would take would be the smallest whisper and his reputation in society as one of the most eligible, amiable gentlemen in all of England would be shot apart. The pieces would be flung far, and he would have no hope of ever restoring his honor again - and that would only be with the briefest of whispers. What more could be done to him if there was proof made visible to society?

His eyes forced themselves back down towards his vowel. He did not recognize the hand that had written it, but he certainly recognized his own signature. There was no escaping it, he *had* signed this, and in doing so, had broken his life apart.

“I did nothing wrong.”

Repeating those words twice over brought James no comfort. No matter how much he tried to convince himself that any gentleman of society might choose to visit an establishment such as the one he had found himself in, his guilt remained. How often had he silently promised that he would never become the sort of fellow his father had been, a man who had done nothing but seek out his own pleasures at the expense of all those who had loved him – or who had tried to love him, at the very least. Since taking on the title, James had managed to keep his vow. Perhaps that was why he now had such a sterling reputation, a reputation which was of great importance to him – possibly more important than he could express. But he wanted to be known as a better gentleman than his father had ever been, and a single word about this matter and all would be ruined.

“I did sign this,” he sighed aloud, looking down at the paper and swallowing the tight ball that rolled itself into his throat.

Yes, he had signed it, but he had been alone, naked, and overwhelmed by the circumstances he had found himself in. He had been afraid that he would not be given anything back if he did not comply, but had he known that he was signing away almost the entirety of his fortune, then he would never have put pen to paper.

Slowly, his eyes traveled away from the vowel to the sapphire pendant that sat beside it. It was the only thing he had of substance, aside from the vowel itself, the only thing that could link him to that night. What had the lady meant when she had told him that he had not broken his vow? And why had she seemed so afraid? It was not as though a young lady in her position would normally do anything that would push a gentleman such as himself away, for those who worked in such an establishment would be eager to retain the custom of those who came to visit. Their desire was surely that they would call upon the establishment repeatedly, so why, then, had she warned him to stay away? What dangers had been lurking that he had been unable to see?

Picking up the pendant, he slammed his other hand down flat on the desk as the sapphire twinkled in the light.

“I *will* find her,” he gritted out, his whole body suddenly twisting as a flood of anger began to set the blood in his veins alight. “I *must* find her.”

The door was suddenly flung open, and none other than Lord Stoneleigh walked in.

“Good afternoon! I did not think that I required the butler to announce me,” he chuckled, as James slowly set the pendant back down on the desk, making as little noise as possible so that his friend would not notice. “I thought to come and see how you were, particularly after last evening.” Lord Stoneleigh’s smile faded a little as he threw himself into a chair. “From my experience, I know it can be very difficult pretending to be quite contented when one’s world is tilting to the side. You appeared to be enjoying yourself at least, however.”

“I did, very much so.” There was no shame in admitting such a thing, he considered. “I was introduced to a few new acquaintances and spoke with a few old ones. Many have asked as regarded my absence from society these last few weeks, but my excuses came conveniently enough.”

Lord Stoneleigh’s eyebrow lifted and James chuckled, a little sadly.

“I simply said that I had an ailing uncle and was required to go to him, to make certain that all was well since my mother insisted that it was the least I could do. He is quite recovered now, though.”

Lord Stoneleigh grinned, but his eyes remained a little dark.

“You enjoyed a good deal of company, then?”

James nodded.

“I did notice that you seemed a little taken with one young lady in particular. Was it a Miss Shaw? Someone you have not been introduced to before?”

“Miss Shaw?” The name came back to him easily enough, but he did not want to make his friend aware of it. “If she was a new acquaintance, then I will confess that I have already tried and failed to remember a good many names!”

The truth was, of course, that he *did* recall Miss Shaw, but simply could not remember when he had first been introduced to the lady. Her certainty that they had never been so before had confused him, but that lingering sureness remained – unless it was simply that her dark gold crown of hair and astonishingly captivating hazel eyes had taken his interest in a way he had not expected.

Lord Stoneleigh smiled, but he did not laugh.

“You seemed most intent on speaking with her after you danced the polka,” he reminded James. “Forgive me, I did not mean to watch you both, but it was only that you were nearby, and both Lord Wiltsham and myself were concerned about the ball and your presence there. We kept a rather close eye on the situation!”

“Oh, I have no concerns in that regard,” James replied quickly, aware that he could not hide the truth from his friend for a great deal of time. “Yes, I do remember Miss Shaw. And yes, I did speak to her after our dance. It was only that...” Shaking his head, he twisted his lips to one side, his jaw jutting forward as he considered how best to explain himself. “I had the distinct impression that I had met her somewhere

before. I asked her about this, but she said to me that we had never been introduced until last night. I must be mistaking her for someone else, but no matter how much I have tried, I cannot bring to mind who that person might be. It is most infuriating!”

“I can imagine,” Lord Stoneleigh grinned, the light back in his eyes now that he realized the conversation between James and Miss Shaw had not been a difficult one. “I do not know a great deal about the Misses Shaw, but I know that one of them is a little quiet. I say that as a gentleman who has not always been inclined towards society’s company, so I certainly do not hold such a thing against her.

“Nor do I,” James admitted as Lord Stoneleigh grinned.

“Yes, I believe the eldest is something akin to a wallflower, whereas her sister seems a good deal more vivacious.”

James found himself speaking up, as if in defense of the lady.

“Miss Mary Shaw stated that her sister is so out of her own sense of duty, which is an admirable quality. I assume that their mother is not present for her to be encouraged into the position of supporting her younger sister, however?”

“I believe the mother passed away some years ago,” Lord Stoneleigh told him. “It is understandable that the elder feels responsible for the younger, although it must be a little difficult for her if she is of eligible age also.”

“She must have a very unselfish character,” James murmured, thinking aloud as his gaze slid away from his friend. “It is not every young lady who would behave so.”

“Certainly, it is not,” came Lord Stoneleigh’s reply. “You think well of her then? You think her handsome?”

He wiggled his eyebrows a little and grinned, but James only laughed and waved one hand as if dismissing the remark.

“I think her handsome, yes, but I think that of many a young lady,” he replied, ignoring the fact that his interest was already piqued by what Lord Stoneleigh had told him about her. “In fact, my mind is not taken up by thoughts of the lady,

but rather of my situation. I have been wondering what it is I ought to do next and encouraging myself to move forward rather than linger here. In fact, I was just about to make my way back to the East End of London before your arrival.”

Lord Stoneleigh immediately rose out of the chair.

“Then allow me to come with you. My betrothed is busy putting her trousseau together and thus I am quite at liberty.” Seeing James about to protest, he slapped one hand down on his shoulder. “Trust me, these things are a good deal better done with company.”

James let out a slightly frustrated breath but nodded, even though he would have much preferred to make his way there alone.

“Very well.”

“Capital.” Lord Stoneleigh grinned and then went towards the door. “There is nothing that you need to feel ashamed of, recall. I am here to support you as your friend.”

Taking a deep breath, James nodded slowly.

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“And as your friend, might I suggest to you that we hail a cab, rather than taking your carriage,” Lord Stoneleigh said as he walked from the study. “I have visited the East End already and I can assure you it is much preferable to take a cab and remain as unobtrusive as possible.”

James paused, then nodded agreement to his friend’s idea.

“Allow me just a few minutes to gather up my coat, and tell my staff that I am going out, taking a cab, and I will join you.”

“Of course.”

Ten minutes later, they stepped out onto the street, and James turned to Lord Stoneleigh, even as the gentleman hailed a passing cab.

“Mayhap you can tell me about what you discovered, as we make our way there.” Lord Stoneleigh nodded. “I should

be very glad to hear of everything that you discovered before you secured your fortune once more. It may give me a little more hope for my own circumstances.”



“THIS IS WHERE WE WERE FIRST.”

Lord Stoneleigh gestured to the red door, and immediately James found himself nodding, remembering it.

“We came here with Lord Gillespie as our guide,” he said aloud, as Lord Stoneleigh nodded. “He promised us an evening of success as far as I recall.”

“Amongst other things,” Lord Stoneleigh muttered, quietly. “Yes, he promised us a great deal – a different experience from what we were used to.”

“It was certainly that,” James remarked quietly. “I am sorry for Lord Gillespie’s betrayal. I know he was a dear friend of yours.”

Lord Stoneleigh nodded, his jaw flexing for a second.

“There is such a great deal I should like to ask him. Unfortunately, I will never be able to speak to him again. Lord Montague made certain of that.”

“Did Lord Foster ever find out why Lord Montague took Lord Gillespie’s life?”

James caught the twist of Lord Stoneleigh’s lips as well as the flash in his eyes.

“I believe it was due to the fact that Lord Gillespie did not wish to continue as part of that particular venture any longer.” A soft sigh broke from his lips. “And I can take some relief from that, at least, knowing that in the end my friend regretted what he had done.”

James drew his gaze back towards the red door. He could not imagine all that Lord Stoneleigh was feeling at present, for it must have been a great trauma to discover that someone he considered a close friend could treat him with such evil.

“Perhaps there was some incredible difficulty which forced Lord Gillespie’s hand,” he said, in an attempt to bring some quiet to the frown which drew itself across Lord Stoneleigh’s brow. “We shall never know the true circumstances and that must be a very great trial to you.”

“Yes, it is, but I have accepted it – and I am endeavoring to undo all of Lord Gillespie’s bad works, as well as revealing the other gentlemen involved - for I will not lay all of the blame on Lord Gillespie’s shoulders.”

“No, indeed not,” James replied, making no move toward the door of the gambling den. “Now, given that I did not lose my fortune here, it does not seem particularly wise to spend any time within the establishment itself.”

“I would agree.” Putting both hands on his hips, Lord Stoneleigh turned around. “Do you recall where you ended up?”

“No, I do not. I am sure it was nearby, but I could not give you any particulars.” A flash of heat burned in James’ cheeks as he shrugged. “I confess that I was so embarrassed that I did everything I could to remove myself from that place as quickly as possible, and I did not take note of my surroundings in any detail as a result. It was also very dark indeed, and I do not think that I would be able to find my way there now.”

“Then we should simply walk along the streets until we see something that you recognize. You say it was very dark, but perhaps something will nudge your memory.”

“Perhaps.”

They set off, but confidence did not fill him as he made his way along the dirty streets. The only thing he could remember of this place was the red-doored establishment where he and his friends had gone at the start of the evening. Thereafter, everything else was a blur.

“Anything?”

Lord Stoneleigh ambled cheerfully along beside him, his eyes alive with interest as they moved from one part of the street to the next. It was a very different world from the one

they lived in, but James took no notice of that. Instead, he grew increasingly desperate with every step he took, wanting to find something that he could recognize, eager to be able to identify even the smallest thing... but nothing appeared familiar to him.

“I had not thought of this particular dilemma,” he muttered as Lord Stoneleigh chuckled. “I thought I would have every success. I thought I would be able to recognize that place fairly easily, once I laid eyes on it. But now that I am here, now that I have wandered a good distance away from that red-doored gambling den, I find that I am quite lost. How can I ask the lady anything if I cannot find her again?”

“Let us return by a different route,” Lord Stoneleigh replied, not answering any of those questions. “And let us pray that we do not get lost in the process!”

This brought a little relief to their situation, and James allowed himself a small smile. Returning by a different route proved a little more difficult than they had anticipated, however, and they soon found themselves wandering, with very little idea of where they were, or of how to return to the gambling den.

“It seems that this was not a wise idea,” Lord Stoneleigh muttered, no smile on his face now. “Forgive me. I thought it would not be as difficult as this.”

James shrugged.

“Nothing looks familiar anyway. Mayhap I can simply hail a cab and we can return to my town house.”

They were at a crossroads, with people and animals everywhere. James made to move across to the other side of the street, only to come to a complete stop. He reached out one hand and took hold of Lord Stoneleigh’s arm. Astonishment rattled through him.

“Whatever is it?” Lord Stoneleigh asked, as James continued to grip tightly at his arm.

James himself said nothing, staring straight ahead until finally, Lord Stoneleigh followed his gaze.

“Wait.” Lord Stoneleigh’s voice had dropped low. “Is that young lady the one you have been searching for?”

James could forgive the confusion that the words indicated, given that Lord Stoneleigh had only seen the lady’s retreating back as she had stepped into the large building opposite; a shabby wooden door closing behind her. Had his eyes deceived him? Could it be that she was here? Or was it simply that she had been on his mind and thus, he had mistaken her for someone else?

“No, it was not her. Not the woman we came seeking, at least. It – it cannot be.” Closing his eyes, he saw the scene play out before him. “Mayhap it was.”

Lord Stoneleigh let out an exasperated sigh.

“Who?”

James took in a breath.

“I believe that was -although I cannot be certain – the elder Miss Shaw.”

Beside him, Lord Stoneleigh let out a chuckle.

“You must be mistaken. A lady of that sort would not come here. Not unless she was... not unless she was my betrothed and much too overly curious!” He laughed again and rolled his eyes. “That is to say, not unless she was fiercely determined and quite sure of herself with regard to her competence and her own strength. If you do not mind me saying so, the elder Miss Shaw does not seem to embody those qualities.”

“I would agree with you,” James answered, his eyes still fixed on the door. “But all the same, I do not think that my eyes were deceived. I actually believe that it was the elder Miss Shaw who went through that door, just moments ago - but whatever can she be doing in the East End?”

“And what sort of place has she entered?”

Lord Stoneleigh cocked an eyebrow, but James was already striding forward, stuttering to a stop suddenly as the door opened again and the young lady in question stepped out.

There was no doubting it this time. It was none other than Miss Tara Shaw hurrying out. Stopping just outside the door, she turned her head to glance first to her left and then to her right – and for a moment, her eyes caught his. There was no flash of recognition, no obvious awareness that he was someone she knew, but in that momentary glance, James caught the flash of fear lingering in her eyes. Starting forward again, Miss Shaw ignored him, tipping her head forward and pulling her shawl over her shoulders a little more tightly as she hurried away down the street. James followed her with his eyes, seeing her climb into a waiting cab, which swiftly pulled away.

“Good gracious!” Lord Stoneleigh shook his head. “Forgive me for my initial disbelief. You are quite correct.”

James moved forward, coming face to face with the door of the large building. It was weather-beaten, with splinters coming in all directions from the wood. Moving even closer still, he ran his fingers down it. His heart trembled and he sucked in air as a sudden memory returned to him. A memory of grabbing at the door, of pulling it open – and the pain in his fingers from where the wood had stabbed at him.

“I think I shall have to speak to Miss Shaw.”

There was a slight unevenness to his voice as he said the words, his heart beating furiously.

“Why would that be? Surely whatever business she has here is private.”

“Because I must ask her something.” Turning his head, James fixed his gaze on his friend. “I must ask her what she was doing at the very establishment where I lost my fortune.”

CHAPTER SIX

Her heart in her throat, Tara hurried away from the house of ill repute, waving one hand to the driver of the cab who had brought her here in the first place. He had been reluctant to take a young lady such as herself, entirely alone, into this part of London, but she had insisted – but now that insistence mocked her. There had been nothing for her here, aside from lifted eyebrows and darted glances.

What am I going to do now?

She had no knowledge of the man who had brought her here, save for the fact that he had been a gentleman of her set, tall and threatening. Even Mary had been unable to tell her his name, despite the fact that she had been caught in a deep embrace with him. Her excuse had been that she had been so overwhelmed by his attentions that his name had somehow seemed of lesser importance. This place had been her only hope but, now, as she ought to have expected, everyone she had spoken to in that house now was denying the fact that she had ever been present there with him. The older woman with whom she had spoken had simply laughed and shaken her head when Tara had asked if she remembered her, despite the fact that she recalled seeing the woman standing by the door when Tara had been freed from her requirements. Much to Tara's frustration, it was clear that remaining silent was in the woman's best interests and so, she had pretended that she did not know Tara or the gentleman who had brought her. There was nothing that Tara could say or do which had made even the slightest difference to the lady's mind.

“My pendant is gone.”

Mumbling to herself, Tara bit back a cry of disappointment, closing her eyes and setting her head back as she did so. The one thing she had been looking for, the one thing she had been desperate to find, was not going to return to her, it seemed. Perhaps it was part of her punishment for behaving so terribly. Perhaps she would always remember what she had done, every time she thought of her pendant, and be reminded of the shame she had brought upon herself... and to her mind, that lifelong sorrow and pain would be a fitting punishment

The rolling of the cab sent waves of nausea all through her and Tara suddenly waved one hand, the other hand going to her mouth. She thumped on the roof of the cab.

“Set me down at Hyde Park, if you please.”

After managing to shout over the noise of wheels on cobbled roads, Tara sank back and closed her eyes again, barely hearing the jarvey's murmur of something indistinguishable - but which Tara hoped was an understanding and acceptance of her request. She suddenly was desperate to be free of the cab, desperate to walk alone through the park in the vague hope of dismissing some of these deeply unsettling feelings. Yes, she ought not to be alone, walking unchaperoned in the park, but given that she was mostly a chaperone herself now, and never particularly well noticed by others, Tara did not think that anyone would really care. In addition, given that she had just made her way to the East End entirely alone, it seemed of very little consequence if she was to walk back home without company. Her sister would, no doubt, still be entertaining various gentlemen who had come to call, with her two maids for company and, no doubt, Tara would hear everything about it later in the afternoon. Mayhap that would be an easy distraction from what she was enduring at present.

The cab stopped and Tara quickly climbed out, nausea still rolling through her stomach. Paying the driver quickly with her pin money, she murmured a word of thanks and then hurried away, dragging in gulps of fresh air, and relieved to be

finally free from the stench of the East End. The burden of distress and guilt did not leave her as she walked through Hyde Park, her head down as she took slow steps forward. Instead, it only seemed to grow, leaving her in so much agony that she could not help but let out a strangled sob. Her head was low, and as always, no one paid her any particular attention.

Her steps quickened as her eyes filled with tears, her heart so heavy that she pressed one hand to her chest as though it might reduce the pain a little. Her vision blurred as she stumbled along the path, not really knowing where she was going any longer. Regret and shame poured through her again as she considered all that she had done. Yes, she had been protecting her sister, but in doing so, she had severely injured Lord Pottinger in a way that she knew full well could never be recovered from. It was a wound that would never heal.

A sudden cry broke from her lips as she stumbled, blinded by her tears, only for someone to reach out and capture her around the waist, setting her back carefully on her feet.

“Be careful, Miss Shaw.” Tara wrapped her arms about herself and stepped away from whoever it was that had caught her, suddenly afraid that her reputation would be quite ruined. Had someone seen her stepping out here alone and now sought to take advantage of her? “Miss Shaw?”

Dashing one hand over her eyes, but with her vision still blurred, Tara attempted to look up at the fellow standing in front of her, only for her breath to catch in her chest. Her eyes closed and she shook her head, anything she wanted to say dying upon her lips. This could not be! How was it that the gentleman she had only just been thinking of, the gentleman she was trying desperately to avoid, was now standing in front of her with a look of concern etched across his face.

He had his arms around me, at least for a moment.

The warmth which attempted to curl through her at this recognition was easily washed away by the cold stain of guilt.

“Pray, excuse me, Lord Pottinger.” Wincing at the way her voice broke, she dropped her head, and try as she might, she

could not force a smile. "I ought not to be here alone. It is only that –"

"You are deeply upset."

The softness in Lord Pottinger's voice had Tara blinking in surprise.

"I confess that I do not know why, but there is part of me that is very eager to understand what it is that burdens you. Perhaps we might be of aid to each other."

"I do not know what you mean." Tara shook her head, not able to look up at him. "I do not think I can be of aid to anyone."

These last words were spoken with a heaviness that could not be kept from her voice. She did not know Lord Pottinger very well, but he was speaking with an honesty and directness which surprised her. Perhaps it was because she felt herself in such distress that she could not help but respond to the kindness in his voice and expression.

