

A Lady's
Brush with
Romance

ELLA EDON

A LADY'S BRUSH WITH ROMANCE

"A masterpiece of love, painted with every kiss..."

ELLA EDON



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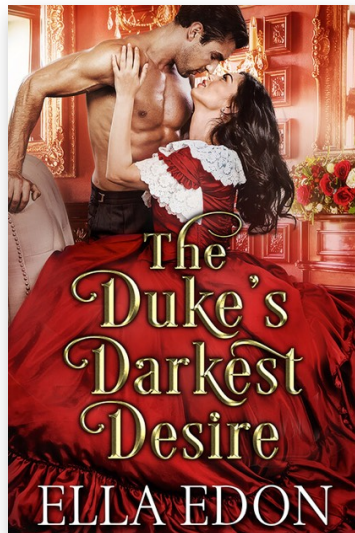
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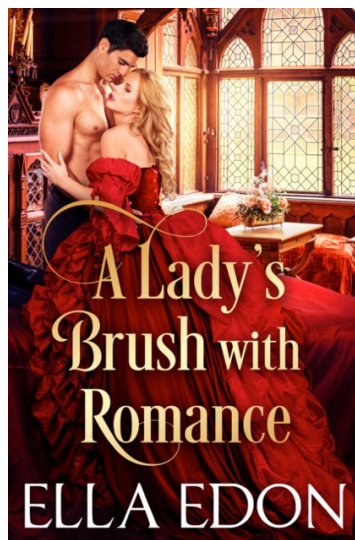
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ABOUT THE BOOK



Her siren's call is a lethal temptation, but he can't resist her charms...

Cecilia Wallace's world is shattered when she is forced to raise her sick brother alone. Desperate to save him, she turns to a ruthless moneylender, only to find herself a pawn in his manipulative games. In a stroke of cunning and as a final attempt to free herself, Cecilia turns to canvas and brush, using her talent to create a breathtaking masterpiece she will claim is the work of her famous, deceased father. **And what better way to set the art world further ablaze, if not to transform herself into the very Nymph of the painting?**

Ezra Spencer, the Duke of Marlborough, has known great sorrow. After the tragic loss of his wife and child, he found solace in the timeless beauty of art. Drawn to its immortal allure, he has dedicated himself to collecting rare and exquisite pieces. Until, one day, he encounters the mystical Nymph,

calling to him like a siren yearning to possess his soul. Due to this very encounter, he eventually meets Cecilia Watson, the owner of a lost painting by the illustrious Thomas Wallace. As he works to uncover the secrets hidden within the brushstrokes of the masterpiece, a fiery attraction burns between them.

And when a moment of vulnerability exposes their desire for each other, Ezra is forced to offer Cecilia a marriage of convenience to avoid a scandal. As they embark on a tumultuous journey together, Ezra finds himself falling hopelessly in love, despite his fear of losing her, as he has lost so much before.

But when Cecilia's troubled past comes back to haunt her, threatening to ruin their future, will their love be the final chapter of their troubled past, or will it be the beginning of a new one?

"A masterpiece of love, painted with every kiss..."



PROLOGUE

Ezra Spencer, Third Earl of Marlborough, preferred to ride in the mornings, even when staying in London. While most of his peers were sleeping off the excesses of the previous night, with most failing to surface before one or two in the afternoon, Ezra found the relative peace of the morns to be preferable to the unrelenting pressure of performing for the *Beau Monde*.

So far, his day had been almost enjoyable. Sir John Sloane had invited him to view his collection, no doubt thinking that the unreasonably early hour of ten in the morning would encourage the young Duke to decline the visit. Ezra smiled at the memory.

“It seems I misread your nature, my boy,” the crotchety old man had eventually conceded. “I took you to be as foolish as the rake in Hogarth’s paintings. Well,” he paused, “I do like to be wrong from time to time. It keeps one sharp.”

“Perhaps in my youth, Sir John,” he’d replied, his eyes feasting on an exquisite watercolor by Richard Westall. “These days I prefer the company of art to that of people.”