"Allow me to be blunt." Lord Pottinger cleared his throat. "I have just seen you stepping out of a rather dark establishment in the East End, an establishment that I am eager to discover more about, to solve a puzzle that confronts me. I will make no demands of you and I certainly will not insist that you tell me what you were doing there, but perhaps you might feel able to tell me a little more about it."

"Aah..."

Tara sucked in air. Everything she had feared was suddenly coming to pass. Her head swam and tears filled her eyes, then she swayed suddenly as dizziness struck her. His strong hand caught her arm, but Tara wrenched herself away, staggering slightly. She did not deserve his kindness, and the warmth of his presence near her brought so many confusing emotions that she simply could not stand it. A part of her wanted to throw herself into his arms, to tell him everything, and to beg him to forgive her, but she stood very still, her hands curled into fists.

"I have no wish to injure you, Miss Shaw." Lord Pottinger stepped back from her, both hands raised placatingly. "I seek

only to help you.”

“You cannot.” Tara’s voice broke as she shook her head. “Lord Pottinger, you cannot do as you seek, not when I—”.

She broke off, her eyes squeezing closed as the realization of what she had been about to say filled her with a sense of dread. She had been about to tell him that she had done him a great wrong, had been about to confess all. His gentle presence encouraged confidences, somehow.

“It is clear you are in great distress.” Lord Pottinger’s voice was softer still. “Something has happened to upset you. I have found myself in much the same situation and strangely enough, it is linked solely to the place you have only just come from. That is why I hoped we might be able to aid each other and that you would be able to tell me a little more about it.”

Tara shook her head but said nothing. A vision of her sister flashed into her mind. If she dared tell Lord Pottinger the truth, then what would become of her sister? Would the cruel gentleman who had set things in motion come to punish her for what she had spoken of? Would the happiness she had finally managed to achieve for her sister be dashed away?

“Perhaps I have made a mistake.” Lord Pottinger spread his hands and stepped back again. Tara’s heart twisted at the distance he had put between them. “I did not mean to injure you or burden you further. I thought only that we might help each other in some way. I am struggling with a great loss. I thought that perhaps if you were in the same situation as myself that we could be....” He shook his head, his lips flat. “It does not matter. If you do not wish to speak of such things, then I shall not demand it and I will not speak of it either. Not to anyone.”

“I thank you, Lord Pottinger.”

Tara did not say anything more, nor stay for even another moment beside him. Instead, she practically fled, running along the path which would lead her back to her father’s house. Fear drove her forward, screaming at her that the truth would, one day, come out, and leave her with nothing. All her endeavors would be for naught; both she and her sister would

be flung from society and left to rot at her father's country estate. Neither of them would ever marry and Mary, at some point, would blame her for everything that had happened. Lord Pottinger had discovered her presence in the East End – and perhaps he was not the only one who had seen her there. What if he'd had companions? What if they were less inclined towards silence than he appeared to be?

“He knows now that I was there.”

Sniffing furiously, Tara passed one hand over her eyes to wipe away the final trickles of moisture. She would not be able to stay far from him, as she had hoped. Now that he knew that she had been present in the very place where he had lost his fortune, she feared that he would not be contented to leave her alone. He would always be watching her, would always be waiting for her to come to talk to him in the way that he had so desperately hoped she might, today. His interest, no doubt, would be piqued all the more, given the fact that she had refused to say a single word.

Her feet stumbled again, and her breathing grew ragged as she made her way home. Blindly, she went inside, only to walk straight into someone.

“Tara, where have you been?” Mary's voice broke into her thoughts and Tara could only shake her head, unable to find an answer which would satisfy her sister. Immediately, Mary's voice became thick with concern. “Whatever is the matter. You are very pale indeed, and your hands are so cold. Have you been crying?”

Tara opened her mouth to say that no, she had not been crying, only for tears to begin to flood down her cheeks. The next moment, Mary had her in her embrace, and Tara could do nothing but sob. Somehow, she was brought into the drawing room and, after a short while, a cup of tea was pressed into her hand. Still, the tears came and, in turn, Mary became more and more concerned, her voice lifting in worry as she spoke to her sister. And yet, all Tara could do was sob.

“I knew something had been troubling you.” Mary shook her head as Tara finally managed to dry her eyes with her

handkerchief. “This is because of me, is it not?”

“It is not because of you.”

Her voice was weak, but the last thing Tara wanted was for her sister to take the blame upon her shoulders.

“Again, you do not tell me the truth.” Mary spoke a little more harshly, leaning forward so that she could see Tara’s face a little better. “We sit here together, you and I, and you refuse to tell me the truth. I know that you have done something significant for me, and yet you refuse to tell me what it is. You have told me over and over that my difficult situation with that gentleman was quickly and easily resolved, but I cannot believe that to be true. Not when I see you now, not when I know that you have been absent from the house today without any real explanation of where you have been. Tell me the truth, Tara. Tell me, even if you fear that it will distress me.”

Tara’s heart cried out for her to remain silent, as she had done for so long, but instead she found herself speaking.

“You recall the evening that I discovered you in the arms of that gentleman?”

Her sister nodded.

“Of course I do. I do not think that I have ever been more ashamed of myself.”

“As I have said to you, it was his doing. It was he who was in the wrong. He ought not to have *ever* come near you, nor led you away, but now that I am able to reflect on what took place, I can say with confidence that the man did what he did most deliberately.”

Her sister’s eyes flared.

“You believe that he sought me out to press his affections on me for his own purposes?”

“Yes, that is precisely what I am saying. I believe that we were carefully chosen to suit his purposes. That is why he did not ever give you his name.”

Mary nodded slowly.

“I do recall asking him for his name on more than one occasion, but he continually chose not to give it to me. Because it was a masquerade, I thought that perhaps he was eager to disguise himself to play the part required. I believed that, in time, he would not only take off his mask, but would also reveal his name to me. But then, after a while, it did not seem to matter what his name or title was.” A gentle flush colored her cheeks. “I am heartily ashamed of myself for being so easily taken in. I knew that I ought not to go anywhere with him, I was fully aware that my reputation would be in danger, but no gentleman had ever spoken to me in such a way before.”

“I am well aware that he made himself incredibly appealing to you. He used your naivety against you, and for his own benefit. When I discovered you absent, of course, I came searching for you, and upon finding you, as you know I sent you away, for the sake of your reputation. But I continued in conversation with that gentleman. I had every intention of speaking harshly to him, of demanding to know what he thought he was doing in behaving so, but the conversation turned out quite differently.”

Tara closed her eyes. She could still see that moment as it had played out. She had drawn herself up to her full height, had been about to demand that the man explain to her precisely what he had thought he was doing in taking her sister away, only for him to chuckle darkly, and for Tara herself to then realize what a mistake she had made.

It had all been deliberate. That gentleman had wanted to use both her and her sister to his advantage, and he had succeeded.

“The room itself was rather dark, and as I went to speak to him, I could not make out his features. I assume that he never once took off his mask when he was speaking with you?”

“No, he did not,” Mary murmured, her face still flushed. “That is to say, he took it off when we were in that quiet little room together, but it was so dark, with only one or two candles, that I could see nothing more than an outline. If I am

to be honest, I will tell you that I was not paying much attention to his features at that moment.”

Tara swallowed hard, understanding exactly what it was her sister meant.

“I do not blame you for this at all. I understand that you were taken captive by his apparent affections and his desires. It must have been incredibly overwhelming.”

“Again, you give me far too much consideration when you ought to be telling me that I should never have behaved so.”

Mary pressed Tara’s hand and Tara herself let out a small, broken laugh.

“Mayhap I should be a little more critical, but I cannot bring myself to be so. Now that I have seen the evil that is in this gentleman, I cannot blame you for anything.”

When she looked up, Mary’s eyes had gone very large indeed.

“What is it that he has done?”

Tara fought against the hot tears which threatened to spill down her cheeks again.

“I tried to leave the room once I realized a little of his intent, but he hurried and slammed the door shut. I have no qualms in admitting to you that I was very afraid.” Her breath shuddered out of her. “He stated that, if I did not do as he asked, he would make quite certain that you would be ruined – all he need do was make sure that rumors started, that people realized that you had been absent from the ball for that short while. He stated that it was only a small thing that he required of me and, such was my fear, I had no other choice but to agree, for I had no doubt that he would do precisely as he had threatened. It would mean very little to him to do such a thing as that, whereas it would mean that your future would be nothing but darkness. You would be ruined and thereafter, forced to spend your days as a companion to one of our relations, or perhaps be wed to someone who cared very little for you and who married you only out of requirement, if indeed, such a man might be found at all. So therefore, I did

what he asked. And while the actions he required were, indeed, not such a large thing, the impact of those actions was far more than could ever be excused.”

Mary closed her eyes.

“Oh, Tara.” Her voice was soft, tears in every word. “Why ever did you do such a thing?”

“Because I had to protect you. He gave me no other choice. Believe me when I say, he would have done anything to make certain that I obeyed. I could not allow him to do anything which would jeopardize you. You have suffered more than enough. Our mother’s passing has not been easy for either of us, and I would not allow any more difficulty to come to you, not if I could help it.”

Her sister said nothing for some minutes. Instead, she simply shook her head and looked away as though she could not quite believe what it was that Tara had told her. Did she think poorly of Tara now? Did she think that she had chosen the wrong course of action and could no longer claim to be a woman of honor?

“You cannot know the respect and admiration for you that possesses my heart at this moment, Tara.” Tara’s shoulders slumped, her throat constricting as her sister gripped her hand. “To know that you have done such a thing as this, whatever the actions and their results are, for my sake, is more humbling than I can express. Especially when I was the one who was a fool, when I was the one who did as I ought not to have done.”

“But again, I could not blame you for that, not when I know that this gentleman did such things to you purposefully.” Tara tried to explain, no longer held back. “But I have done something so terrible that I know it can never be forgiven – and now what is worse, the gentleman to whom I did such a thing saw me enter the place where that dark happening occurred. He has even spoken to me, eager to know what I was doing in that place in the hope that I might be able to help him when the truth is that *I* am the one who has destroyed him.”

“He wishes to talk with you?” Mary repeated as Tara nodded, choosing to hide the fact that she found herself drawn

to Lord Pottinger, despite the fact that she had injured him so. “Then why not do so? Why not tell him what has taken place? Perhaps you will be able to resolve the situation together.”

Tara shook her head.

“It is quite useless. There is nothing I can say, apart from admitting my own guilt, and I fear what would happen, should I do such a thing - and what would happen to you also. This gentleman might become quite furious over what I tell him and in turn, could resolve to ruin both myself and you, entirely. After everything I have done for you, I do not think I could bear to risk that.” Licking her lips, Mary turned her head away. She did not immediately answer, and Tara found herself a little surprised by her sister’s lack of agreement. She would have thought that Mary would have wanted to protect her reputation at all costs. “You think that I should say something to him?”

“I think that you ought to consider what it is that you are struggling with at present, and whether or not you will be able to endure such feelings for the rest of your life,” Mary said softly, looking back at her. “It is clear that you have a lot of guilt and sorrow within you. No doubt you will have a great anxiety also, deeply concerned that this gentleman, whoever he is, will be able to discover what you have done. One way or the other, whether you tell him or not, is that truly how you wish to live the rest of your days? Is that what you desire for yourself?” Tara shook her head, her throat constricting. Of course, her sister would not understand. She had not been the one to endure such torment, she had not been the one who had stood beside Lord Pottinger and seen him sign his fortune away in full knowledge of what it was she was doing, whereas Tara could not ignore the seriousness of what could occur should she tell him the truth. “I would have you tell this gentleman everything,” Mary continued as though she had been able to read Tara’s thoughts. “That is the only way you will be able to discover any sort of happiness in the years to come. And perhaps I ought to face the consequences of my own actions. I know that you have been protecting me, but in this matter, it is *my* fault that such a thing took place. I encourage you to be honest with this fellow, whoever he is.

That is the only way that your heart is ever going to be free of the guilt which is currently burying you.”

Tara put one hand to her heart.

“Mary, he could ruin us completely.”

“And should he do so, then we will recover.” Her sister squeezed her hand tightly, her eyes steady. “I cannot bear to see you in this state in the days, months, and years to come, knowing that it is my fault that you were *ever* forced into that situation in the first place. Whoever this gentleman is, perhaps he will be the understanding sort. Mayhap he will be glad that you have found the confidence to speak with him and might understand your motivations behind what you did.”

“And perhaps he will do precisely the opposite and tell of everything that I have done to all of society.”

Tara’s voice was barely a whisper, but Mary squeezed her hand yet again.

“Yes, maybe he will do so, but that is a risk I think you must take. I will be by your side if you wish it.” Her eyes searched Tara’s face for a moment before she drew in a deep breath, let go of Tara’s hand and sat back, her shoulders straight. “Might you be willing to tell me the name of this gentleman?”

Tara closed her eyes but nodded, her chest tight as she opened her eyes to look into her sister’s face.

“It is Lord Pottinger,” she said, catching the way Mary’s eyes flared. “The gentleman whose life, by my actions, I have ruined, is none other than the eligible and amiable Lord Pottinger.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“*I* am sure that that young lady knows more than she is saying.”

Lord Stoneleigh let out a small sigh, but James ignored it, well aware that he had spoken about this matter on more than one occasion during these last ten days, but he simply could not help it. There had been great anguish in Miss Shaw’s eyes, and the way that she had wrenched herself from him had spoken of great distress. James very much wished to know what it was that troubled her, finding himself surprisingly eager to aid her, not only because of his own difficulties, but also for her sake. The thought of her continuing in her distress was troubling to his heart.

“Might I suggest that you actually speak to *her* about this, rather than speaking to me?” Lord Stoneleigh lifted one eyebrow as James let out a frustrated breath. “I can only listen to you. I cannot offer you any advice.”

“I have tried to speak to her already, as you might recall,” James responded swiftly. “She pulled herself away from me. She insisted that there was nothing that she wished to tell me. I cannot imagine that such things will be different now since she has not approached me.”

“You may be surprised.” Lord Stoneleigh shrugged. “Have you returned to that house of ill-repute? Have you any recollection of it?”

Snorting, James rolled his eyes.

“Yes, I returned, but everyone that I spoke to stated that they had never seen me before and that they had no recollection of me ever being present in the place. I also presented the pendant but, of course, no one identified that either. In fact, I was made to feel as though I was something of a fool, for believing that I had ever been there. It was obvious to everyone else that I had never set foot in that establishment, and it was suggested that perhaps I had mistaken one house for another. But I know I am correct. That place is where my fortune was stolen from me. I have not a single doubt about it.”

“So what then shall you do?” His friend asked, folding his arms across his chest. “If no one will admit to seeing you there, then you have no help whatsoever. The pendant is next to useless. What then, are your intentions? Will you go and speak with the proprietor of the gambling den? Perhaps he will be able to tell you something, although he did seem a little less than eager when I spoke with him.”

James shook his head.

“I doubt that speaking to the man would be of any use whatsoever. After all, it was not there that I lost my fortune. I might very well have played only a few games of gambling and then been taken somewhere else.” Heat licked up his chest and into his neck, as the flush of embarrassment filled him, but he continued to speak as he recalled how he had awoken. “Someone wanted to give the very distinct impression that I had spent time in the company of a young woman at the bawdy house. I would never have gone there willingly. I am sure of it.”

“You believe then that you have kept your vow?”

James nodded.

“I *must* believe it. If I do not, then I shall lose all hope in my heart.”

Lord Stoneleigh grinned.

“That is good at least. So what do you plan to do next?”

James spread his hands wide.

“The only thing I can do. I *must* speak to Miss Shaw. I must beg her to tell me what she knows of that place, to see whether or not she can be of any aid to my particular situation, I cannot demand, but I must try. She is my only hope. I cannot imagine what reason a respectable young lady might have for going to such a place, but nonetheless, she was there, and there must be some reason for it!”

A frown immediately placed itself upon Lord Stoneleigh’s forehead, drawing his eyebrows down.

“I should not place all of your hopes upon Miss Shaw. It may be that it is exactly as she said: her reasons for going to that establishment are very different to your own. Even if she does speak with you, she may well prove her words correct. Then what will you do?”

“I think I shall drop into despondency,” James quipped, his smile rueful. “In truth, I have very little idea as to what I will do. Perhaps I shall have to go and speak with the proprietor after all, for what else can be done? It may be that I shall have to pay the vowel after all, and be plunged into a most difficult situation.” Turning his eyes to his friend, he lifted one hand towards him. “Tell me truthfully, is it very difficult?”

It took a moment for Lord Stoneleigh to respond. His eyes flashed with something unspoken, and then with a heavy sigh, he spoke.

“Yes, it is. It is *incredibly* difficult. There were times when I had lost all hope. I despaired of what I would do, what the future would be for my title and my family line. I say this not to bring you any despair but to be truthful with you about what you must prepare yourself for.”

James slumped in his chair and let out a long breath.

“I appreciate your honesty. I am struggling with what I must face already. My title is certainly not as high as yours, but my fortune is equal. If I should lose that, then I lose a great deal. Yes, there is land and property which I could sell, but it would not be enough to regain the entirety of what I would lose should I be forced to pay the vowel completely.”

“Let us hope it does not come to that. Your present intention is to speak with Miss Shaw, is it not? If it transpires that she is unable to help you in any way, then we can speak again of what you could do next. There *will* be an answer. Regardless of how long it takes, I can assure you that there will be an answer.”

Whether that answer brings me what I hope for remains to be seen.

“Quite how I am to speak to Miss Shaw, I do not know.” James ran one hand over his hair, shaking his head to himself. “She has been absent from society of late and, given how she pulled away from me, even if I was to see her, I fear that if I draw near to her, she will only move away all the more.”

Another frown dragged at his forehead as he thought of the lady, and when he had last seen her. His hands had been burning from where they had rested against her waist and thereafter, caught her arm and he had been a little surprised by the quickening of his heart. His own emotions had been swiftly forgotten when he had taken her in. Miss Shaw’s cheeks had been so pale and there had been no smile upon her lips. The urge to close the distance between them, to do what he could to comfort her and to reassure her, had been great, but he had fought not to act in a less than appropriate manner.

Was it possible to feel so much for someone he had only recently become acquainted with? She had been constantly on his mind, it seemed, ever since their first introduction, and that had been even *before* he had known of her involvement, whatever it was, with that particular bawdy house. He had been sure that they had met before, but perhaps that had come from only the sensation of a feeling that he had never experienced before. It did not matter to him that she had a quiet character - in fact, he would much prefer that over someone who was loud and abrasive.

Miss Shaw had a quiet beauty about her which he had noticed from the beginning, giving her a distinction that, to his mind, set her apart from the other young ladies in society. And now the fact that she was at a great distance and in a good deal of distress was tearing at him, for he was eager to do all he

could to help her, but he was completely restrained by her reluctance. Yes, he very much wanted to know what she had to say about that bawdy house in the hope that it would be something of a help to him, but neither did he want her to suffer and struggle alone, as she appeared to be doing, with no mother present and her father seemingly almost entirely ignorant of his daughters' requirements. Why else would he permit the elder daughter to chaperone the younger?

James could not help but take the impression that Miss Shaw was rather alone in the world, and his desire to be near her had only grown in the last few days. He had spent almost every evening in society looking for her, his eyes shifting from one part of the room to the next, to the point that he had missed out on more than one conversation.

"I need not ask if you are a little taken with the young lady. I know that you have only been acquainted recently, but you certainly seem to be showing an interest in her that goes further than this particular situation."

James shook his head, but Lord Stoneleigh chuckled, forcing words of denial from James' lips.

"No... I..."

Lord Stoneleigh chuckled again, and went on before James could say more.

"First – and you may not be aware of this - but you have spoken of none other than her these last two weeks. Secondly, I have seen you searching for her at society events and ignoring others entirely. You may protest, but you have certainly done so. Is there a particular reason for that, I wonder?"

"It is just as well we are good friends, else I would be eager to deny everything," James responded as Lord Stoneleigh chuckled. "Goodness, you are bold in your questions."

Lord Stoneleigh shrugged.

"Matters of the heart ought always to be discussed, as far as I am concerned," he stated firmly. "Particularly in

circumstances such as this, when one is already caught up with a great many thoughts. I understand your eagerness to speak with the lady as regards the bawdy house, but if there is something more, then that is something else to be considered, is it not?"

"Perhaps it is," James admitted. "What is disappointing to me is that she seems so afraid."

"It may be that she is not afraid of you in particular, but more that she is unwilling to speak to anyone. I have already told you that she has a quiet nature, have I not?" Seeing James nod, Lord Stoneleigh continued. "Given that she is chaperoning her younger sister, I suspect Miss Shaw will be much too ready to shrink into the background."

James nodded slowly, considering this. It was a wise remark and yet his heart twisted all the more when he thought of it. He did not want her to fade into the background. He wanted her to be seen, to be aware that she was just as important as her sister. Why he should have such a thought was another matter entirely and, with an effort, he forced himself back to the conversation about how to find the lady so that she would speak to him without fear.

"That still brings me to the difficulty I have at present, in talking with Miss Shaw," he stated. "There is a ball this evening. Mayhap she will decide to be present, and I can attempt to speak with her then."

A quiet rap at the door interrupted their conversation and James called for the butler to enter.

"My Lord, there are two young ladies wishing to speak with you." He lifted one eyebrow as James shot a glance towards Lord Stoneleigh. "They are *unchaperoned*."

"Their names please." The butler handed James a card and to his utter astonishment, he read the name of Miss Tara Shaw. Blinking rapidly, he handed it to Lord Stoneleigh, then nodded to his butler. "Send them in, and then bring us some tea."

The butler did not so much as raise an eyebrow. Instead, he nodded and exited the room, leaving James to try to collect

himself.

Whatever are they doing here, particularly if neither of them has a chaperone?

He did not have much time to think, and Lord Stoneleigh was only able to mutter one small exclamation before the door opened again, and the two Misses Shaw stepped into the room.

James went to them immediately, even as Stoneleigh also rose to welcome them.

“Good afternoon. Please come in. I can send for a maid if you wish?”

The young ladies shared a glance, only for the elder to shake her head. She was, James noted, looking anywhere but at his face. His own heart turned over on itself as a desire to draw closer to her began to rush through him, but he stayed precisely where he was.

“Our father does not know that we are here, Lord Pottinger. We have kept it from him - *I have kept it from him.*”

“You have been trying to protect us.” Mary Shaw patted her sister’s hand before practically leading her to a place where they might sit together. “Before we begin, Lord Pottinger, I must beg of you to listen to this with an open heart. If I am to speak honestly, I will tell you that my sister is terribly afraid of the consequences of speaking with you. I only learned of this yesterday, but now that I know all, it is, to *my mind*, the best course of action to tell you everything.”

James found himself stumbling towards a chair, sinking into it, his hands gripping the arms. He managed a small nod, but nothing more. Somehow, he was able to tell that what the Misses Shaw were about to reveal to him would be of great significance to his circumstances, and what had occurred.

“I can take my leave if you wish?”

Lord Stoneleigh’s voice broke through the sudden silence and James cleared his throat, trying to take control of the desperate tension flooding him.

“Lord Stoneleigh can be trusted,” he found himself saying, his voice rasping. “You can be sure of that.”

“Then please, stay. It may be best for Lord Pottinger also if you are here to support him.”

At the eldest Miss Shaw’s words, James’ heart began to pound with such fury that he was sure it echoed around the room. Tara was still not looking at him, sitting with her hands in her lap, her fingers twisting together as she stared down at them rather than lift her head. The dark gold of her hair was no longer as resplendent as he remembered it. In fact, everything about her seemed to be a little darker.

“There was an... incident.”

Immediately, Miss Mary Shaw interrupted her sister. Taking in a deep breath, she grasped her sister’s hand.

“I shall speak my part without shame,” she continued, lifting her chin, and looking directly at James. “What my sister is trying to say and trying to hide from you at the same time, is that we both attended a masquerade ball some weeks ago. It was close to the beginning of the Season. As you may be aware, my mother is no longer with us and, since my father has settled his heir and my elder sister, he appears to care very little for our situations. Therefore, Tara has placed herself as my chaperone.” At this, Miss Tara Shaw placed one hand over her eyes. Her lips were trembling, and James felt something quake inside him in response. “My sister believes that if she had kept a closer eye on me that evening, then none of this would have occurred,” the younger continued, her own voice shaking a little. “But that is not true. She bears no responsibility for any of this. It was my doing and I will admit to it openly.”

“And what is it that took place?” Lord Stoneleigh asked, quietly, as the elder Miss Shaw returned her hands to her lap. “Please speak as freely and as openly as you wish. Both Lord Pottinger and I are gentlemen of honor. It is plain that there is a great burden on your hearts, and it is that heavy weight that has you coming to speak with us in such an open fashion. We will both honor that.”

He shot a hard look over toward James, who quickly found himself nodding. He could say no words. The strain he felt was much too great.

Sighing, Miss Mary Shaw settled her own hands in her lap, emulating her sister.

“Thank you, Lord Stoneleigh.” Pressing her lips tightly together, she closed her eyes for a moment before she continued. “That evening, one particular gentleman came to speak with me. Of course, he wore a mask, as did I. I was aware that we had not been formally introduced and did ask for his name and title, and for someone to introduce us. However, he did not give me that information, and his attention and flirtations soon overwhelmed my thinking, and made me so caught up in what was happening that I accepted it when he told me that it was only a small matter. Formal introductions were not necessary, he stated, not when he had been captured by my beauty.”

Dropping her head, she took a moment as James closed his eyes. He did not need Miss Shaw to tell him what had happened. He was already aware of what such gentlemen attempted to do to young, naïve ladies making their first come out into society.

“I see.”

“I was caught by him. In my own foolishness, I allowed him to lead me from the ballroom to another smaller room. It was dark, with only one or two candles and, when he removed his mask, I did not even have an opportunity to glance at his face... if you understand my meaning.”

The scoundrel caught her in his embrace. James frowned hard, looking away so that Miss Shaw would not think that he was directing such a look toward her. He had very little respect for gentlemen, who took advantage of young ladies without any real consideration for their feelings or reputation.

“I will not go into particular detail, but my elder sister had instructed me on proper decorum on many an occasion. I knew that what I was doing was not at all proper, nor seemly. Indeed, I am mortified now when I think of it, for I was foolish

to permit him to lead me away from my sister in the first place. Make no mistake, I knew full well that I ought not be there. I found him so very charming that I simply ignored what was right and did what I wanted. When my sister realized I was gone, she came to find me and when I was discovered, I was so heavily ashamed that I fled, back to the ballroom as she requested that I do. I found my friend, and I stayed with her until Tara returned. I believed that all my sister had done was merely speak to the gentleman sharply, to perhaps insist that he stay away from me. I did not know until yesterday that there was more to the matter than I believed.”

This was then followed by a look toward Miss Tara Shaw but, rather than look up, she simply lowered her head a little more.

“The man was obviously a scoundrel!”

The words slipped from James’ lips, despite his intent not to interrupt the lady. But it was the elder Miss Shaw who now spoke.

“Indeed. I foolishly assumed that I could simply demand that this gentleman leave my sister alone, and return to the ballroom myself thereafter.” Miss Shaw’s voice was quiet, her shoulders sinking as she sighed. “I see now how foolish I was to think so. This gentleman had clearly planned everything, even to the point of using the masquerade as a place to hide his features from both myself and my sister. He stated that he would ruin Mary completely unless I did what he asked. That he would cause there to be rumors, that all of society would know that Mary was forward, and worse... I did not doubt him for a moment. It was as if I could see his cruelty reaching out to injure me in his words.”

Her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her quick breaths shuddering in and out of her – and James’s heart yearned to comfort her, to the point that he actually shifted forward in his chair, only to grip the arms a little more tightly.

“What was it that he demanded of you?” he asked, realizing, too late, just how gruff he sounded.

Miss Tara Shaw's head lifted suddenly, and she looked back at him, but her eyes dropped away at the very next moment, her face white. Her lips pressed together for a long moment as if she were trying to stop them from trembling.

"You will have every reason to be angry with me, to scorn me, and to have every desire to punish me, Lord Pottinger," she whispered, one hand going to her throat for a moment. "This man told me that I had to do what was asked, or else Mary would be ruined. He said that it would be a small thing, not so difficult to do. I felt that I had no choice, for my sister's sake. Through notes, he demanded that I meet him in the East End of London on one particular night. I did not know what I was to do until I arrived, but he explained all to me thereafter."

It took some moments for James to understand what she meant, but when the realization dawned, it was as if he had been catapulted back against the wall of his drawing room. He stared at her, hardly breathing, but she did not so much as glance up at him.

"Explained...?"

"I was required to pretend to be one of the young women working at that establishment." There was no strength to her voice now, as if it might fade away at any moment. "I was to demand that you sign the vowel, knowing that I was asking more from you than you ought to have ever given, knowing that what was being implied had not taken place. And I did so for the sake of my sister."

So many feelings rushed upon James that for many minutes, he simply sat and stared. The door opened and a tray of refreshments was brought in, but still, he said nothing. In fact, it was Lord Stoneleigh who insisted that, once the servants had left the room again, the ladies pour themselves something, commenting on just how strong a character the elder Miss Shaw had to not only do as she had done, but also now to speak so honestly of it. Thereafter, Lord Stoneleigh got up and fetched a brandy for himself and one for James, pressing it into his hand. That action forced James from his stupor, and he dragged in what felt like a much-needed breath, his lungs screaming. A sip of his brandy helped him regain

himself further, and he closed his eyes, discovering a fierce anger burning in his chest.

“It was you.” The hoarseness of his voice scratched around the room, burning through the silence which had drawn itself into the space between them all. “You were the one who was there that evening. You lied to me! You made me believe that I had come there of my own volition, that I had broken the vow I had made to myself. How could you do such a thing? How could you be so unfeeling and inconsiderate? It is clear that you knew the burden you placed upon me, and yet you did so regardless. Did you feel no guilt? No shame over your actions? I have found myself wondering where we had met before, perhaps thinking that it was my heart becoming interested in your company, but now I realize *why* I felt such things. It is because we *have* met before, but only under circumstances that you had no wish to reveal to me.”

Miss Shaw finally lifted her head. Her eyes were swimming with tears, but she did not let any of them fall. Her gaze was steady and fixed on his, and as she took in a deep breath, James’ soul filled with guilt. Guilt that he had said such things to her when it was clear to him that she herself had been suffering a great deal.

“Yes, Lord Pottinger. That was I. I have been desperate to avoid your company and yet you have been so very present these last few weeks. My guilt has been so great that I have tried to hide from you. I can only tell you how sorry I am, but I was forced into this action. I know precisely what that vowel will do to you. You say that I have no consideration for you, but that is not the case. I thought only of my sister and the difficulties which would face her, should this man reveal what she had done. I did not know exactly what it was that this wicked man was to demand of me until I arrived at that dreadful bawdy house, but when he did, I at first tried my best to remove myself from the situation. I told him that I could not do such a thing, and he reminded me again of the consequences of refusing him. What could I have done? What would *you* have done in this situation, Lord Pottinger, if it was your own dear sister who had been so cruelly taken in? Would you not have done anything you could to protect her?”

James huffed out a heavy breath, coupling his hands and then leaning so far forward that his head almost touched them. The truth was that yes, he probably would have done precisely the same, but the injury to his soul felt so great that he could not yet forgive the lady.

“I need to think.”

His response was brusque and immediately both sisters rose to their feet.

“Yes, of course. We quite understand.” The younger Miss Shaw spoke for them both, as the elder simply forced her eyes downwards, her cup of tea untouched on the table in front of her. James looked back at them moodily, his hands clasped still. “We shall take our leave. The only thing I shall beg of you, Lord Pottinger, is not to disgrace my sister. If you have any desire to speak openly of what has occurred, then pray put my name on all of this, rather than that of my sister. She has endured enough already and has given so much of herself that I cannot allow her to suffer even more.”

It was Lord Stoneleigh who answered, perhaps worrying that James would speak much too harshly. He immediately rose to his feet.

“You need not have any fear about that. As I have said, both Lord Pottinger and I are gentlemen of honor. What you have discussed with us this afternoon will remain solely between us. There will be no disgrace, no shame, nothing further for either of you to endure.”

James closed his eyes as the young ladies took their leave. It was only as he felt the soft swish of their passing that he forced himself to lift his head. Miss Tara Shaw had stopped directly in front of him. Her eyes looked down into his, eyes that he had often thought of these last few weeks. Was that attraction, that desire to draw close, something which had come only because of their previous connection, which had remained unknown to him until this moment, or was there something more?

“Despite my sister’s words, you may pass judgment on me in whatever way you see fit,” she told him, her gaze direct and

her words firm, despite the glistening in her eyes. “I am all too aware of how much I deserve your judgment. I am truly sorry for injuring you so. I have confessed the truth to you in the hope that you might be able to use what I have said to discover the man who did such a wicked thing as this – to all of us. And if you cannot, then my guilt will remain with me for the rest of my days, and I will bear the burden gladly.”

James held her gaze steadily, but she simply turned and walked from the room, leaving him to watch her go, as his heart felt heavier with every step she took.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“*I* cannot go out tonight.”

“But you must!” Mary came towards her, reaching out to grip her hands with hers. “To remain at home would not be wise. You will only find yourself struggling with more discontent, more melancholy, more fear. It is better to come out and remain in society so that your thoughts are a little diverted.”

“But what if Lord Pottinger should be there?” Even saying his name brought tears to her eyes. “I do not think I can face him.”

“If he is there, then you shall see and speak with him as you normally would,” her sister replied, firmly. “Tara, you have been incredibly brave already. This is only a little thing that is asked of you now. Lord Pottinger and Lord Stoneleigh gave us their assurance that nothing untoward would be said about either of us. That should rein in your fear a little, at the very least.”

Tara shook her head, saying nothing. She had been entirely unable to forget the look on Lord Pottinger’s face as she had left the room. He had appeared suddenly haggard, staring at her as though he had never really seen her before. How diminished she must be in his eyes now! She was unable to explain it, but that seemed to mean a great deal to her. How she longed for him to understand and accept the reasons behind her actions, and yet she feared that such a thing would never be. He would blame her for everything which had happened since that night, would hold her accountable for the

situation he now found himself in, and she would have nothing to say in her defense. She was, of course, entirely responsible. Had she refused, then perhaps none of this would have taken place.

But Mary would have suffered a great deal.

“I must insist.” Mary let go of her hands. “You are already dressed and prepared. I understand your fear, but I must beg of you to come out with me. I truly believe it will be for the best.”

Tara bit her lip. The thought of seeing Lord Pottinger again was almost too much to bear, but then the awareness that her sister would be left without a chaperone, should she step out without Tara and only with their father, brought itself forcefully to her mind, and she closed her eyes.

“I will go, but only if we do not make ourselves prominent. I have no wish to be amongst society this evening. I do so only for your benefit.”

Opening her eyes, she saw that her sister was smiling, even though her gaze remained steady with determination.

“Very well. I can accept that, and if Lord Pottinger *is* present, then you and I will face him together. You did the right thing in speaking with him, I can assure you of that.”

“If only I did not feel so much remorse, then perhaps I might be a little less afraid,” Tara replied, blinking back tears. “I have injured him so severely. I wish that there was more I could do to free him from the circumstances I placed upon his shoulders.”

“You must not carry the weight of all of this yourself,” Mary replied, turning and catching Tara’s hand so that she might lead her from the room. “Nothing that took place was your fault. I am sure that Lord Pottinger will see that in time.”

Tara said nothing as they made their way to the ball. The strange sensations she had felt with Lord Pottinger upon first seeing him had slowly faded as she had come to terms with the fact that the man whom she thought handsome, the man she was drawn to, was the very same man she had seen that

dreadful night. What she had seen of him - the astonishment in his face, the pain flickering in his blue eyes, and the tightness of his jaw - had not left her since they had spoken together. Had there been even the smallest hint of feeling on his part for her? Did that make her behavior towards him all the worse? The carriage rocked her gently back and forth, as if seeking to comfort her. Keeping her eyes closed, Tara silently prayed that she would be able to endure this evening without any great difficulty. She would be there for her sister, and nothing more, and would be more than relieved to return home once the evening had been brought to an end. The less she could be in society at present, the better.

“Now do take care of your sister.”

Their father patted Tara’s arm gently, although his eyes were already fixed on the door of the house, and a smile was beginning to curve his lips, as though he already knew what distractions were waiting for him inside.

“Yes, Father, I shall,” Tara replied obediently, before following him into the house.

They dutifully greeted their host before making their way into the ballroom, where their father immediately took his leave of them. Tara let out a long sigh, her shoulders dropping as she looked around the room. There were a good many guests here this evening. Perhaps she would be able to fade into the background as she usually did, while Mary, of course, would be encouraged to dance with as many gentlemen as she could, and to garner as much enjoyment from the evening as possible. But for Tara, there could be no delight at present.

“Miss Shaw.” A hand grasped hers, and Tara let out a gasp of astonishment as she was pulled back toward the edge of the ballroom, whirling around to look up into the face of a gentleman. His other hand went around her waist, and for a moment Tara was afraid that something dreadful was about to take place, only for her to be drawn immediately into a warm embrace as they stood in the shadows. “I am so very sorry.”

Fear rebounded back into her chest, and she made to pull away, only to hear her sister exclaim Lord Pottinger’s name.

Her heart quickened all the more as weakness loosened all of the fearful tension and she found herself leaning against his shoulder, quite unable to do anything more than that. She ought to pull away, she ought to step back from him, for fear of being seen, but since they were already standing in the shadows, and given that the ball was such a big crush, she did not think anything untoward would occur.

Nor did she care.

But why was he holding her so? It was most unlike any gentleman of the *ton* to behave in such a fashion. And what was his apology for?

“You have been through such a great ordeal.” Lord Pottinger finally broke their embrace although his hands slid down her arms to catch her fingers with his. Deep blue eyes flew to hers as he leaned forward, his voice low. “My reaction to you was utterly despicable and must have injured you even more. I am sorry for it. I ought to be joining you, supporting you in dealing with this, rather than blaming you for what has taken place, when you are as much a victim of this gentleman’s schemes as I.”

His eyes continued to search her face, and Tara felt as though he could already read all of the thoughts which were present in her mind. Her breathing was ragged and for some reason, she could not look away from him. Part of her wanted to give herself a solid shake so that she could be sure that what was happening was real, whilst the other part simply wanted to remain like this for as long as she could. Fire was slowly drawing up her arms as Lord Pottinger’s hands tightened and the gentle expression on his face threatened to cause her to break down completely, overwhelmed suddenly by the kindness and understanding he offered her.

“It is not you who ought to be apologizing. It is I.”

“No, my dear lady, no.” Lord Pottinger shook his head firmly and took a step closer to her. His nearness added fresh fuel to the fire already burning in the pit of her stomach, sending flames licking up into her chest. “I reacted poorly, and practically threw you from my house!”

Tara swallowed again, unwilling to simply accept his apology without taking on some of the responsibility.

“But you had every reason to, I am sure. It must have come as a great shock to you, and I more than understand that you required time to think about what I had revealed to you. I assure you, I bear you no ill will.”

Lord Pottinger lowered his head, his blue eyes flashing as his jaw tightened.