Sir John had made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a grunt, then drawn his attention to a series of portraits sketched by Sir John Mortimor.

Yes, it had been a good morning, and Ezra was almost content with the world. Even here in Hyde Park, which was never truly empty, there was enough space to feel he was back on his estates and far from the pressures of High Society. His favorite spot was close to the Serpentine, near to where the dilapidated remains of the old Cheesecake House still stood, and where there was a rich planting of old trees that felt like a mystical forest. Even now, with the sun climbing to its highest point for the day, there was no sign of another living soul around him.

As he neared the shoreline, he became aware of someone singing. A young woman's voice, he guessed, with her beautiful tones rising and falling in a folk song that sounded vaguely familiar but he couldn't quite remember.

"Woah, boy," he murmured to his horse, pulling lightly on the reins to guide Atticus to a standstill. The distant sounds of the city seemed to fade away, and all he could focus on was that beautiful singing.

*"The water is wide, I cannot get over
And neither have I wings to fly.
O go and get me some little boat,
To carry o'er my true love and I.
A-down in the meadows the other day,
A-gathering flowers both red and blue,
A-gathering flowers so fine and gay,
I little thought what love could do."*

He patted his horse lightly on the neck. “Can you hear that, too, boy? Or have I finally lost my mind?”

Atticus snorted in response, and Ezra chuckled.

“Well, maybe I *am* imagining things, my friend, but you have to admit that singing is beautiful. I’d not forgive myself if I left without discovering to whom that voice belongs.”

He swung out his leg and dismounted, and whatever opinion Atticus held on the matter, he chose to keep it to himself, offering no objection as Ezra threw his reins over a nearby branch.

Making his way into the woods, he pushed through the low branches as he moved with as much stealth as he could.

*“I put my hand into one soft bush,
Thinking of the sweet flower to find.
I pricked my finger to the bone,
And left the sweet flower to mind.
I leaned my back up against a great oak,
Thinking him a fine trusty tree.
But first he did bend and then he broke,
So did my love prove false to me.”*

When he finally beheld the singer, his breath caught. She sat among a patch of bluebells and wildflowers, while leaning against an oak tree, just as in her song, and was staring out over the waters of the Serpentine. She was a slight thing, practically ethereal in appearance, and wearing a thin cotton dress that was little more than a slip. Her hair was unbound,

but he could not quite make out the color—dark blonde, light brown perhaps?—for she wore a Spanish-style mantua comb on her head, and a thin white veil cascaded down from it, obscuring the details of her appearance, yet leaving the strong impression of a very beautiful woman.

*“Where love is planted, O there it grows,
It buds and blossoms like some rose;
It has a sweet and pleasant smell,
No flow’r on earth can it excel.
Must I be bound, O and he go free!
Must I love one thing that does not love me!
Why should I act such a childish part,
And love a boy that will break my heart.”*

He stepped forward with the stealth of an expert hunter, but the divine creature whirled her head around to stare at him as though he’d hailed her. The veil draped over the top half of her face, but a fine pair of pale-pink lips were uncovered, and currently shaped around a delightful gasp of surprise. She was younger than he had imagined, and despite her state of *déshabillé*, there was nothing of the courtesan about her. She glanced over her shoulder, revealing a flash of red in that tantalizing hair of hers, and in so doing left Ezra with the strong impression of a fawn about to bolt into the woodlands.

For reasons he did not have the time or inclination to study, he did not want her to go.

“Please, don’t let me disturb you, my lady,” said he, inclining his head in a respectful nod. “I mean you no harm; I simply wanted to listen to the end of your song.”

Her head cocked to one side, and he found himself wishing she would remove the veil just so he could see the color of her eyes. He walked toward her slowly, approaching in the same way he would a skittish foal, but she made no move to leave her patch of bluebells.

“Who are you?” he asked. The woman laughed, and it was an ethereal sound, gentle and teasing, that nonetheless struck him like an arrow through the chest.

“I’m the nymph,” she replied, that perfect mouth curving into an innocent smile.

Ezra couldn’t help but smile back.

“*The* nymph?” he repeated. “Not just *a* nymph?”

Her chin lifted slightly. “Do you know a great many nymphs, my lord?”

He chuckled at that. “A point to you, my dear Nymph. Is there a reason you have chosen to sing in Hyde Park, of all places?”

The smile turned seductive.

“I was waiting for you.”

He stopped walking toward her, too used to women’s tricks to entice him into marriage to trust the Nymph, no matter how other-worldly she appeared. “For me?”

She laughed again. “Why, who else is here to appreciate my song?”

He looked her up and down, trying to gauge what type of creature he was dealing with. The Nymph, however, grew bored of his appraisal and turned her attention to the bluebells at her bare feet, and began to sing again.

“Whatever magic or trickery this is, it’s working,” Ezra murmured to himself before moving to sit beside her. She didn’t so much as acknowledge him, not even as their shoulders brushed against each other.

*“There is a ship sailing on the sea,
She’s loaded deep as deep can be,
But not so deep as in love I am;
I care not if I sink or swim.
The water is wide, I cannot get over,
And I have not the wings to fly,
My love was untrue, but I can’t complain,
Some day I hope new love I’ll find.”*

The song came to an end, and the Nymph let out a melancholy sigh.

“Love can be a terrible thing, don’t you think?” she said.

Ezra forced down the painful memories that threatened, just for a moment, to overwhelm him. Memories of beautiful lips

turned blue, and a four-poster bed replaced with a silk-lined coffin.

“Yes, it can be terrible,” he replied, “but what is life without a little risk now and again?”

The Nymph turned to look at him, and Ezra met her gaze, their faces only an inch or two apart. He thought—hoped—he heard her breath hitch.

“So, I am not wrong to hope I will find love?” she asked, her tone indicating the genuine nature of her question.

“Never,” he murmured, lifting his hand to lay against the cool skin of her cheek. “It is never wrong to hope for love, not even when it hurts.”

Her lips parted, but whatever words the Nymph was about to say remained unspoken, for desire got the better of Ezra’s good sense, and he kissed her.

For just a moment he felt her tense with shock, but then she melted toward him, her lips parting willingly as his hand buried itself in her hair. She gasped when his tongue entered her mouth, then gave the most delicate moan of pleasure he’d ever heard as she tentatively began to return the kiss.

She’s never done this before! The thought surprised him. He could feel her passion growing with her confidence, and he knew with absolute certainty that if he allowed this to continue, he would be unable to resist her explorations. In another time or place, he would have welcomed such a

distraction, but he was damned if he was going to take advantage of a girl—nymph or otherwise—in Hyde Park, of all places, under the midday sun.

With effort, he pulled away from the kiss, running his hand back across the Nymph's cheek as he did so. She was staring at him from behind the veil, her lips still parted as she took several rapid breaths.

Then, she shook her head as though she needed to dislodge an unwelcome thought, and practically jumped to her feet.

"Someone is coming," she said, staring out beyond the woods. "I must go."

Ezra frowned; he could not hear any indication of people approaching, whether by foot, horse, or carriage. He was about to say as much when the Nymph leaned down over him, bringing her mouth close to his ear.

"Will you find me again?" she asked.

"Find you? You mean here?"

She laughed and danced away from him.

"Not here. You will find me in the picture," she replied.

Ezra clambered up to his feet, but the Nymph was already several feet away from him. "What picture?" he asked, starting

after her. His foot connected with a root of the oak tree, and he fell back to his knees. He heard the Nymph's laughter again, echoing about him, but when he looked up, she was nowhere to be seen.

"Find me in the painting!" she called out and, thus, she was gone.

"Nymph?" Ezra called out, with only the woodland birds responding to him. He got to his feet slowly, listening for the snap of a twig or the crunch of dead leaves to give away her location, but there was nothing. It was as if she had never existed, as though the entire experience had been nothing but a dream.

Ezra rubbed at his jaw as he tried to work out whether he was amused or annoyed by the whole experience. Then he remembered the way her tongue had shyly danced with his own, and he shivered.