“You are so willing to take some of the responsibility, Miss Shaw, but there is no need for you to do so. Your kindness is appreciated, but I am well aware of my fault in this. I should have been grateful for what you had revealed to me and instead, I found myself blaming you for what had taken place. The time I have had to think on it has revealed a great deal to me – and I see now that you are as wounded in all of this as I, for you were forced into behaving so to protect your sister. Understand that I lay no blame at your feet whatsoever.”

Tara blinked furiously, tears beginning to pool in the corners of her eyes as her gaze slid away. Was he truly so generous of spirit?

“But I have lost you your entire fortune,” she mumbled, wishing that she could dash the tears from her eyes, but at the same time wanting to hold onto Lord Pottinger for just as little longer. The strength in his grip bolstered her courage even more and she lifted her chin to look directly up into his eyes. “I am truly sorry for the part I played in this. My sister is very dear to me. I had to protect her, even at your expense.”

“I understand completely, and I certainly do not hold it against you,” came the soft reply. “I can only apologize for my lack of consideration. It must have made you feel—”

“Pray do not apologize for that,” she replied quickly. “Your reaction was not unwarranted. It must have come as a great shock to hear that I, who have been close to you in society for a few weeks, am involved in this particular affair.”

“Yes, I will admit that it was something of a shock,” he replied, smiling a little wryly. “But I am very grateful to you

for your honesty and for your courage in coming to speak with me. I am sure that, together, we will be able to find a way forward... that is, if you are willing to help me?"

Her eyes went wide.

"What is it that you intend to do?"

"I intend to find the person responsible." Lord Pottinger's eyes grew dark as he frowned, although his anger was not directed at her, she realized. "I do not know if it will be possible for me to do such a thing, but that is my intention at least. Sadly, the vowel they had me sign provides no true clues, for it requires that I provide the payment by means of a solicitor's firm, and I am quite certain that such a firm would never break a client's trust. But perhaps if we work together, we will be able to find a way to discover the man responsible so that we will be able to lay the blame at his feet. I am not suggesting that I will be able to regain everything, as my friends have done, but more to state that I *hope* I will be able to do so. In short, I also desire him to face the consequences of his actions. It may be that you are not the first young women whom he has treated in this way, and I certainly wish to prevent him from doing the same to any others!"

A sense of urgency filled Tara.

"Then yes, I eagerly desire to help you in any way that I can. Given what I have done, it is the least I can do now."

Lord Pottinger smiled.

"Recall that I do not blame you for this action, Miss Shaw. I do not blame you for any of it. My only hope is that we might be of assistance to each other, so that satisfaction can be gained for all." It was as if he had opened the door for her, and let her see the light for the first time in many a dark day. Tara looked up at him, her throat constricting as she struggled to find the words to express all that she felt at that moment. Shaking her head, she closed her eyes briefly, but Lord Pottinger seemed to already know what it was that she was trying to express. "You have suffered in this a great deal, I think," he said softly. "No longer shall it be so. You will not be alone, nor shall you continue to bear that burden of guilt that

you have tied to your shoulders for so long. You are quite free, Miss Shaw. Do not allow any guilt to unsettle you any further.”

Before she could react, Tara found herself once more pulled into Lord Pottinger’s embrace. It was a most extraordinary behavior, for no gentleman had ever treated her with such consideration before, and she knew that it was not something she ought to accept, given the circumstances. But regardless, she let herself be swept up into his arms, finding such comfort in his actions that it was as though this was what she had always needed, to recover a little of her happiness. Her eyes closed and she breathed him in, taking in a gentle scent of cinnamon and spice. The gentleman she had been avoiding for so long was suddenly the only one she wanted to be close to. And it was only the gentle clearing of her sister’s throat that forced her back from him.

“It is just as well you are standing in a place that can hide you so well,” Mary quipped as Tara dropped her head, her heart alight as she stepped back, one hand still inexplicably clutching his. “Lord Pottinger, might I also express my gratitude to you for your response to all of this? I know that my sister has been greatly troubled and to hear you speak with such kindness and consideration has greatly pleased my heart. It is just as I have said to my sister on many occasions - she does not bear the guilt in this. She did as any sister would have done.”

“But that is where I think you are mistaken.” Lord Pottinger smiled, taking some of the concern from Tara’s eyes as she looked back at him, wondering what he meant by such a remark. “I do not think that every sister would have behaved with such kindness or such selflessness. You have a great blessing in your sister, Miss Mary, and I am sure you are grateful for it.”

“I am.” Mary’s eyes softened as Tara shook her head, disliking the attention which was being placed upon her. “If I can be of any help to you also, then I would be glad to offer whatever I can.”

Tara's hand reluctantly pulled from Lord Pottinger's, and it was only then that she realized that Lord Stoneleigh was also standing with them. She had not even noticed him before and dropped her head as a flush hit her cheeks. Her feelings about Lord Pottinger were much too complicated for her to work out at present, but certainly there was enough for her to be embarrassed by. Lord Pottinger had pulled her into his embrace not once, but twice, and she had gone there willingly. She found herself desperate to step back toward him, to have that warmth around her once more. But instead, she tried to fix her thoughts on what was being spoken of now, rather than on what she desired.

"The gentleman, whoever he is, has stolen Lord Pottinger's fortune. He was clearly aware of who he was and in addition, may well have used both yourself and your sister to his own advantage," Lord Stoneleigh remarked as Tara nodded slowly. "To my mind, there is every expectation that he will do so again. If it has been successful, then why would he not try the very same thing, again? It would garner him more wealth, and that I am sure, is the reason for his wickedness."

Tara's eyes flared wide.

"Do you mean to say that you think he will try to steal from someone else, in a similar way?"

"Yes, I do. There is a group of us whose fortunes have been taken by unscrupulous fellows, but Lord Pottinger's situation is slightly different. He was not in the same establishment as the rest of us. He did not lose his money in the gambling den. But as three of us who suffered the trickery of that place have now regained our fortunes, those involved in the scheme in the gambling den will almost certainly refrain from continuing on as they have done thus far. They will be too afraid of being discovered. In Lord Pottinger's case, however, given that he was elsewhere, there is no reason for the person responsible not to try again, with someone else. After all, he has not been discovered as yet, he believes. His confidence is sure. What has he to lose?"

“But perhaps he has found enough money,” Tara remarked as Lord Stoneleigh smiled ruefully. “What if he has simply decided to take Lord Pottinger’s wealth and live in contentment? He might already be gone from London.”

“That is a wise consideration.” Lord Pottinger smiled at her. “However, given the experience that these gentlemen have had in pursuing those responsible thus far, I would suggest that this man will be less inclined to behave so. That is simply because his desire to gain wealth is greater than anything else, even the threat of being discovered.”

Tara nodded slowly.

“I suppose it is as you say. There is no expectation of being discovered as yet for this man.” Seeing Lord Pottinger smile, her heart warmed. “What is it then, that we can do? How can we be of aid to you at present?”

“I think we first must meet to discuss everything you can remember about the man himself, in particular,” he replied as Tara nodded. “Anything you can recall of him would be a great help, I am sure.”

“And might I put something to you?” Mary asked, coming to stand beside Tara. “I do not know if you have been invited, but there is another masquerade ball soon to take place.”

Tara caught her breath in sudden astonishment.

“Yes, of course! I had quite forgotten.”

“And a masquerade was where he captured your attention at the first, was it not?” Lord Stoneleigh put to Mary, who immediately nodded. “Perhaps then, it would be wise to make certain we are *all* in attendance that evening.”

He shot a look toward Lord Pottinger, who immediately murmured his agreement before turning to Tara.

“Might I call upon you tomorrow, Miss Shaw?”

Lord Pottinger’s eyes were soft as they rested on hers, and Tara allowed herself to smile back at him, that gentle heat filling her again. There was a freedom now to feel everything she wished for him, for she was no longer held back by her

fear and dismay. It was as if everything she had felt upon seeing Lord Pottinger for the first time had now been set free to roam through her completely. It was the most extraordinary feeling.

“I should be very glad if you would do so,” she answered softly as his smile continued to grow. “You cannot know of my relief, Lord Pottinger, in speaking with you in this manner. To know that you bear me no ill will has made my heart so very happy.”

“Then allow me to prove it to you all the more,” he murmured, bowing low and offering her his arm. “Might you be willing to step out with me for the waltz?”

Her heart skipped a little in her chest as Tara nodded, accepting his arm with only a smile. He reached across and pressed her fingers as he continued to smile down at her, no barriers between them any longer. And when they stepped out to dance, Tara thought her heart might burst. His kindness and consideration of her was more than she had ever dreamed she could deserve and yet being on his arm now felt so wonderful that she could barely take everything in. To be in his arms again, to be close to him as they danced was a wonderful few moments, her heart lifting all the more until fear could no longer wrap its cold, tight hands around it.

CHAPTER NINE

“*A*re you quite ready?”

Lord Stoneleigh’s question came just as James was studying himself in the looking glass above the fireplace, making certain that his hair was perfectly in order.

“Yes, yes, I am ready,” he stated as Lord Stoneleigh chuckled. A little concerned, he whirled around. “Is something wrong? Do I look ridiculous? Is my cravat...?”

“No, no, I should say you look quite resplendent.” From the flicker in Lord Stoneleigh’s eyes, James saw that the man was teasing him. His hands fell to his sides and his lips twisted to one side of his mouth. “You are putting rather a lot more effort into paying a visit to Miss Shaw than you have done on any of our previous visits to various acquaintances.”

He quirked an eyebrow.

“That is because I have always had a direct purpose when it came to speaking with those people,” James retorted. “My sole intention has been to speak with them about what they knew of this fellow who has taken my fortune. That is all.”

“And is that not why we are going to see Miss Shaw, then?” Lord Stoneleigh chuckled as James scowled, all too aware of the flush in his cheeks. “Yes, we are going to speak to her about your fortune, but you are also going to speak with her simply because you enjoy her company. Is that not so?”

James shook his head but did not find his heart eager to tell a lie.

“If you are asking me whether or not I think highly of the lady, then the answer is yes,” he stated unequivocally. “I have always told you that my mind was certain that we had already been acquainted and while I am now fully aware of why that may have occurred, my heart continues to be interested in furthering our connection. That may be very foolish indeed, given our present situation, but I cannot help it. It is as though in speaking with her I have found a great freedom to allow my heart to feel whatever it wishes.”

“And you find yourself feeling something profound for Miss Shaw?”

“I do indeed. I am a little astonished that it has come upon me so quickly, but I am certain that there is more within it than a mere consideration of her feelings or even an admiration for her selfless decisions to help her sister. I did not mean to pull her into my arms last evening, but I found myself doing that very thing on two occasions! It is just as Miss Mary Shaw said: I am glad that we were in the shadows else the entirety of the *ton* would be wondering at my behavior!”

Lord Stoneleigh chuckled.

“That is true, although I must say I am rather taken aback by your openness and honesty about the lady. I did not think that you would be willing to tell me if you truly felt anything for her.”

“I see no reason to hide it,” came the quick response. “Besides which, it is not as though my behavior would be able to keep such a thing from you, I am sure.”

Lord Stoneleigh grinned, then slapped James on the back.

“That is true. You must forgive my bluntness in asking such questions. But you are my friend and I have every intention of finding out as much as I can about everything you feel for this particular young lady. It should be very pleasing indeed if you were to find yourself both with your fortune secure and the beautiful Miss Shaw by your side.”

James opened his mouth to say that it was much too soon to be thinking of anything so very serious but found that his

heart leaped at the idea. Thus, he closed his mouth again and found himself nodding. Considering the way that his heart now yearned for the lady, in finding out the truth he had been able to identify everything he felt. And once the anger had faded away, once the upset and the shock had cleared from his mind, he had been able to see the truth about her character, to see the unselfishness of her behavior, and to understand just how kind and considerate a young lady she was. That, alongside the fact that he found her golden hair and hazel eyes incredibly compelling meant that he simply could not hide his feelings from himself, never mind from anyone else!

“Come now. We will be late, and I am certain that is not the impression you wish to give.”

James had chuckled and hurried towards the door, reaching it before Lord Stoneleigh. This only made his friend laugh as he ambled towards the door and James joined in, finding his heart a good deal more uplifted than he had expected, given the present circumstances. It was as if his fortune did not matter as much anymore, now that he had Miss Shaw as a closer acquaintance.

“I am very much looking forward to walking with her,” he admitted as Lord Stoneleigh grinned. “And perhaps we will begin to talk about what she remembers of that night. But if she does not, I cannot pretend that I will be at *all* disappointed. I am eager only to be in her company.”

“Goodness, you are quite captivated by her, are you not?” came Lord Stoneleigh’s response, although there was a broad smile on his lips as James glanced at him. “Let us hope that your discussion is profitable, one way or the other.”



“GOOD AFTERNOON, MISS SHAW.”

Was it just his imagination, or did her smile seem brighter, her green and brown eyes a good deal more vivid? There was a fresh beauty about her that captured his heart, and he could not look away; did not *want* to look away.

“I am very glad to see you here. I confess that I lay awake last night, a little uncertain as to whether or not everything that had happened truly took place.”

“I can assure you that it did.” He offered her his arm, and she took it at the next moment without even a fraction of hesitation. “I feel as though something wonderful has taken place,” he continued. “I do not mean to say that your telling me what you endured has made my situation much better, but rather that I find myself no longer alone. I do not know if you feel the same way, but that is all that is in my heart.”

Miss Shaw seemed to consider for a moment, her eyes shifting away from him as they meandered slowly through St James’s Park. Then she nodded and smiled softly, although it was not a smile of happiness.

“I will agree with everything that you have just stated,” she answered him. “But yes, there is a great deal of pain there also. I find myself wishing that there had been another choice that I had been able to make, another decision which would not have injured you so.”

“I am not fully injured yet,” he reminded her with a quick smile. “I have not yet paid my vow.”

“But you will be required to do so, will you not?” she asked him, her eyes looking up, fixing themselves to his boldly, perhaps desperate to find out whether or not there was any way for him to escape what she had done.

“It is a legally binding document,” he informed her. “I am sure that the gentleman who did this particular deed made quite certain it could not be easily discarded.”

“I did hear mention of a Jerusalem room, so yes, it is clear that it was very well considered.” A heavy sigh broke from her lips. “If you do not pay it, then you will be ruined, your reputation and your honor destroyed, but if you do, then your fortune will be no more.”

“That is, unless I can find the fellow responsible and make him cancel my debt,” James replied. “I have taken the vow to my solicitors, so that they might look at it in more depth,

but their initial consideration is that it will be difficult, albeit not impossible, to avoid it. However, if I choose not to pay the debt, then I will be in a great deal of disgrace if the *ton* were to hear of the debt itself, and even more so if the reason for my debt was made known.”

“Your *supposed* actions. The *ton* will be given the same lie as you first believed.”

James cleared his throat, trying not to recall the fact that this particular young lady had been next to him when he’d had not even a single stitch of clothing on.

“So we have the mystery of who this particular gentleman is. We do not know his face, for he hid it from both you and your sister. Do you remember anything about him? I know you said it was dark, but perhaps there was even a flicker of an illumination which might have given us something to consider.”

She thought for a short while. There was a slight paleness to her cheeks, and she caught her lip between her bottom teeth, thinking. James twisted his mouth, disliking the distress that such consideration was building within her, but it was important for them both that she recalled everything she could.

“When I first came upon him and my sister, I confess that my vision was a little blurred, such was the anger I felt,” Miss Shaw confessed, dropping her head a little so that her bonnet hid her expression from him. “I am not inclined towards fits of rage, but I wanted desperately to injure him in some way for what he had so carelessly done as regarded my sister.”

“You need not fear that I will think less of you for that,” James replied softly, and her bonnet lifted just a little. “Had I been present, I believe I would have planted him a facer at the very least!”

This brought a quiet giggle from Miss Shaw and James smiled back at her, glad when her eyes met his again. There was already a bond between them, a bond that he could not quite explain, but yet he was deeply grateful for. It was as though, through enduring that dark and dreadful experience, they had found something to build upon. And it was now

growing with such ferocity that James was certain it could not be contained. How grateful he was for it! It was unlike anything he had ever experienced before, for whilst he had made the acquaintance of various gentlemen and ladies, there was nothing else of *this* particular closeness.

“He was a gentleman eager to hide his face from me, although I do recall he was a tall figure, broad. He used it to his advantage, to further intimidate me,” Miss Shaw continued, after a few moments. “When my anger cleared and I realized what he was demanding of me, I could not even lift my eyes to his, such was my horror. Thereafter, he communicated with me only by a note here or there and when I came to that bawdy house in the East End, everything was rather dark. I did not even know that you had been brought into the place until I was summoned. I already knew what part I had to play, by then, for it had all been very clearly set out for me.”

James grimaced.

“You mentioned he sent one or two notes prior to that night,” he said, as she nodded. “Those notes had no distinguishing marks, I assume?”

Miss Shaw shook her head.

“I also burned them. I did not want Mary to catch sight of anything which had been sent to me. She would have demanded to know everything otherwise. I was trying to keep her from any distress.” James opened his mouth to ask something more, only for Miss Shaw to stop suddenly, pulling his arm for a moment. “Wait, I do recall one moment when he leaned close to me.” Waiting silently, James looked down into her face, but she was not looking at him. Instead, her eyes were wide, fixed straight ahead, as though this was not something she had ever recalled before. “He asked me something, but I did not answer. The next moment, I felt his breath run over my skin, and thereafter, something brushed against my cheek. It was an act of intimidation, to make certain that I was terrified enough to do as he demanded.” James let out a slow breath, his heart beating a little faster. “It was not a finger which touched my face - this man must have

had a beard... and with it came a strong scent of pine. I could not help but notice it, given how close he was. I am only frustrated that I did not recall that until this moment.”

“You are a marvel, Miss Shaw.” The immediate flush in her cheeks made him smile. “To recall such details after you have endured so much distress is incredible indeed. I find myself quite in awe of you.”

“But it will not mean a great deal,” she replied, clearly a trifle worried that what she had said would not be of any use to him. “There must be many gentlemen in London who would fit that particular description.”

“But it is better than having no knowledge of the person whatsoever. Now at least we can eliminate all of the clean-shaven gentleman.”

Grinning at her, his heart jumped when light appeared in her eyes.

“Might you wait a moment? I merely wish to ask my sister if what I recall is true.” A flush of red danced in her cheeks as she pressed her lips together. “I will not be a moment.”

James glanced towards where the younger Miss Shaw was walking with Lord Stoneleigh and Lady Sara.

“Certainly.”

She stepped away from him and the loss of her presence by his side felt as though a heavy weight was pulling him down. It was extraordinary just how much he had come to value her, in only these last few days. He turned his eyes away when she pulled her sister to one side, not wanting the younger Miss Shaw to suffer any further embarrassment. This conversation would be difficult enough.

After only a few moments, Miss Shaw came to join him again. She took his arm without him even offering it, eliciting yet another smile from James.

“My sister informs me that my memory is quite correct. She recalls that the mask he wore covered a great deal of his face, but when they were alone....” Trailing off, she twisted

her lips and James reached across with his free hand to press her fingers in silent understanding.

“You have given me a great deal of hope. I am certain that we can do something to discover this fellow, particularly since another masquerade ball is soon to take place.”

“You still believe that he will attempt to do the same thing, again.”

James nodded slowly, an idea quickly coming to him.

“And it may be that I can use my current standing in society to gain a slight advantage,” he murmured as she turned her head to him again. “That is not to boast, but rather to say that I am very well aware that many young ladies – and their mothers – are eager for my company, and will listen to whatever I have to say. If I speak a word into one or two ears, then that may give us a little further chance of success.” He turned his eyes to hers again, recognizing that the desire to pull her close was growing ever more urgently - and he found himself suddenly longing to confess all that was on his heart, as extraordinary as it might be. “I must also hope that whether we find this gentleman or not, our acquaintance may continue. I cannot truly express all that I feel in my heart at present, for it has been thrown from one emotion to the next in such quick succession that I am not certain it has settled!”