Atticus had not moved from his spot at the edge of the woodland, and his expression was one of an animal that had seen everything and was bored by it all. Ezra patted the horse affectionately on the neck.

"Well, that was an enjoyable albeit strange interlude, old boy," he told the horse. "What did you make of the Nymph?"

Atticus made no response. Ezra nodded.

"Very wise, my friend. Very wise, indeed. Well, we'd better get back home before my sister emerges from her bedroom.

For some unknown reason I promised to take her for ices today, and if I am late, she will ring a peal over my head, no doubt about it.”

The horse snorted. Ezra laughed. “No, I think it best we keep this encounter a secret, don’t you? There’s enough speculation about my sanity as it is. No need to add to it.”

He mounted Atticus and settled into the saddle, allowing himself a glance back at the woodland, and to the old Cheesecake House in the distance.

Yes, all in all, it had been a good morning, he decided. Now all he had to do was work out what the girl had meant about finding her in a painting.



Cecilia Wallace, her veil discarded as she slipped on an old walking gown and buttoned up the front, peered around the Cheesecake House’s wall and watched him leave. She quickly pinned up her hair and tucked any stray wisps under the edges of her straw bonnet, confident she had erased all trace of the alluring nymph and replaced her with a nameless young woman of the middling classes.

“He’ll find the painting, I am sure of it,” she said to no one in particular. “Perhaps he’ll even fall in love with her.”

She touched her fingers to her lips, where the memory of his kiss still lingered, and the desire to have his mouth explore hers more thoroughly throbbed with unfulfilled longing.

She pulled her hand away abruptly, giving her head a small shake as she did so.

“Don’t be so foolish,” she admonished herself before crouching down to pull on her well-worn, practical boots. “All that matters is the painting. That’s all you want from him.”

She could taste her own lies as she emerged from the woodland, stepping out onto one of the walking paths when there were no witnesses to see where she had come from. It would not do to have anyone connect the mysterious nymph with a plainly dressed girl, especially not if they recognized who she really was.

“All that matters is the painting,” she repeated, and set off in the direction of home at a brisk pace, resisting all urges to turn around and see if she could catch just one final glimpse of the man whose kiss still weighed heavily on her mouth.

CHAPTER ONE

Lady Matilda Spencer threw open the door to her brother's study without warning, bringing a small whirlwind of fashionable clothing and excited chatter along with her.

“Don't be silly, Anderson, you don't have to announce me to my own sibling! Ezra, tell Anderson he's being a stuffy old bore, and that I don't need to be announced when I want to come into your study.”

Ezra looked up over his newspaper at his long-suffering butler hovering in the doorway.

“Anderson, I have it on good authority that you are a stuffy old bore, and that Tilly may do as she pleases, whenever she pleases,” he said. “Since I have no hope of restraining her impulses, I beg that you not upset yourself in the futile attempt of making her behave with propriety.”

The butler, who had long ago perfected the art of hiding all emotion, visibly struggled to keep from smiling.

“See, Anderson?” declared Matilda as she undid the ribbon of her bonnet. “Ezra likes it when I come to spend some time with him.”

“I don’t think I would go quite that far,” said Ezra thoughtfully. “Perhaps, Anderson, we should look into getting Tilly a bell to wear about her neck. That way, you would not need to waste your time trying to announce her presence, and I will have ample opportunity to hide.”

“Are bells fashionable, Ezra?” asked his sister as she discarded her bonnet on the floor and began to pull at her gloves. “I don’t believe I have seen anyone wearing them, but fashions begin so quickly, I swear it exhausts me trying to keep up.”

“They most certainly are,” he replied solemnly. “Anderson, instruct Tilly’s maid to find a bell for her to wear. Something delicate in gold, I think, but loud enough to announce her presence through two walls and a sturdy door.”

“Very good, Your Grace,” replied the butler, bowing himself out of the room before he could betray his position in the household with something so uncouth as a snort of laughter. Ezra grinned; baiting Anderson had been a hobby of his since his salad days, but he’d never come close to succeeding until his sister’s return from living with their aunt and her permanent establishment in his household.

Matilda had narrowed her eyes and was staring at him. “You were teasing me again, weren’t you?”

He folded up his newspaper and placed it on the table beside him. “You wound me, Tilly! When have I ever been so

tyrannical a big brother as to indulge in teasing you?”

“You tease me constantly, and you know it,” she replied without any rancor. “Why, you even instructed all the servants to keep calling me Tilly, as though I were still in the nursery, and not one of them addresses me as Lady Matilda unless we have company. Even the scullery maids call me Tilly!”

“Do you *want* us all to start calling you Lady Matilda?”

His sister tried to look stern, but her face quickly collapsed into a rueful grin. She settled for flinging one of her gloves in his general direction, although it fell far short of its mark.

“No, I would not, as well you know! I hate being introduced that way, for it just reminds me of Aunt Ursula’s constant criticism.” She raised her chin and pinched her lips tight in her favorite impression of their proud relative. “Lady Matilda, one must always have perfect deportment, not slouch like a common milkmaid. Lady Matilda, one must remain suitably aloof from the servants, not embroil them in faradiddles. Lady Matilda, one must perfect an air of fashionable *ennui*, not laugh like a horse.”

“Do I want to know about the faradiddles?” Ezra asked.

Matilda winced. “I think it’s best that you don’t.”

“Agreed,” sighed Ezra, “although you must enlighten me, Dear Heart; how exactly does a horse laugh, anyway? Atticus, for example, has the finest sense of humor I have ever known in man or beast, and yet I cannot ever recall him laughing.”

“According to Aunt Ursula, horses laugh like me,” said Matilda, a scowl once again settling over her features as she threw herself into the wingback chair opposite him. “Why our parents thought she was a suitable guardian for me, I will never know. I would have been much happier living with you.”

“I doubt it,” said Ezra. His sister looked at him in confusion for a moment, but realization quickly dawned.

“Oh, you mean because you were in mourning for Lizzie? Well, I suppose it’s understandable that you wouldn’t have wanted to add my care to your burdens, but I would have much preferred to have been there to take care of *you*. Still, it’s all in the past and I’m here now, so that’s what matters the most.”

He couldn’t help but smile at the sentiment, even as the memory of his dead wife knifed at his heart.

“I wouldn’t have done that to you, Tilly, although I am forever moved by your continued love and devotion to me.”

“Well, Aunt Ursula was never going to bring me to London despite my being practically on the shelf, so I really had no choice but to be nice to you,” she said cheerfully. “Oh, that reminds me, I have the most wonderful lead on a new painting for you!”

Ezra groaned and buried his face in his hands. “I thought we agreed you weren’t going to interfere with my collection

again, Dear Heart? I love you, but not to the exclusion of reason!”

“No, dear Brother of mine, this is not like last time at all! I swear it! And I didn’t even hand over as much as a trinket to pay for the information on this occasion!”

He leaned back in his chair, eyeing her warily.

“Just information?”

“I promise.”

“And you have not paid for it, promised anything for it, or made the acquaintance of any men of dubious character to obtain it?”

“Only if you consider the Duke of Clarence to be so!”

Ezra widened his eyes. “Tilly, I mean this with the greatest of respect to the Crown, but yes, I absolutely consider him to be a man of exceedingly dubious character and hold the same opinion for all his brothers, Prinny included. Please, tell me that Clarence has not been pawing at you, Dear Heart. I would be compelled to shoot him, and I’m fairly certain that murdering a royal duke is treason.”

His sister rubbed at her nose. “He did take a liking to me, but I promise I am not some wide-eyed debutante unable to throw off his advances.”

“What did you do?”

Matilda began examining her fingernails, her face the picture of innocence. “I laughed.”

Ezra blinked. “You laughed?”

She glanced at him, her roguish smile showing she was very well pleased with herself. “Indeed, I did, just the way Aunt Ursula always told me not to.”

Ezra felt a grin creeping across his face. “You laughed like a horse, did you?”