A soft laugh came from her.

“Yes, Lord Pottinger. I find myself in much the same state.”

“But what I *should* like to make clear is that my heart has been caught by you since our very first meeting. At the ball, I was glad to dance with you, becoming quite certain that we had already met.”

Miss Shaw frowned.

“But that is only because we *had* already met, Lord Pottinger,” she answered, her lips pulled downwards. “That does not mean that there is any truth or depth of feeling in that regard.”

Heedless of those walking behind him, James stopped and turned, catching both of her hands in his.

“I have not made myself clear, it seems, and that is my fault entirely, for I am certain that I said that to you at one point. However, upon further reflection, I am sure that my heart was eager to acquaint itself with you properly, not because of what we had shared previously, but because it was drawn to your beauty, simply from my first glance. When I realized our previous meeting, it was that injury which had me speaking harshly to you. It was not merited, Miss Shaw, and since then I have found myself pulled towards you all the more, as if what we have already shared has tied a strong rope between us, binding us together. I do not know if you feel anything akin to what I have expressed, but all I wish to say is that I would be very eager to further our connection, once this matter is resolved.”

She did not reply for some minutes. The others continued walking directly past them, while Miss Shaw simply looked up into his eyes. Pools of tears began to form as she held his gaze and James began to fear that he had made a great mistake. Perhaps he had spoken much too openly, long before she was ready to hear what it was that he had to say.

“You astonish me.” Her thin voice had her closing her eyes as two tears ran down her cheeks. “Before we were introduced, I felt a very strange emotion, but I simply could not understand it. It has lingered on within me despite my fears and my urgent desire to stay away from you, for fear of what you might discover. Now that my guilt and shame and fear has been assuaged, my feelings are finally permitted to be free, and I find myself eagerly drawn to you in much the same way as you describe. I did not think that you would ever say such things to me, but it seems that you are more of a generous gentleman, more of a *forgiving* gentleman, than I had ever imagined. You cannot know my gratitude. The fact that you would wish to remain acquainted with me is incredible enough, but to consider me in an even *greater* depth is more extraordinary than I can take in.”

“Then you would be happy to deepen our connection?”

Her smile bloomed big and bright, and James knew the answer before she said it.

“Yes, Lord Pottinger. I would be very glad to do so indeed.”

CHAPTER TEN

“*Y*ou have spent a good deal of time with Lord Pottinger recently.” Mary tipped her head as Tara finished adjusting her gown. “I know that there has been much to discuss, but our plan was solidified some ten days ago, in preparation for this evening. You are eager for his company, are you not?”

Mary did not hold back her questions, and Tara, in turn, felt no desire to hide the truth from her sister.

“I have very much been enjoying Lord Pottinger’s company,” she admitted. “He and I have a shared desire to further our acquaintance with one another, regardless of the situation and the outcome which may follow.”

For a moment, Tara feared that her sister was about to frown her displeasure at such a situation, only for Mary’s eyes to flare and for her, at the very next moment, to fling herself at Tara.

“I am so very glad for you. I am so *very* glad to hear this news!” Mary squealed, her arms wrapped around Tara’s neck. “There is something of significance between you then, is there not?”

Mary’s hands went to Tara’s shoulders as she pulled back to look into her face.

“There may be,” Tara replied cautiously. “The situation is delicate enough as it is, and as you know, given that this evening is the masquerade, we have had a great deal to discuss. But yes, in short, we both found ourselves with the

same sense of affection for each other - which I must confess is the strangest of situations given that *I* was the one who caused him so much pain!”

“Except that it was not your doing,” Mary reminded her, drawing back. “He is clearly as aware of that as I am. I am so very happy for you, Tara. I am sure that he is an excellent gentleman, although I cannot say that I know him particularly well, given that you are *always* in conversation with him!” Tara was immediately about to apologize, only to see the twinkle in her sister’s eye. A blush ran up her cheeks. “You are happy, then?”

“I am *very* happy.” Tara smiled softly, her gaze going away from her sister as she thought about Lord Pottinger and all that they had shared these last few weeks. “He is an excellent gentleman who has such a forgiving heart. He is good and gracious and kind in all things. There is a bond between us that has been forged from the difficulty we both faced and yet it has brought about this magnificent joy that simply will not remove itself from either of our hearts. I cannot tell you how much I long to be in his company. When we are apart, it seems as though the world has gone grey.”

“I am both astonished and delighted to hear you speak so.” Mary pressed Tara’s hands, blinking some quick tears away. “This is what I have longed to see for you, and in a way, it also lessens my own guilt. You may tell me as often as you wish that I was taken in by a gentleman who ought to have known better, but be that as it may, I know that what I did was wrong. Had I not behaved so, then perhaps none of this situation would have occurred.”

“But then might I not also say that I would not have become acquainted with Lord Pottinger?” Tara asked, softly. “Good has come out of the darkness. I only hope that we are able to find the person responsible this evening, so that he will not injure anyone else in the same way as he did you.”

Mary nodded, but dropped her head. Tara stepped forward, eager to say more, but her sister let out a small sniff, lifted her head, and then smiled.

“I will not lose myself to melancholy,” she stated, as Tara smiled back at her. “There is much to do this evening. Let us go and see if we can find the gentleman responsible for all of this suffering, so that we can *all* be filled with a great sense of relief.”

“I am quite sure it shall all come to pass as we wish,” Tara agreed softly. “Is your mask prepared? Do you have it ready?”

“I certainly do.”

Mary giggled as she moved across the room, only to turn back to face Tara, her face hidden by a dark blue mask that was covered in peacock feathers. It shimmered as she moved, and Tara could not help but laugh.

“Good gracious, I do not think anyone will be able to recognize you!”

“That is the idea, is it not? Come now, where is yours?”

Tara gestured to the rather plain mask which was sitting on the bed beside her.

“It hides my features certainly, but it is nowhere near as ornate as yours! Not that I have any intention of hiding away this evening.”

Her sister’s eyes glowed.

“I am very glad indeed to hear you say that. The days of you hiding in the shadows and pushing me forward are gone. You are a young lady in your own right and deserve to be treated so.”

“I thank you.” Picking up her mask from the bed, Tara waved it at her sister. “Are you quite ready?”

Mary dropped the mask from her face and smiled, although it faded quickly.

“I am,” she replied, although there was no trace of laughter in her voice now. “Let us pray that somehow we will be able to find the gentleman responsible, and that both yourself and Lord Pottinger will be able to look to your future with all happiness.”

Tara smiled back at her sister.

“I am certain that we will be able to find such happiness, even without success this evening,” she responded softly. “But yes, let us go.”



“GOOD EVENING, MISS SHAW.”

Tara started and turned swiftly, only to look up into the smiling face of Lord Pottinger. He was not wearing a mask; it dangled from his fingers.

“Goodness, however did you recognize me?” she exclaimed, seeing him smile. “I think my sister’s costume is more interesting than my own, but even my own mask surely hides a good deal of my features!”

“I think I could recognize you anywhere.”

The smile in his eyes and the gentleness of his voice made a heat of awareness rush through her. These last few weeks, they had spent so much time together that she considered every moment a blessing. Her feelings had grown substantially, and there was very little else she wanted to do, other than be by his side.

“And yet you have prevented me from being able to say the same, by refusing to wear your mask,” she teased. “Although I am very glad to see you.” A slight nervousness caught the edge of her voice, and she dropped her eyes. “Do you think that he may be here again this evening?”

“Yes, I believe that he may well be. It is the perfect opportunity for him to secure yet another victim. You are correct, however - I should put on my mask so that my identity is a *little* hidden. Should he recognize me, that may prove itself a little disastrous. Perhaps he may be warned that we are seeking him.”

Relieved that they had stopped to speak in a quieter part of the ballroom, Tara nodded, waiting for him to settle his mask in place, although it only covered his eyes. Her stomach

swirled with a sudden nervousness as she glanced about her, glad that her mask hid enough of her face that her expression would be hidden from those around her. No doubt she would have flushed cheeks and anxious eyes which darted from one side of the room to the other.

“I recall you saying, some time ago, that you thought to use your presence within society to your advantage in this situation,” she murmured softly, keeping her voice low. “Have you managed to do that?”

Lord Pottinger had not been specific in his ideas, and she hadn't pressed him on it either. But when he nodded, a small, satisfied smile spread across his lips and the nervousness in Tara's stomach immediately began to dissipate.

“Yes, I have done so.” He offered her his arm and she took it immediately, with Mary only a short distance behind. “You will not have heard of it, since you are so inclined to keep to the back of society, but I have spoken to one or two ladies and expressed my concern over a man who is known amongst the gentlemen of the *ton*, for behaving in a most indiscreet manner with some young ladies. I have made them aware that I have every intention of preventing this gentleman from continuing to behave in this manner and have begged them for their aid.”

A little confused, Tara looked back at him, frowning.

“But does that not mean that they might then spread this news to the gentleman we seek?”

“There is a chance that they might do so, certainly. However, I did my very best to make it plain that I required their discretion. Indeed, with everyone I spoke to, I made it sound as though they were the only ones I had asked. I encouraged their sense of self-importance. I stated that I would trust them to speak of this matter only with those that they trusted, but to no other, reminding them that should anything happen to make this gentleman aware of my determination, their own daughters could be in danger.”

“I see.” A little astonished at all that Lord Pottinger had thought of, Tara blinked slowly, keeping her eyes forward as she fought to make sense of what he had said. “Then you trust

them. You trust that they will keep their word, as they have said.”

“I am afraid I have no other choice but to trust them. It is the only ploy I have, but any to whom I have spoken will be so very glad that I have singled them out, that they will do *exactly* as I ask. Some others will be genuinely concerned for their daughters and will therefore do as asked too. I cannot speak for everyone, of course. I cannot know their actions, but we must pray that all will go to our advantage.”

Tara nodded, suddenly aware of just how many young ladies in the *ton* would be rather jealous of her close acquaintance with Lord Pottinger when it eventually became known. Thus far, they had kept their close connection hidden from society as a whole, with only the occasional dance and the occasional brief conversation when in amongst society - but there had been many an afternoon call shared with pleasant conversation. This had been done simply to make certain that the gentleman who had orchestrated all of this, whoever he was, would not become suspicious. No doubt he was still watching everything closely, to make sure he was not himself discovered.

“What do you intend to do when you discover him?” Tara asked softly. “We have discussed many a hope of finding the gentleman responsible, but you have never said what it is that you intend to do thereafter.”

A tight laugh came from Lord Pottinger. It was dark and a little strained, and when she glanced at him, he was shaking his head.

“That is because I am not certain. Lord Stoneleigh has given me one or two suggestions, but whether or not I will find myself eager to use any of them is yet to be seen. I am uncertain as to how I will feel when I lay eyes on the fellow and, thus, I do not feel that I can predict my actions - although I can assure you that I will do nothing to either injure him or to bring danger towards myself.”

Tara nodded slowly, not quite certain what to say to this. It was not that she was afraid for Lord Pottinger, but rather that

she was uncertain as to how the evening itself would play out. If there was nothing that could be done, then how was he ever to regain what was his? Surely the man responsible could simply laugh or deny that he had ever been the one to do such a thing? That would mean nothing but difficulty for Lord Pottinger from then on.

“Good evening, Lord Pottinger.”

An older lady sidled towards him, sending a glance towards Tara that she could not quite understand. It was as if she were assessing her, wondering whether or not she was suitable for Lord Pottinger’s company. She was not wearing a mask but had recognized Lord Pottinger regardless.

“Lady Hatton.” Lord Pottinger inclined his head. “Good evening. You may speak freely. I have only just been informing this young lady of what I also spoke of with you. After all, she does have a younger sister.”

In an instant Lady Hatton’s expression changed, and she nodded fervently, coming all the closer before lowering her voice to a loud whisper.

“There is a gentleman here who is as you have described. I saw him arrive and have been watching him closely.”

Tara’s heart skipped a beat, but Lord Pottinger himself seemed to remain quite calm.

“Indeed? Might you point out where this particular gentleman is?”

Before Lady Hatton could do so, someone else hurried towards him, begging Lady Hatton’s pardon for interrupting the conversation and demanding that they speak with Lord Pottinger at once.

Tara took a small step back as Lord Pottinger listened first to one lady and then to another. They both pointed in different directions and to her frustration, another lady came close just after the other two had left. Indeed, in the space of only a few minutes, Lord Pottinger had been spoken to by at least six women who had all told him of a gentleman fitting the description he had given them. When the final lady stepped

away, Tara moved forward, her eyes rounding as she took in Lord Pottinger's lined forehead and twisted lips.

"What are you to do? They cannot *all* be the gentleman we seek."

Glancing around, she was relieved when Lord Stoneleigh, her sister, and Lady Sara, Lord Stoneleigh's betrothed, came to join them. They all wore masks, but Tara knew already who they were.

"I assume you have had many descriptions of this gentleman, Pottinger," Lord Stoneleigh remarked as Lord Pottinger himself nodded.

"I have had at least five men reported to me as possibilities. They have been pointed out to me in various directions; all tall, broad-shouldered men with a beard." Taking a deep breath, he sighed, then closed his eyes. "Perhaps this was not the wisest idea."

"It is the only thing we have to go on," Tara replied, coming to stand beside him and grasping his hand in as surreptitious a manner as she could manage. "We can all step away and keep our eyes on one of these gentlemen. If we see the man we are watching attempting to take a young lady from the room, then we will know that he is the man we must follow."

Her breath shuddered out of her at the thought of again coming face to face with the man who had been so wicked and who had demanded so much from her, but her determination rose all the more as she saw Mary nod. She did not want what had happened to her sister to happen to any other young lady, nor did she want anything like what had happened to Lord Pottinger to happen to anyone else. That was her goal. That was her determination, and after a moment, she felt Lord Pottinger squeeze her hand in assent.

"Be careful and do not let him see you, if you can manage that. Your sister's mask disguises her completely but yours a little less so."

Despite her inner trembling, Tara managed to smile.

“Or maybe it is that you know me so well, you are simply able to tell who it is behind the mask. Whereas someone such as he might be entirely unable to do so.”

A quick smile crossed his lips, and he lifted her hand as if to brush it across his lips, only to drop it again, smiling before giving it another gentle squeeze before turning to the others. Giving them all instructions about where the ladies of the *ton* had told him the supposed culprit might be, Lord Pottinger released her hand and, after another long look, turned and went to his left. The others all took one potential gentleman each as their target and thereafter, Tara found herself quite alone.

Putting her hands behind her back, she meandered slowly across the ballroom in her allocated direction. Her eyes darted from here to there as she searched for a bearded gentleman who was rather tall. It did not take her long to spot him, for a broad-shouldered fellow soon quickly came into view who was talking animatedly with a young lady. His mask covered his forehead, eyes, and cheeks but allowed a dark beard to remain visible. As for the young lady, her mother stood beside her, and Tara let out a small sigh of relief. There would be no discernible way for that gentleman – if he was the gentleman in question - to make off with the young lady to any nearby room.

Looking around the room, Tara shrank back closer to the wall, wondering if they would have any success this evening. Her eyes drifted back towards where the gentleman and the young lady were still conversing, only, to her shock, to see that the young lady’s mother was no longer standing with them. In fact, the gentleman had somehow managed to make it so that only he and the young lady stood together.

Her heart turned over in her chest as she watched the gentleman reach out to run one hand down the lady’s arm. Silently, she willed the girl to step back, to move away, but instead, she only dropped her gaze and smiled. The gentleman had not done anything particular as yet, but that one, single action was enough to convince her that this was the gentleman they were searching for. Her eyes went around the room,

desperate to find Lord Pottinger. If only he was near her, then she would be able to tell him that this man was the one she believed they had been looking for. She dared not leave her position, however, for fear that the gentleman would take his leave, or worse, slip from the room with the young lady.

Tara's breathing quickened rapidly, one hand pressing against her faltering heart as the gentleman turned around and began to walk away with the young lady on his arm. This was still foolishness on the young lady's part for she ought not to be stepping out without her mother present. Licking her lips, Tara stepped forward, following the gentleman and the young lady as her stomach swirled with a mixture of nervousness and fear. The gentleman turned his head and Tara caught the way his eyes glittered as he looked down at the young lady, her skin crawling with the despicable intentions in his smile. Her heart thudded furiously as the gentleman made for the door, a door which would lead away from the ball and into another place entirely – and much to her horror, the young lady seemed entirely willing to go with him.

Mary did the same thing, she reminded herself, a small trickle of sweat running down her spine. And now this gentleman seeks to do the same to another young lady.



SOMEONE CAUGHT HER ARM, and she knew, without even looking at him, that it was Lord Pottinger.

“Is that the gentleman?” Lord Pottinger gestured with his chin towards the fellow who was still drawing ever closer to the door. “The gentleman I was sent to consider could certainly *not* be the man, given that he was shorter than almost every other gentleman here!”

There was a grim smile on his face and his jaw was set, his eyes narrowing slightly as they followed the gentleman and the young lady.

Tara drew in a steady breath and braced herself.

“Yes,” she stated. “Yes, I believe that he is the one we are looking for. I must go and find my sister, Lady Sara and Lord Stoneleigh if we are to follow him. We cannot simply go after him alone.”

“Very well,” Lord Pottinger replied firmly. “I will follow him and, if required, I will confront this fellow. But hopefully you will reach me before that becomes necessary.”

“Pray be careful.” Tara squeezed his hand for a brief moment before turning away, praying that she would find her friends before Lord Pottinger was forced to confront that gentleman. Her heart beat furiously fast as she searched the ballroom for her sister. It did not take long to find the peacock feather mask and with a swell of relief, Tara grasped her hand. “We must go at once. Do you know where Lord Stoneleigh or Lady Sara is?”

“The gentleman you were watching is the man, then?” Mary asked, not answering Tara’s question.

“Yes, I believe so.” Tara cast a worried glance over her shoulder, uncertain as to whether or not Lord Pottinger had stepped forward after the man as yet. “Lord Pottinger is following him, but I do not know if he will be able to wait for our arrival before he must act.”

Mary nodded.

“Let us return to Lord Pottinger’s side,” she stated, as Tara swallowed hard. “We will find Lord Stoneleigh and Lady Sara soon, but we ought not to leave him alone.”

Tara nodded, her throat tight with fear and worry as she hurried back towards the door where she had seen that particular gentleman lead the young lady. Mary herself fell silent, only to stop for a moment, waving one hand at something or someone, but Tara barely paid any attention. Finding the door, Tara closed her eyes, one hand going to her heart.

“Lord Pottinger is not here. He must have followed the gentleman and the young lady.”

“He went in here?”

Tara nodded, bolstering her courage as she lifted her chin and set her shoulders. Without another word she stepped forward, turning the handle and stepping through the door, silently preparing herself for exactly what it was she would see.

To her slight disappointment, it opened only into a hallway, but a murmur of voices caught her attention. Putting one finger to her lips, she glanced at Mary, and then she began to walk up the hallway, although it did not take long for her to spy Lord Pottinger. He was sitting on a small wooden chair, half hidden by a tall fern in a china vase. His jaw was set and his eyes deep, dark blue and he did not so much as smile at her but held out his hand, which she took at once.

“He has just gone inside with the young lady,” he murmured. “No doubt someone will be looking for her very soon, by which time his plan will be fully enacted. We must prevent that from happening again.”

Tara nodded firmly, trying to encourage a little more confidence within herself.

“Then let us make our way inside.”

A sound came from behind her, and she turned her head, only to see Lord Stoneleigh and Lady Sara hurrying towards them. Evidently, her sister had seen them as they made their way to the hallway, and their presence bolstered Tara’s strength a little more. In only a few moments she would be face to face with the gentleman who had threatened her, intimidated her, and forced her to act in a way she would never have done voluntarily.

Lord Pottinger squeezed her hand as though he understood her anxiety. Without another word, he got to his feet and made his way toward the door, leading Tara with him.

“Prepare yourselves.”

He took a deep breath before he set one hand on the door handle, then the next moment, he turned it quickly and pushed it open, making his way determinedly inside.

Darkness was their only greeting, but as Tara pushed her way forward, following Lord Pottinger's lead, she heard a soft exclamation and a growl of frustration.

It seemed as though they had found their culprit.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

James did not hesitate. Seeing Lord Stoneleigh and Lady Sara approaching, he gave his friend a swift nod which was returned at once. Evidently, Lord Stoneleigh knew precisely what it was that James meant to do and, after taking a breath, he pushed open the door.

A soft exclamation came at once, which James assumed was from the young lady that the gentleman had taken into this room. This was immediately followed by a slight cry of fear, as if perhaps she had only just realized what this meant for her reputation, as the gentleman himself let out a low growl.

“Whatever is the meaning of this?”

A gentleman’s voice, loud, brash, and angry, echoed around the room, and at the same moment that he spoke, Miss Shaw grasped James’ hand a little more tightly. Glancing at her, he could not make out her expression in the gloom, but given the tightening of her fingers, he considered that she was, in fact, a little afraid. Perhaps it was that she now recognized the voice, which meant that there could be no doubt that *this* was the same man who had taken Mary into a room such as this... and who had caused so much pain and strife thereafter.

“I could ask you the same.” James stepped a little further forward, pulling his mask off and flinging it aside, trying to make the man out through the darkness, but no illumination was offered him save for a single, flickering candle to his left. Another glance behind him showed that Lord Stoneleigh, Lady Sara, and Miss Mary Shaw were all framed in the doorway,

making certain that the gentleman and the young lady in the room would not be able to pass easily.

“A little more illumination is required, I think.”

Much to James’s astonishment, it was Miss Shaw who released his hand and then moved forward, picking up the single candle and using it to light a few others, her mask now dangling from her fingers. Slowly, the room began to grow a little brighter, and James hurried closer, coming to stand beside Miss Shaw as she held the final candle and candlestick in her hand.

They all stood before the gentleman and James took him in. He was tall, with wide shoulders and a small, dark beard. To James’ frustration, there was a smile playing about his thin lips and his small eyes glittered with malice. The young lady beside him stood quietly, her head low and her hands clasped tightly in front of her. James’ lip curled. He had no doubt that this fellow was the perpetrator of his own suffering.

Before he could say anything, however, Miss Shaw spoke up again. Her confidence in the face of her tormentor brought nothing but admiration to him.

“And what is your name?”

Her voice was soft and quiet, and it was not to the gentleman that she spoke, James realized, but rather to the young lady beside him. Stretching out to one hand towards her, she encouraged her to speak, but it took some moments for the girl to respond.

“Miss Attison.” She dropped her head, looking at her clasped hands. “I am quite ruined, am I not?”

Her voice was thick, with tears breaking through the obvious distress which now plagued her.

Miss Shaw spoke quickly.

“No, not in the least. We have come to protect you. This gentleman, the one you were so eager to follow, has used his wiles before. Knowing this, we came in search of him to make certain he could not attempt to ruin anyone else.”

Standing before them all, it seemed to take Miss Attison a few moments to understand the situation. Lady Sara came up beside Miss Shaw, spreading out one hand towards the unfortunate girl.

“You must return to the ballroom at once, and to your mother, wherever she is gone.”

“She was gone only for a moment. He... he told her that we were to dance.” Turning her head, she glanced up at the still anonymous gentleman, then reached out to grasp Lady Sara’s hand. “This gentleman assured her that I would be quite safe in his company.”

“You do not know his name or title, then?” James put in, as she shook her head, reaching up her free hand to brush tears from her eyes.

A deep sense of certainty filled James’ heart. They had been fortunate enough to find the gentleman responsible *before* he had been able to injure another young lady. Their plan had been successful, although for all he knew, he was not the first to have been taken in by this fellow’s methods. Hopefully, now he could be the last.

“I will take you back.” Lady Sara threw a quick glance towards James and Miss Shaw, leading the young lady towards the door. “I am Lady Sara. I ask you to say to your mother that we are newly acquainted so that she does not feel any concern. Pray do not fear that any of us will speak of this matter. I can assure you that we will not.”

Miss Attison sniffed.

“Thank you.”

James followed them both with his eyes, watching as the door closed – and instantly, the air seemed to grow thicker. His eyes swerved back towards the man before them all, glad that he could not simply leave the room now. There were too many of them to allow him to do so. Finally, it seemed, they would get some answers.

“And here we have the gentleman behind everything.” James took a step forward and threw one hand out towards

him. “Did you think that I would not search for you? Did you think that I would not do everything I could to make certain I found the man responsible for attempting to steal my fortune?”

The man laughed and shrugged before moving to his right to sit down in a chair beside the empty hearth. Crossing his arms, he rested one ankle on his opposite knee and tilted his head to one side, clearly more than able to make himself at ease despite the situation he was faced with.

“I did not think that Miss Shaw here would be foolish enough to admit her wrongdoing – to you of all people! But she dared to admit it, I see. And no doubt her beautiful eyes and distressed soul were enough to make you forgive her?” Chuckling, he shrugged and looked away. “That is a very lovely story I am sure, but unfortunately it does not alter the fact that you owe me a great deal of money.”

“That is nothing but a lie.” Anger gripped him, and James curled his hands into fists, forcing himself to remain as calm as he could, despite the circumstances. “I did *not* spend any time at the bawdy house. I did *not* enjoy the company of any of the young ladies there - and Miss Shaw can attest to that, given that she was the one forced to require me to sign that vowel.”

Again came the dark laugh which had James’ heart twisting in fury. He felt as if he were tightly tied, held hostage by the man responsible for all of this wickedness – but realizing that he could do nothing about such deeds, could not force the cancellation of his debt – even if the man himself seemed to have no concerns as regarded admitting what he had done.

“I am afraid that this situation was necessary for me to achieve my aim.” The man shrugged, as though everything he had done was quite understandable. “Miss Mary Shaw and Miss Tara Shaw were easily manipulated, given that their father does not seem to have any interest in chaperoning them. And the elder Miss Shaw does her *very* best to make certain that her sister is well protected, although she did not do as good a job of it as she ought to have done, on one particular night.”

His grin flashed wide, and fury turned to rage. Close to losing control, James made to step forward, only for Miss Shaw herself to grasp his arm, restraining him. His breathing was heavy, air sucked in between gritted teeth, and he was barely held back by her quiet voice and gentle grip.

“But why use us in the first place?” Miss Shaw’s voice was quiet, pushing away the sharp edge of his anger. “There are many unfortunate ladies in these bawdy houses. I’m sure they would have done as you asked without question.”

“Yes, you are quite correct, Miss Shaw,” the gentleman replied, smiling as though he were proud of her. “But I seek to gain as much wealth as I can, so must give as little of it away as I can. Since I already had to pay a substantial amount for the use of that bawdy house - as well as to pay for the silence of the lady within, the one who keeps all the girls in check, well! That was expensive enough and I did not want to have to pay more. Therefore, it was easier to demand such things of a young lady like yourself, for you would have no other choice but to do as I asked. Thereafter, I was certain that the shame of it would keep your mouth closed. I must admit, however, I never expected that Lord Pottinger here, the man you had cheated, would be the person you would spill your secrets to!”

“Perhaps you do not think as highly of these young ladies’ characters, as you ought.”

James opened and closed his fist as he held his hand behind his back in an attempt to mitigate everything he felt. His body was tense and tight, screaming at him to stride forward and plant one fist into the smug gentleman’s face, but after a struggle, he restrained himself. It would do no good for him to behave so.

The gentleman shrugged.

“It appears in that regard, you are correct,” the man stated firmly. “However, there is also another reason that I wished to use such creatures as the Misses Shaw. It is because young ladies who work in those establishments *cannot* be trusted. I might have paid them for their silence, but they could easily be encouraged into speaking the truth should yet more money be

placed upon them. They fear very little, given that they have to endure so much, which was yet again another reason for me to consider you, Miss Shaw - and you played your part very well, up until the point you decided to tell Lord Pottinger the truth! That is a little disappointing.”

“You were attempting to do the same thing again, tonight, were you not?” James asked, his voice low. “That young lady was to be your next victim.”

“Indeed, she was. This time I would not have used any sister or the like, for she had none, but instead I intended to use the young lady herself. I would have stepped back once particular circumstances had taken place and reminded her of just how dear her mother held her reputation. The rest would have been easily done. I had yet to select a gentleman, but I have time enough for that, given that I must now select an entirely *different* young lady. That is most frustrating.”

“You are despicable.”

James spat his disgust at the man’s wickedness, but he merely shrugged, still smiling his victory.

“What is there for you to do, Lord Pottinger? You have nothing that can prove that I was present that evening and, therefore, Pottinger, you have a choice to make. Either you pay my debt and the matter is forgotten, or you do not – in which case, you shall have to prepare yourself to be entirely ruined.”

Miss Shaw’s breath caught audibly.

“That will alter your consideration of him, will it not?” the man continued, now directing his attention towards Miss Shaw rather than to James. “Consider what will happen should Lord Pottinger be so ruined, with such a scandal tied around him? He will never be able to lift his head up in society again! His children - should he have any children, that is, although I highly doubt that he will find any young lady willing to court him after this – will still suffer under the shadow of their father’s scandal.”

“I should wed him if he were to ask me.” Miss Shaw’s sharp voice rang out around the room as she took a step forward, her head held high and one hand pointed towards the seated gentleman. “You think that he would be completely abandoned should this threat of ruination come to pass? You are mistaken in that.” Her declaration seemed to pull the smile from the gentleman’s face and James’ heart warmed with a small but growing sense of relief. “You shall not succeed in pulling all of his happiness away, no matter how much you think you might have achieved,” she continued, just as the gentleman tried to say something – but Miss Shaw was not finished. Pointing one finger towards the man, she continued to speak with vehemence and fervor, sending James’ confidence soaring. “One does not need to have a satisfactory reputation to achieve happiness. I am certain that Lord Pottinger and I could be very contented indeed in our own estate with our own family and situation. Your threats are not as terrible as you might think. Your power is not as great as you believe it to be.”

James’ lingering anger immediately began to fade away as Miss Shaw painted a beautiful picture of what his future could be, should he share it with Miss Shaw. She was right, he realized, his gaze falling away from the man. Yes, reputation ruination and scandal was a viable threat. Certainly to any children that he might be blessed with could face difficulty – but to imagine that such a threat would remain with all its strength in some twenty years was a laughable idea. Yes, were he to wed Miss Shaw, then he could very easily reside at his estate and live there, quite contented, with his bride. Any children borne to them could be brought up in a happy home and should there be any whispers remaining when it came time for their children to make their own way in life, then he would find a way to deal swiftly with them – and there was always a hope that his many years of contented marriage, should he be blessed with that, would be enough to silence any lingering whispers completely.

“Yes, you are quite right.” Ignoring the fellow completely, he turned and grasped Miss Shaw’s hand. “I had never thought of such a thing, but now that you have said it, it is all that I

find my heart longing for. This man's threats mean nothing to me. How can his words pierce me now, when you hold up such a beautiful picture of our future together?" The desire to grasp hold of it before it had even the smallest opportunity to slip away filled him and he spoke quickly. "That is, if you would have me."

"Have you?" Miss Shaw's eyes widened and, despite the fact that they were standing in front of the very gentleman who had attempted to ruin his life and caused such trouble for her, found that she was laughing with clear and evident joy – a sound that James could not help but join in with. "Would you truly offer me such a thing, Lord Pottinger?"

"Yes, I would." There was not a single modicum of doubt, his heart singing with anticipation of expected happiness. "In such a short space of time, our acquaintance has become so much more than mere familiarity, and my heart has been so overcome with all that I feel for you that to offer you my hand is all that I can think of and the only thing I wish to do. Regardless of what happens to me, regardless of the circumstances that will follow thereafter, I swear to you that I will do everything I can to make our future a happy one."

Miss Shaw's smile spread so very wide that it filled up all the spaces in James' heart and he saw her answer in her vivid hazel eyes.

"Then yes, of course. I should be glad to accept you, Lord Pottinger."

Her hand squeezed his and, were it not for the fact that she was still holding a candlestick in one hand, James was sure she would have flung her arms around his neck. It was the strangest of circumstances, and yet the most jubilant. Laughing he settled one hand around her waist and tugged her closer. Her head rested on his shoulder, and James turned back towards the man who had tried to ruin him, aware that he now, for whatever reason, could not seem to stop smiling.

"You have attempted to cause me a great deal of pain and immense difficulty. Now that I have Miss Shaw by my side, now that I have seen her strength and determination, permit

me to express the same to you.” Taking a deep breath, he tightened his hand on Miss Shaw’s waist. “It appears as though I shall *not* be paying your vowel,” he stated firmly. “You may do as you please. You may pay whomever you wish to threaten my reputation or to attempt to ruin me completely. But you will gain nothing. You will *achieve* nothing. No matter what you do, I will not be scorned. Your little plan has been foiled by the great affection which has flourished between myself and Miss Shaw - and it has flourished solely because of your actions, I might add.”

To James’s delight, the gentleman now seemed entirely non-plussed. He did not seem to know what to do or to say, for his mouth opened and then shut again on at least four occasions before he closed his eyes, and his proud smile was no longer present. Instead, he put one hand to his forehead, letting out a long breath, as if he were battling to find a solution that would once more give him the victory – but he had no strength remaining. Regardless of what he threatened, James had decided that he would not pay the debt.

“But the legal ramifications!” the man sputtered, eventually. “You know that it is legal document.”

“And I shall pay my solicitors to do all that they can to refute it. I will have witnesses state that I was never at that place. If you can pay men or women for their silence, then I can do the same and pay them substantially for telling the truth. The debt shall be tied up in legality for years, and you will pay a great deal in attempting to gain what was never yours to take in the first place.”

The man glowered and began to rise from his chair, his shoulders hunching.

“No. No, this cannot be! I will have your wealth! I require it. I need it.”

“Then I am afraid you will be disappointed.” Miss Shaw spoke up, her voice steady now. “You have nothing.”

“And you have no one to aid you in this – and the man who encouraged you into this scheme, Lord Montague, has left for the continent and I highly doubt that he will return to

England,” James added, seeing the man glower, his confident demeanor quite gone. “The others involved are slowly being discovered and one by one, we shall have *all* of you. This game you play will not be allowed to continue. My advice would be to give up your schemes here and make your way back to whatever estate you come from. Seek to build your own fortune on your own means.”

The man took a step forward and James immediately braced himself, concerned that the man was to throw a punch and worried indeed that Miss Shaw would be caught by it. Before the man could even attempt to strike him, however, the door to the room suddenly flung itself open and a shrill voice echoed through it.

“There he is, Mama! That tall, whiskered gentleman at the back of the room!”

At the next moment, the room seemed to be filled with people – both gentlemen and ladies. The young lady, Miss Attison, had clearly chosen *not* to remain silent about what had taken place and had gone directly to her mother, who in turn had evidently gone to her husband, for they all came forward together, their daughter in front of them. A few others – both gentlemen and ladies – all flooded into the room – perhaps friends of the Miss Attison’s – and all were clearly furious about what this gentleman had tried to do. Dark mutterings echoed around the room, sharp eyes fixed themselves on the man - and James’ heart jumped with a sudden, furious hope.

“How dare you?” Miss Attison’s mother quickened her steps as she walked past James and Miss Shaw, hesitating for not even a moment before slapping the gentleman full across the face. Thereafter, her hands pinned themselves to her hips as she glared at the man, her husband now standing beside her. “You tried to steal our daughter away, did you? And it was only this good gentleman and his friends that prevented you from doing so. Shameful! Utterly shameful.”

“Lord Pottinger and Miss Shaw at your service, my Lady.”

James gave a quick bow, then caught Miss Shaw’s hand. It seemed that this incident could not be kept secret.

“I know you!” another gentleman shouted, as the men all drew closer. “You and I were introduced last Season when you had only just come to take on the title.”

“You know who this man is?” James asked as another gentleman elbowed his way forward, his face dark with anger.

“Yes, I certainly do.” The man drew himself up, pointing one finger at the man’s chest. “This is Edward, Viscount Bickens.”

“Viscount Bickens.” Miss Shaw repeated the name as James drew in a long breath, a sense of satisfaction filling his chest, loosening it. “Well, Viscount Bickens, it seems as though your previous anonymity is no longer able to hide you.”

James smiled quietly as the newly named gentleman glowered back at them. He could do nothing more than that, James knew, for he had nothing with which to threaten them. There was no anonymity now, no threat left for him to make, and certainly no power by which to terrify them. It was all at an end.

“Your father was a gracious, upright man,” the other gentleman continued, throwing up his hands. “How much of a disgrace you are to his memory!”

“My father is the reason for my actions,” Viscount Bickens shot back, his face a little red from where he had been slapped. “Yes, I took on the title, upon my father’s death, but it was a title that came with very little wealth.” His eyes narrowed. “My father had thought it was adequate, but he was sorely mistaken. I had to find a way to improve it.”

Someone else – a rotund, grey-bearded fellow - stepped forward, coming to stand on the other side of James.

“I was acquainted with your father and know how good a gentleman he was. I also know that he lived well within his means for many years. I do not believe what you say. Instead, I think that what you mean to say is that the fortune he left you was not enough to satisfy your needs, your greed.” His voice was harsh, as Lord Bickens dropped his head. “Did you truly

believe that in taking on the title, you would simply be able to do as you please and to live as you wished? To take on a title is a solemn responsibility that demands the very best from us – which is *not* to spend whatever money you have on whatever diversions you enjoy without even considering your obligations! That is *not* what is required from a gentleman.”

Lord Bickens was no longer the calm, laughing gentleman he had been, only a few minutes before. Instead of that laughing smile, there was a tight line playing about his mouth. Instead of mirthful, glinting eyes, they were narrowed and dark in evident rage, and instead of a calm, relaxed demeanor, his hands were curled in fury and his shoulders lifted. To James’ mind, it looked as though he were either going to push his way out of the room or strike out at either himself or one of the other gentlemen who had spoken - but given that there were a good number of men and ladies present in the room, he did not think that either would be possible. There was no escape for the gentleman now. He had been caught, and prevented from taking his freedom, just as he had done to James and Miss Shaw.

“You are *not* a gentleman.” Miss Attison lifted her chin and set narrowed eyes to Lord Bickens. “I was taken in here against my will, and I am so very grateful to these new acquaintances of mine for saving me.”

Another murmur of displeasure ran around the room and James allowed himself a brief smile. That was not quite the entirety of the truth, but he did not think that a demand for the exact nature of what took place was required, particularly if it was to save the young lady’s reputation! In many ways, he was grateful to Miss Attison for choosing to tell her mother about what had happened, rather than keep it to herself – and, thereafter, grateful to her mother for reacting with such outrage and in garnering such support! It meant that they were no longer the only ones pursuing this gentleman’s actions in the hope of bringing some sort of consequences for his cruel behavior. It was not merely their own efforts that would bring Lord Bickens’ dark intentions to an end.

“So we have discovered you, then, Lord Bickens.” James wrapped one arm around Miss Shaw’s shoulders and pulled her a little closer as satisfaction rolled right through him again, relieved that Lord Bickens was now the one who would be disgraced. “Everyone here has seen your malice, your selfishness, and your arrogance. You do not truly believe that we will all keep silent, do you?”

His satisfaction grew still further as the man dropped his head, no longer able to hold James’ gaze.

“I certainly shall not. How *dare* you treat my daughter so?”

A gentleman, who James assumed was Miss Attison’s father, moved forward, clearly unable to hold back his fury in much the same way as his wife had struggled to do so. It was as if he desired to do the very same as she, for he punched Lord Bickens straight across the jaw. Such was the shock of his action, that the man fell back with a loud exclamation, which in turn, brought further shouts from behind him. Turning his head, James became aware that the room was growing even more crowded as more gentlemen and ladies came through the door.

“It seems that news of your actions this evening has already begun to spread through the ballroom, Lord Bickens,” Miss Shaw said loudly, as Lord Bickens rubbed at his bruised jaw, his eyes still flashing, but no words of defense coming from his lips. “It seems that your true character has been revealed – and I realize now just how much you have underestimated those you used for your own advantage. You believed that I was too weak, too afraid, to say anything about what had taken place – and indeed, I believed that myself for a time, telling myself that it was for the best to remain silent. But with encouragement, I found the courage to speak openly first to my sister, but also to the man you tried to cheat.” Turning her head, she looked up at James and smiled. “We have recovered, however. You have no strength any longer, Lord Bickens.”

“You mean to say that Lord Bickens had done something similar to you?”

For a moment, James grew concerned that Miss Shaw might fear she had spoken too openly, but the next moment, such concerns were dashed away as she turned to speak to the lady in question.

“You are Miss Attison’s mother, yes?”

“Lady Rawdon.”

“Then yes, Lady Rawdon, Lord Bickens injured both myself and Lord Pottinger – in a manner a good deal more devious than what he attempted with your daughter, I am afraid. But we have recovered now and there is no lasting injury. He has failed to achieve and maintain his success, and I am only glad that every other young lady in London will be kept safe from him, now that his deceptions have been revealed. His intentions are dark, his heart is deceitful, for he thinks of no one but himself and what he can gain from those who he encourages to trust him.”

This was not denied by the man in question, could *not* be denied by him, and James smiled grimly. What could be said in his defense? What could he say for himself? There was nothing that would satisfy anyone as regarded his supposed innocence. If news about what he had tried to do was already through the ballroom then, no doubt, it would be spread through London come the following day. Lord Bickens would have nowhere to show his face and would be outright rejected by everyone in society, and that was just as it ought to be, James concluded.

“I think we shall take our leave,” he stated, still looking at Lord Bickens before turning to Miss Shaw and smiling down at her. She returned it with a smile of her own before leaning against him a little more as a small, contented sigh broke from her lips. James brushed his lips against her temple, knowing that they were clustered in a small room but that everyone’s attention was on the gentleman before them. His heart held the same relief and contentment that her gentle sigh had expressed, for there was no heavy weight on his shoulders or his heart any longer. Smiling softly, he made to turn away, only for his name to be shouted.

“Lord Pottinger, I still have your vowel!”

Pausing for a moment, he glanced back over his shoulder. Lord Bickens was glaring at him, his lip curling at the edge, but James’ heart did not cry out with even the smallest hint of concern.

“That is true, but I do not think it will be particularly difficult for my solicitors to argue that such a thing was nothing more than a deceit, now that your deeds will become known to all of society,” he replied. “Your reputation will be ground into the dust and, as I have already said, if required, what could prevent me from paying those witnesses even more than *you* gave them to tell me the truth?” Waiting for his words to penetrate Lord Bickens’ mind, James smiled grimly as his foe dropped his head, his chin resting on his chest while, in James’ heart, there was nothing but contentment, as he was secure in the knowledge that there was no longer any threat of poverty hanging over his head. All that Lord Bickens had built up had been cut short, broken down, and completely destroyed. There was nothing for him any longer, and everything for James to gain.

“It is over.”

James smiled as Miss Shaw murmured to herself as they left the room, walking back towards the ballroom. Miss Shaw’s mask was still hanging from her hand, and James quickly realized that he had very little idea as to where his own was. A swirl of desire ran through him and, glancing over his shoulder, he saw that many people were still crowding at the door of the room itself, but none were looking towards him. Where Lady Sara, Miss Mary Shaw, or Lord Stoneleigh were at present he did not know, but that was of very little consequence to him at the moment. He had only one thought in his mind, and he acted upon it swiftly, not allowing himself a moment of hesitation.

Grasping her hand, he stopped and turned to face Miss Shaw. She was ready for him, smiling gently as her eyes met his. Acting quickly and with a great deal of haste, he lowered his head and caught her lips for the briefest moment. Much though would he have liked to linger, given the present

circumstances, he could not, and yet the desire to pull himself closer to her than he had ever been before was only a little satisfied.

When he lifted his head, her eyes were closed, and that gentle smile had blossomed into something beautiful.

“Yes, Miss Shaw,” he murmured, one hand reaching to brush lightly across her cheek. “Yes, my dear lady, it *is* over.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“*I* do not think I have ever seen you so happy!”

Tara laughed softly as her sister smiled in her direction, tilting her head, and paying no attention to the book which was lying on her lap.

“But that’s because I *am* very happy,” she replied, lifting one shoulder. “It has been three days since that masquerade ball, and everything has untied itself and smoothed out so beautifully, so that I have not even the smallest of worries. You cannot know how glad I am that I spoke to Lord Pottinger about everything which took place - and I have you to thank for that encouragement.”

“You were reluctant to even speak of it with me,” her sister reminded her gently. “But I am glad that I made you do so.” Her smile faded and her gaze pulled away from Tara’s. “I saw a good deal of myself when I observed Miss Attison,” she continued, more quietly now. “I saw just how easily I was taken in by Lord Bickens. I saw how easily his words encouraged me to break all propriety and everything I had been taught and, instead of clinging to that, simply to go with him. Strangely, I felt horrified that Miss Attison had done such a thing, even though I knew that I had done exactly the same thing. How foolish I was!”

“I do hope that you will not allow guilt to capture you all over again, however,” Tara replied, getting up from her seat and wandering towards the window, looking out at the London street below as a sense of freedom had her smiling softly to herself. It proved that there was no longer anything to burden

her heart or her mind and, for that, she could not express her relief.

“I have felt such guilt for so many days,” she murmured, half to herself and half to her sister, “but now that I am free of it, it is as though I have stepped forward into the light when, for so many weeks, I have hidden in shadow. I often stood at this window, wondering just how much condemnation would be on my soul for what I had done, doing all that I could to keep the truth of my actions from you, and feeling the burden all the heavier as I did so. Now, however, that burden is no longer present, and I am all the better for it.” Taking a breath, she turned back to her sister. “In much the same way as I have found my own freedoms, I would also seek to encourage you with yours. Yes, Lord Bickens behaved inappropriately and yes, you were encouraged to step into his embrace when you knew you ought not to do so, but surely, as you have seen for yourself, he is a gentleman who is well able to encourage the affections and interest of *any* young lady. I can easily see why any young woman would be taken in by him. You must surely see that also.” Offering Mary a smile, she waited until her sister began to nod slowly, although there was still a slight glassiness in her eyes. “He was cruelty itself, Mary, and all that has been revealed now. Lord Bickens’ nature and true character have been seen by many. There is nothing that need burden your soul any longer. Do not permit it to do so. It will only weigh you down.”

“Thank you, Tara.” Mary smiled, but there was a slight glistening in her eyes which betrayed her ongoing upset. “It may sound very foolish indeed, but in coming upon Miss Attison and Lord Bickens, I saw myself in a way that I had never seen me before, and in many ways, I found my heart pained over what I had done.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that I am broken-hearted about how my actions affected you. It was always unfair that the requirement was set upon *your* shoulders to be my chaperone,” Mary replied quietly. “You felt such distress about my foolish actions. You desired to protect me, reminded me repeatedly

what was expected of me, and, in the end, did a good deal more than ever should have been required of you.”

“But I was glad to do it,” Tara protested weakly. “You are my sister. You have always had the bigger share of beauty, of charm, and I promise you, I have never been envious of that. It was only right to my mind that I should treat you with as much care as our mother would have done, had she still been here. Given that our father cared so little for either of us, I felt it my duty, and I have not been upset nor found myself restricted in doing it. I have been eager in my desire for you to find a suitable match, Mary. I am aware that such circumstances are a little out of the ordinary but given that I am in my third Season, it has always seemed right for me to step into that place. I truly mean it when I say that I have been very glad indeed to do it.”

Mary rose from her seat, coming across to Tara and putting her arms around her, embracing her. Tears burned in Tara’s eyes, but they were not of sorrow. Instead, they were of gratitude and relief that she was once more joined with her sister in perfect contentment.

“I do not think that you will be able to continue as my chaperone, however.” Mary replied as Tara lifted her eyebrows in surprise, pulling back from their embrace.

“Whatever do you mean? I have every intention of doing so.”

Mary laughed, wiping her eyes with her other hand at the same time.

“You cannot be my chaperone if you are making preparations for your own wedding!”

Tara’s cheeks flushed hot. When Lord Bickens had been making a mockery of them all, she had found herself speaking to him and to Lord Pottinger with a boldness that had never been a part of her before. Three days later, however, Lord Pottinger had still not spoken to her of it, to the point that Tara was now beginning to doubt that his proposal and her acceptance of it had been genuine. Perhaps it has merely been

a ploy to unsettle Lord Bickens – a ploy which had worked, nonetheless.

“Your smile has faded.” Tilting her head, Mary studied Tara as Tara herself fought the urge to turn her head away. “Something is the matter. What is it?” Tara shrugged, fearful that she would appear foolish if she told her sister the truth. “After everything that we have shared and endured together, you can speak to me of this,” Mary encouraged her gently. “I will not laugh at nor mock you, and I am certain Lord Pottinger has not ended your close acquaintance, else you would not appear as happy as you are at present.”

“No, nothing of the sort!” Tara spoke quickly. “It is only that - and this is where I believe I may be being a little foolish - he has not spoken of our betrothal these last three days, nor has he spoken to Father as yet.”

“But you have barely seen him?” Mary merely pointed out. “He has been caught up with his solicitors and his vowel, as well as returning to the bawdy house in search of witnesses, has he not?”

“Yes, he has. His suggestion to Lord Bickens that he would be willing to pay a good deal more to have the truth spoken by those present at the house appears to have been a legitimate one. He has briefly told me that his solicitors now feel almost entirely confident that, the vowel can be disputed successfully, given how ruined Lord Bickens’ reputation is. I am certain that with these witnesses, he will be able to prove that he was tricked into signing that particular vowel, should it come to it. It may take a little time, but I do not think he will ever have to face poverty, for which I am very relieved. I think it would have been a great hardship for him.”

“A hardship for you both.” Mary shook her head then smiled at Tara. “I am very glad for you both. I would encourage you also not to have any great fear. I cannot tell you of my joy when Lord Pottinger asked for your hand – and your description of it was the most beautiful future. When you finished speaking of that, Lord Pottinger’s eyes were alight, as though the most wonderful idea had been offered to him. I am certain that the only reason he has not spoken to you of it is

simply because of the present circumstances which require so many things to be done, taking so much of his time. These matters must be very weighty indeed, and I am certain that he will come to you in time. I highly doubt that Lord Pottinger even suspects you have any doubts of this kind!”

Tara breathed out slowly before drawing in some deeper breaths, trying to release the tension which filled her. Her sister was correct; there was nothing for her to be concerned about, and to have such doubts was entirely foolish. All that was required of her at present was to trust that everything Lord Pottinger had said was genuine, and came from his heart – just as everything *she* had said had been.

“You have reassured me,” she told her sister, managing a small smile, “but that does not mean that I cannot continue to be your chaperone until I am wed, at least. Perhaps I will be able to arrange my marriage for after the Season - or as near to the very end as I can manage. Father will do very little for you otherwise.”

“Or mayhap your absence will force him to do as he ought,” her sister remarked, one eyebrow lifting gently. “Do not hold back your own happiness for my sake. You have done more than enough of that already. I should like you to be free from any sort of burden now, Tara. You will have only happiness, for happiness is all that you deserve.”



“I CANNOT TELL you how glad I was to receive your note. I am only sorry that it has taken me so long to spend more than a few brief minutes in your company,” Lord Pottinger replied. “I have had a great deal of difficulty these last few days, but I am very glad to say that all has now been resolved.”

Hope flared in Tara’s chest.

“You mean to say, then, that you have no concern as regards your future, nor your wealth?”

“No, I do not. That vowel has been completely canceled, and the burden of debt taken away. My solicitors have been

able to prove that Lord Bickens had treated me unfairly and tricked me into that particular debt. Given his reputation, it did not take much convincing in the end, I believe.”

Relief flooded through Tara and, for a moment, she closed her eyes, pausing in their walk together.

“I am so very glad to hear that news. I know how much of a struggle it would have been for you to have lost your fortune.”

“I believe it certainly would have been difficult, but to have you by my side, I am sure would have made all the difference,” Lord Pottinger murmured, glancing at her with eyes so bright that she wanted to simply stare up at him for as long as he would permit her, such was the intensity of his gaze.

“It was what *you* said that made me realize just how much I did not need my fortune to be contented. Your closeness has been a great blessing and comfort to me, and it is because of you that I now see just how much I have gained through this dark experience.”

“I feel the same way,” Tara murmured as Lord Pottinger smiled at her. “It has been difficult, certainly, but how much things have changed between us now! I recall stepping into the ballroom and seeing you for the very first time. My heart turned over and I found myself unable to draw my eyes away from you. It was only when I learned who you were that I knew I could no longer consider you, nor my feelings in that regard. My emotions refused to leave me, however, even though I did all that I could to force them from myself. There has been a great deal of instability and confusion, has there not? But now that we are at this place, at this juncture together, I find myself almost glad of it all.”

“You speak just as I feel.” Lord Pottinger reached to press her fingers with his as her hand remained tucked into his arm and Tara could not forget the way that his lips had touched hers, albeit briefly, the night of the masquerade ball. It had been the crescendo to an extraordinary evening and had brought her such an overwhelming sense of joy that she had

been unable to forget it ever since: that flair of surprise, the curling warmth of delight and astonishment that rose up within her again as she remembered how his arms had slid around her waist, how he had held her close and how she had felt such comfort - a comfort that she hoped would continue for the rest of her days, should Lord Pottinger still wish to marry her. "I still remember the first time I saw you also." Lord Pottinger's voice had softened a little, becoming quieter as she looked up at him, the wind brushing aside some blonde curls from her forehead as her bonnet kept her face hidden from the sun. "I was certain that we had met somewhere before, but there was more to my consideration than that. I can see that now. There was a desire for your presence that simply would not leave me. I found myself wondering about you that night when I returned home from the ball, and in the days thereafter. I also quickly realized that my consideration of you was something I had never felt before and I can safely say that such a feeling has continued until this moment. I suspect that it shall continue till the end of my days."

At this Tara let out such a breath of relief that Lord Pottinger's eyebrows lifted. Heat burrowed into her chest, and she shook her head, not wanting to tell him that she had been a little afraid he had thought that their betrothal in front of Lord Bickens had only been a spectacle to prove to him that they were not afraid of his endeavors.

"You did not doubt my affection, I hope?"

"It is not that I doubted it, more that I was a little afraid that the reason for our betrothal was a response to Lord Bickens' mockery."

"And is that how you felt?"

A little concerned, Tara quickly grasped his arm, looking up at him.

"No, indeed not. I meant every single word that I said!"

"As did I." He smiled back at her, and Tara let out slow breath, heat pooling in the depths of her stomach at the tenderness in his expression. "I know that I have not spoken to

your father as yet, but I have every intention of doing so – this afternoon, in fact, once we have returned from our walk.”

A deep, contented breath escaped her.

“I have every certainty that he will accept your offer for my hand without question!”

Lord Pottinger chuckled.

“I am glad to hear it.” Smiling at her for another moment, he paused, bringing their steps to a stop. “I have something that I would like to return to you.”

“Return to me?” She looked at him, confused. “I do not recall you ever taking something from me.”

Lord Pottinger chuckled.

“That may be so, but this has been with me since the very first moment we met. You may not have been aware of it, but I can assure you that I am quite sure that this belongs to you.” Tara blinked, a little confused. How could he have something from the very first moment that they had met? “Perhaps I should have returned this to you sooner. But in the course of our endeavors, I found myself distracted, and quite forgot about it. Initially I thought I could use it to find the person responsible for what had taken place, but when you confessed all to me, there was no need for me to do so any longer.” To her utter astonishment, he pulled from his pocket the pendant she had long been looking for. She stopped walking, staring at him as he held it out to her. “As I have said, I am sorry that I did not return it to you before now. I should have done so.”

Tears blurred her vision as she reached out to take it, her hand trembling a little.

“I did not think that I would ever see this again. I thought I had lost it completely.” Swallowing her tears, she grasped the pendant carefully. “Do you realize that this is why I was in the East End in the first place, why I went back to that dreadful bawdy house? This was why you saw me there that afternoon.”

Lord Pottinger’s eyes flared for a moment and then he put one arm around her shoulders.

“I did not realize how much this meant to you. I can see from your expression that it must mean a great deal.”

Despite the fact that they were walking in the park, albeit with a chaperone behind them, Tara leaned into Lord Pottinger, her head going to his shoulder as she held the pendant tightly in her hand.

“Yes,” she whispered softly, not quite trusting her voice for fear that it would break at any moment. “This pendant means so much to me. It is the only thing that I was given to remember my mother by.”

“Goodness, then I feel even more terrible that I did not give it to you sooner.”

“You were not to know. I am sure that, to your eyes, it merely looked like a simple piece of jewelry.” She looked down at it in her hand, then turned her eyes back towards him. “However, did you come to find it? Was it after I had left the room?”

“No. If you recall, you spoke to me. I did not fully understand why you did so, but to my mind, it seemed as though you had wanted to say something more. You knew my title, even though I was sure I had not given it to you. You were warning me to take myself far from that place, only to be interrupted by a rap at the door. I still recall seeing the glint of fear in your eyes as you stumbled back toward it. That was the only glimpse I got of you, and in my desperation, I reached for you in the darkness, my fingers grasping whatever they could find to hold. It was then that your pendant must have fallen into my hand, although I did not notice it for some moments after you had left. I clung onto it, believing that I would be able to use it to my advantage, but of course, none of the people present in the bawdy house would either speak to me or look at the pendant. And then of course, I spotted you there that afternoon, and the need for it fell to the back of my mind. Now that I knew you had been present also in that place, my mind thought only of you.”

“I could not believe that I had lost it.” Tara’s heart clenched with the memory of the pain which had filled her

when she realized it was gone. “I so very rarely took it from my neck, and it was not until my sister mentioned it that I realized its absence. It has been around my neck almost every day since my mother passed, and it grieved me dearly to know that not only had I lost it, but the chances of recovering it were very slim indeed. That was why I dared return there, why I forced myself to go back to that place – but of course, I was not to have success. Even if it *had* been there, I doubt they would ever have told me.” Closing her eyes, she rested her head on his shoulder once more, a small, contented sigh escaping. “And now you have returned it to me. It is so wondrous that I do not think I can express to you the gratitude which is in my heart at present.”

“Then we find ourselves in much the same situation, Miss Shaw,” he answered softly. “I have not always been the best with words when it comes to expressing what I feel, but I want you to know that my heart has filled itself with such a great affection for you that I am certain it can be nothing less than love. It has been swift, and it has been wondrous but that is the truth that lingers there now.”

Tara’s head lifted immediately, her eyes widening as she stared up at Lord Pottinger, wondering if she had heard him correctly. Perhaps she had been mistaken and he had not said such a thing to her after all, but as she gazed up into his face and saw his blue eyes searching hers, she knew the truth.

“You love me?”

“Yes, Miss Shaw - Tara. You will think it a little quick, I am certain, but nothing has ever been slow about our connection! We have hurtled towards each other, despite our restraint. We cannot seem to escape one another, and I, for my part, am very glad of that. I have looked into my heart. I have studied it these last few days, and I have realized that my admiration, my respect, and my affection have joined together as one so that now, I can look down into your beautiful face, into your eyes that continue to captivate me, and truthfully tell you that I love you most dearly.”

Tara did not know how to respond. Her mind was screaming with joy, her heart lifting towards the skies. Before

she knew what she was doing, before she even had a chance to consider that they were standing in the middle of Hyde Park and could be seen by all and sundry, she wrapped her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

Lord Pottinger did not seem to care, either, that they were in public, and acting in a most scandalous manner, for his lips met hers urgently, as though he was eager to confirm everything he had said with a single kiss. His hands went to her waist, and she sighed against him, her joy near completion. She had her mother's pendant back, Lord Pottinger by her side and, in addition, her guilt was alleviated entirely, now that Lord Bickens was no longer at liberty to continue with his wicked scheme. Lord Pottinger's arms encircled her waist and half lifted her off the ground, eliciting a squeal of delight from Tara.

When he set her down and reached for her hands, Tara reluctantly broke their kiss and stepped back.

"Might it be that your heart once more says the same as my own?" Lord Pottinger asked, speaking so softly that Tara strained to hear him, forced to linger in closeness with him.

"It does, Lord Pottinger." Tara closed her eyes, her one hand pressed to her heart, oblivious to the fact that there were one or two young ladies who were whispering together, staring in their direction at the obvious and impetuous behaviors that she and Lord Pottinger had just engaged in. "Yes, I believe that I love you too."

Large Pottinger smiled at her, his fingers lacing through hers.

"Then I believe Tara, that we will have no other choice but to marry," he replied as she laughed softly up at him. "Shall we say for a month's time?"

"A month is much too long," she teased as he laughed, his fingers lacing through hers. "Let us say three weeks at the very most, for I do not think I can wait any longer than that to stand up beside you as your bride."

His joyous smile lifted her heart even more.

“I have an even better thought – let us say a fortnight and be done with it – I can obtain a license, and obviate the need for the banns to be read...” he laughed as Tara smiled at him, her eyes dancing. “We have much to discover still, but I look forward to being able to do so as husband and wife. I love you so very much, Tara.”

“As I love you,” she promised, before lifting her lips to his once more.

I AM glad that Lord Pottinger and Miss Shaw found love, after their harrowing adventures! If you missed the first book in the series, [A Viscount's Stolen Fortune](#), you can read a preview in the next few pages!

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Happy Reading!

All my love,

Rose

A VISCOUNT'S STOLEN
FORTUNE

PROLOGUE

“*W*hat say you, Lord Foster, another round?” William tried to find some sort of inner strength by which he could answer, but there did not appear to be any available to him. “Capital. It is good that you are game.”

He blinked furiously, trying to find the words to say that he did not wish to play again, and certainly had not agreed to it. But the words would not come. His jaw seemed tight, unwilling to bend to his will, and anything he wished to say died upon his closed lips.

Closing his eyes, the sounds of cards being dealt reached his ears. Yes, he had drunk a good deal, but he had not imbibed enough to make himself entirely stupid nor stupefied. Why was he struggling to even speak?

“And what shall you bet this time, Lord Foster?”

The gentleman chuckled, and William blinked again, trying to make him out. His vision was a little blurred and for whatever reason, he could not recall the name of the fellow he had sat down to play cards with. This was not his usual gambling den of course - he had come here with some friends, but now was sorely regretting it.

To that end, where were his friends? He did not recall them leaving the table. But then again, he could not remember if any of them had started a game with him, although it would be strange indeed for *all* of them to leave him to play cards alone. Given that this was a part of London none of them were

familiar with, however, perhaps it was to be expected. Mayhap they had chosen to play in another gambling house or to enjoy the company of one of the ladies of the night.

My mind seems strangely clear, but I cannot seem to speak.

“If you wish to put everything on the table, then I shall not prevent you.”

William shook his head no. The action caused him a little pain and he groaned only to hear the gentleman chuckle.

“Very well. You have a strong constitution, I must say. I do not think that *I* would put down everything on the table. Not if I had already lost so very much. You would be signing over almost your entire fortune to me.”

Panic began to spread its way through William’s heart. Somebody said something and laughed harshly, leaving the sound to echo through William’s mind. He did not want to bet any longer but could not find the strength to speak.

“Shall you look at your cards, Lord Foster?”

William tried to lift a hand towards the cards that he knew were already there, but he could not find them. His fingers struck against the solid wood of the table, but, again, he could not find the cards.

“Goodness, you are a little out of sorts, are you not? Perhaps one too many brandies.”

The gentleman’s harsh laugh fired William’s spirits and he managed to focus on the gentleman’s face for a split second. Dark eyes met his gaze and a shock of fair hair pushed back from the gentleman’s brow... but then William’s vision blurred again.

“I have... I have no wish to bet.”

Speaking those words aloud came as a great relief to William. He had managed to say, finally, that he had no wish to continue the game.

“It is a little late, Lord Foster. You cannot pull out of the bet now.”

William shook his head, squeezing his eyes closed. He was not entirely sure what game they were playing, but he had no intention of allowing this fellow to take the last bit of his money.

“No.” He spoke again, the word hissing from his mouth, as though it took every bit of strength that he had to speak it. “No, I end this bet.”

Somehow, he managed to push himself to his feet. A strong hand gripped his arm and William had no strength to shake it off. Everything was swirling. The room threatened to tilt itself from one side to the next, but he clung to whoever it was that held his arm. He had no intention of letting himself fall. Nausea roiled in his stomach, and he took in great breaths, swallowing hard so that he would not cast up his accounts.

“No, I make no bet. I withdraw it.”

“You are not being a gentleman.” The man’s voice had turned hard. “A gentleman does not leave the table in such circumstances – given that I am a Viscount and you one also, it is honorable to finish the game. Perhaps you just need another brandy. It would calm your nerves.”

William shook his head. That was the last thing he required.

“Gentlemen or no, I will not be continuing with this bet. I will take what I have remaining and depart.” It was as if the effects of the brandy were wearing off. He could speak a little more clearly and stand now without difficulty as he let go of the other man’s arm. His vision, however, remained blurry. “I will gather up the last of my things and be on my way. My friends must be nearby.”

“You will sit down, and you will finish the game.”

William took in a long breath - not to raise his courage, but rather to muster his strength. He wanted to *physically* leave this gambling house for good.

“I shall not.” His voice shook with the effort of speaking loudly and standing without aid. “I fully intend to leave this gambling house at once, with all that I have remaining.”

Whilst his resolve remained strong, William could not account for the blow that struck him on the back of the head. Evidently, his determination to leave had displeased the gentleman and darkness soon took William. His coin remained on the table and as he sank into the shadows, he could not help but fear as to what would become of it.

CHAPTER ONE

“*M*y Lord.” The gentle voice of his butler prodded William from sleep. Groaning, he turned over and buried his face in the pillow. “My Lord.” Again, came the butler’s voice, like an insistent prodding that jerked William into wakefulness. The moment he opened his eyes, everything screamed. “I must apologize for my insistence, but five of your closest acquaintances are in the drawing room, determined to speak with you. Lord Stoneleigh is in a somewhat injured state.”

“Injured?” Keeping his eyes closed, William flung one hand over them as he turned over. “What do you mean?”

The butler cleared his throat gently.

“I believe that he has been stabbed, my Lord.” The butler’s voice remained calm, but his words blunt. “A surgeon has already seen to him, but his arm may be damaged permanently, I was told.”

“Permanently?” The shock that flooded through William forced his eyes open as he pushed himself up on his elbows. “Are you quite certain?”

“Yes, my Lord. I did, of course, inquire whether there was anything the gentleman needed, but he stated that the only thing required was for him to speak with you.”

“And he is well?”

The butler blinked.

“As well as can be expected, my Lord.”

William nodded slowly, but then wished he had not, given the pain in his head.

“Must it be at this very moment?” he moaned, as the butler looked at him, the dipping of his mouth appearing a little unsympathetic. “I do not wish to appear heartless but my head...” Squeezing his eyes closed, he let out a heavy sigh. “Can they not wait until I am a little recovered?”

The butler shook his head.

“I apologize, my Lord, but I was told that they wish to speak to you urgently and that they would not leave until they had spoken with you. That is why I came to you at once. It appears most severe indeed.”

“I see.” William realized that he had no other choice but to rise, pushing one hand through his hair as the pain in his head grew. “This is most extraordinary. Whatever is it that they wish to speak to me about so urgently?”

“I could not say, my Lord.” The butler stood dutifully back as William tried to rise from his bed. “Your valet is waiting outside the door; shall I fetch him?”

“Yes.” William’s head was pounding, and he grimaced as he attempted to remove his legs from the sheets. They appeared to be tangled in them, and it took him some time to extricate himself, hampered entirely by the pain in his head. “I am sure that, after last night, my friends must also be feeling the effects of a little too much enjoyment,” he muttered aloud. “Why then-”

Shock tore through him as he suddenly realized that he could not recall what had happened the previous evening. He could not even remember how he had made his way home. A heaviness dropped into the pit of his stomach, although there was no explanation for why he felt such a thing. Had something happened last night that he had forgotten about?

“Jefferies.” Moving forward so that his valet could help him dress, William glanced at his butler who had been on his way out the door. “You may speak freely. Was I in something of a sorry state when I returned home last evening?”

There was no flicker of a smile in the butler's eyes. His expression remained entirely impassive.

"No, my Lord, you were not in your cups. You were entirely unconscious."

William blinked rapidly.

"Unconscious?"

The butler nodded.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Are you quite sure?"

The butler lifted one eyebrow.

"Yes, my Lord. The carriage arrived, but no one emerged. Your coachman and I made certain that you were safe in your bed very soon afterward, however."

Confusion marred William's brow. It was most unlike him to drink so very much that he became lost in drunkenness. He could not recall the last time he had done so. A little merry, perhaps, but never to the point of entirely losing his consciousness.

How very strange.

Shoving his fingers through his short, dark hair in an attempt to soothe the ache, William winced suddenly as his fingers found a rather large bump on the side of his head. Wincing, he traced it gingerly.

That certainly was not there yesterday.

It seemed that the pain in his head was not from drinking a little too much, but rather from whatever had collided with his head. A little concerned that he had been involved in some sort of fight – again, entirely out of character for him – he now wondered if his friends were present to make certain that he was either quite well or willing to take on whatever consequences now faced him. William urged his valet to hurry. *Did not my butler say that Lord Stoneleigh was injured? Surely, I could not have been the one to do such a thing as that!*

“I am glad to see you a little recovered, my Lord.” The butler’s voice remained a dull monotone. “Should I bring you something to drink? Refreshments were offered to your acquaintances, but they were refused.”

“Coffee, please.”

The pain in his head was lingering still, in all its strength, but William ignored it. A new sense of urgency settled over him as he hurried from his bedchamber and made his way directly to the drawing room. Conversation was already taking place as he stepped inside, only to stop dead as he entered the room. His five acquaintances, whom he had stepped out with the previous evening, all turned to look at him as one. Fear began to tie itself around William’s heart.

“Lord Stoneleigh.” William put out one hand towards his friend. “You are injured, my butler tells me.”

His friend nodded but his eyes remained a little wide.

“I am, but that is not the reason we are here. We must know if you are in the same situation as we all find ourselves at present?”

The question made very little sense to William, and he took a moment to study Lord Stoneleigh before turning to the rest of his friends.

“The same situation?” he repeated. “Forgive me, I do not understand.”

“We should never have set foot in that seedy place.” Lord Thornbridge pushed one hand through his hair, adding to its disarray. Silently, William considered that it appeared as though Lord Thornbridge had been doing such a thing for many hours. “It was I who became aware of it first. I spoke to the others, and they are all in the same situation. You are the only one we have not yet spoken to.”

“I do not understand what you mean.” More confused than ever, William spread his hands. “What situation is it that you speak of?”

It was Lord Wiltsham who spoke first. Every other gentleman was staring at William as though they had some

dreadful news to impart but did not quite know how to say it.

“My friend, we have lost our fortunes.”

Shock poured into William’s heart. He stared back at Lord Wiltsham uncomprehendingly.

“Your fortunes?”

“Yes. Some more, some less but a good deal of wealth is gone from us all.”

William closed his eyes, his chest tight. How could this be?

“He does not know.” William’s eyes flew open, swinging towards Lord Pottinger as he looked at the others. “He cannot tell us either.”

“Tell you?” William’s voice was hoarse. “What is it that you mean? How can you have lost your fortunes? What is it you were expecting to hear from me?”

He stared at one gentleman, then moved his gaze to the next. These gentlemen were his friends, and how they could have lost so much coin in one evening was incomprehensible to him. They were not foolish gentlemen. Yes, they enjoyed cards and gambling and the like on occasion, but they would never have been so lacking in wisdom, regardless of how much they had imbibed.

“Some of us do not wish to say it, but it is true.” Lord Silverton glanced at William, then looked away. “We have realized that our fortunes have been lost. Some have a little more left than others, but we are now in great difficulty.”

William shook his head.

“It cannot be. You are all gentlemen with wisdom running through you. You would not behave so without consideration! I cannot believe that you have all willingly set your coin into the hands of others. You would not do such a thing to your family name.”

Lord Stoneleigh was the next to speak.

“I fear you may also be in the same situation, my friend.” His eyes were dull, his face pale – although mayhap that came from his injury. “You are correct that we are gentlemen of wisdom, but making our way to that part of London last evening was not wise. It appears that certain gentlemen - or those masquerading as gentlemen - have taken our coin from us in ways that are both unscrupulous and unfair.”

Fire tore through William as he again shook his head.

“I would never give away my fortune to the point of poverty,” he declared determinedly. “I am certain I would not have done so.”

“As we thought also.” Lord Pottinger threw up his hands. “But you find us now without fortune, leaving us struggling for the remainder of our days. That is, unless we can find a way to recover it from those unscrupulous sorts who have taken it from us... although how we are to prove that they have done so is quite beyond me.”

William took a deep breath. He was quite certain that he would never have behaved in such a foolish way as was being suggested, but the fear that lingered in his friend’s eyes was enough to unsettle him. If it was as they said, then he might well discover himself to be in the same situation as they.

“I am quite sure that I cannot...” Trailing off at the heaviness in each of his friend’s eyes, William sighed, nodded, and rose to his feet. “I will have my man of business discover the truth,” he declared, as his friends glanced at each other. “It *cannot* be as you say. I would certainly never...”

A sudden gasp broke from his lips as the memories began to pour into his mind. He recalled why the pain in his head was so severe, remembered the gentleman who had insisted upon him betting, even though William had been somehow unable to speak. A memory of attempting to declare that he would not bet anymore forced its way into his mind – as well as the pain in his head which had come swiftly thereafter.

“You remember now, I think.” Lord Wiltsham’s smile was rueful. “Something happened, did it not?”

William began to nod slowly, his heart pounding furiously in his chest.

“It is as I feared.” Lord Wiltsham sighed and looked away. “We have all been taken in by someone. I do not know who, for it appears to be different for each of us. Going to that east part of London – to those ‘copper hells’ instead of our own gambling houses - has made a difficult path for all of us now. We have very little fortune left to speak of.”

“But I did not wish to gamble.” Hearing his voice hoarse, William closed his eyes. Thoughts were pouring into his mind, but he could make very little sense of them. “I told him I did not wish to gamble.”

“Then perhaps you did not.” A faint note of hope entered Lord Wiltsham’s voice. “Mayhap you remain free of this injury.”

William opened his eyes and looked straight at his friend.

“No, I do not believe I am.” The truth brought fresh pain to his heart. “I remember now that someone injured me. I do not recall anything after that, but my butler informs me that I arrived home in an unconscious state. If it is as you say, then I am sure that whoever I was playing cards with made certain that they stole a great deal of coin. Lifting his hand, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Perhaps I have lost everything.”

“I will be blunt with you, my friend.” Lord Thornbridge’s eyes were clear, but his words brought fear. “It sounds as though you will discover that you *have* lost a great deal. It may not be everything, but it will certainly be enough to change the course of your life from this day forward.”

The frankness with which he spoke was difficult for William to hear. He wanted to awaken all over again, to imagine that this day was not as it seemed.

“We ought never to have left our usual haunts.” Lord Pottinger dropped his face into his hands, his words muffled. “In doing so, we appear to have been taken advantage of by those who pretended to be naught but gentlemen.”

“They have done more than take advantage.” William’s voice was hoarse. “I recall that I did not feel well last night. My vision was blurred, and I do not even remember the gentleman’s face. And yet somehow, I have managed to lose my fortune to him. My behavior does not make sense, and nor does any of yours.” Silence filled the room as he stretched his hands out wide, looking at each one in turn.

Lord Thornbridge was the first to speak in response.

“You believe that this was deliberate. You think that these... scoundrels... gave us something to make us lose our senses?”

“In my case, I am certain that they did.” William bit his lip. “I cannot give you a clear explanation for it, but I am quite certain that I would never have behaved in such a manner. The responsibility of the title has been heavy on my shoulders for many years, and I would never have given such a fortune away.”

“Nor would I. But yet it seems that I have done so.” Lord Pottinger shook his head. “I cannot see any recourse.”

“And yet it is there.” William took a step closer, refusing to give in to the dread which threatened to tear away every single shred of determination that tried to enter his heart. “The only way we will regain our fortune is to find those responsible, and demand that they return our coin to us. I will not stand by and allow myself to lose what should see me through the remainder of my days – and to set my heir in good standing!”

His friends did not immediately reply. None answered with hope nor expectation, for they all shook their heads and looked away as though they were quite lost in fear and darkness. William could feel it clutching at him also, but he refused to allow its spindly fingers to tighten around his neck.

“We have each lost our fortune in different ways.” Lord Thornbridge shrugged, then dropped his shoulders. “However are we supposed to find those responsible, when we were all in differing situations?”

William spread his hands.

“I cannot say as yet, but there must be something that each of us can do to find out who is to blame. Otherwise, the future of our lives remains rather bleak.”

A sudden thought of Lady Florence filled his mind. He had been about to ask for her hand, but should he tell her about what had occurred, then William was quite certain that she would refuse him. After all, no young lady would consider a gentleman who had no fortune.

His heart sank.

“You are right.” Lord Wiltsham’s voice had a tad more confidence and William lifted his head. “We cannot sit here and simply accept that our fortunes are gone, not if we believe that they have been unfairly taken. Instead, we must do all we can to find the truth and to recover whatever coin we can.”

“I agree.” Lord Stoneleigh tried to spread his hands, then winced with the pain from his injury. “I simply do not know how to go about it.”

“That will take some time, and I would suggest that you give yourself a few days to recover from the shock and to think about what must be done.” Lord Thornbridge now also appeared to be willing to follow William’s lead. “Since I have very little coin left, I must make changes to my household immediately – and I shall have to return to my estate to do it. Thereafter, however, I will consider what I shall do to find out where my fortune has gone. Perhaps we can encourage each other, sharing any news about what we have discovered with each other.”

“Yes, I quite agree.” Letting out a slow breath, William considered what he would now face. It would be difficult, certainly, yet he was prepared. He knew how society would treat him once news about his lack of funds was discovered and William would have to find the mental strength to face it. What was important to him at present was that he found the perpetrators, for that was the only way he could see to regain some of his fortune – and his standing in society.

“I should speak to my man of business at once.” William dropped his head and blew out a huff of breath before he lifted it again. “This will not be a pleasant time, gentlemen. But at least we have the companionship and encouragement of each other as we face this dreadful circumstance together.”

His friends nodded, but no one smiled. A heavy sense of gloom penetrated the air and William’s heart threatened to sink lower still as he fought to cling to his hope that he would restore his fortune soon enough.

I will find out who did this. And I shall not remain in their grip for long.

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