She leaned forward in her chair, and he found himself mimicking her action, as though a great secret were about to be revealed.

“Oh, no, Ezra,” she whispered, “it was far, far worse than that. I *snorted*.”

They stared at each other for a moment, then both began to laugh at the same time.

“You little minx! You did not!”

“I swear to you, I did! And it was a loud, toothy kind of snort as well! I think everyone in the parlor must have heard me, and it would have been mortifying were it anyone else!”

Ezra wiped a hand across his eye. “Good lord, how did Clarence react?”

“I don’t think I could have repulsed him more if I had dribbled,” replied his sister cheerfully. “And believe me, I was prepared to dribble if necessary.”

“I do not doubt it,” he replied, chuckling at the mental image her words had conjured.

“But all of that aside, he did confirm the rumor going about the *ton*, which no doubt you would have heard already if you attended more than the absolute minimum number of parties you can get away with.”

“If I ever learn how to snort toothily to extract myself from awkward encounters, then perhaps I will attend more of them,” he replied. “Now, tell me this piece of information of yours before you get distracted again.”

His sister leaned forward again. “A new, unknown work by Jacob Wallace has been found, and what’s more, it is magical!”

There was a moment of silence between them. Matilda was practically bouncing with excitement in her chair, waiting for his reaction.

“A new Wallace painting?”

“Exactly!”

“And it’s magical?”

“I know! How thrilling!”

Ezra shook his head as he leaned back in the chair. “I’m sorry, Tilly, but that’s impossible.”

His sister’s expression turned mulish. “No, it’s not, people have seen her!”

He blinked. “Seen who?”

“The Nymph, of course! She’s appeared in several parks and gardens around London, asking people to find her in the painting.”

The memory of the girl he’d met by the Serpentine filled his senses for a moment, and it felt as if the world suddenly went off balance.

“There’s a nymph running around London kissing strangers?” he asked, more sharply than he’d intended.

His sister threw up her hands in disgust. “Don’t be ridiculous, Ezra, she’s a nymph! A fairy! I said people had seen her, not that they had been taking liberties. I wish you would not tease me when I am trying to be of service.”

So, she has not kissed anyone but me! Ezra was uncomfortable with how satisfied the realization made him feel.

“Are you even listening to me?” demanded Matilda. Ezra looked up to see she was pouting, and his heart went out to her. From long experience, he knew Tilly could be flighty, distracted, and prone to exaggeration, but she was also his dearest friend and greatest defender.

“I’m sorry, my dear, I was just distracted by the idea that there could be a lost Wallace. He died, what, two years ago now? I reviewed the inventory of his work, and it was comprehensive. I am merely intrigued by the idea that there might be more works of his out there that remain unaccounted for.”

Matilda rolled her eyes, but a smile was tugging at the edges of her mouth. “Trust you to focus on the least interesting part of the tale. *Of course*, there are more works. Wallace was an artist, after all. No doubt it was a private commission or some such thing that the buyer did not want to be made public. If the rumors are true, then it would explain a lot.”

“Because it’s magical?” he asked, unable to keep the teasing note from his voice.

“Mock me all you like, dear Brother, but at least five men and a few women of the *ton* claim to have seen her, always at midday and always in some kind of wooded place. She is dressed all in white, with a long veil that obscures her face, and her song is like a siren calling to them. She runs away if they get too close, calling out that they must find her in her painting before disappearing before their very eyes.”

“Magical indeed,” replied Ezra. The girl had not disappeared for him, he thought, it was more that he’d lost sight of her when he tripped on that blasted tree root. “But it’s impossible to follow your train of thought, my dear, even at the best of times. Explain if you will, what has the nymph got to do with Wallace’s painting?”

His sister’s expression turned triumphant. “*That* is the information I have for you! Clarence was full of the story of this beautiful nymph—with some extremely improper details, I should add—when Sir Thomas Hope commented that he wondered whether the nymph was the same one who appears in a recently discovered Wallace painting he’d viewed.”

The name of a fellow art collector caught Ezra’s attention despite himself. “Sir Thomas Hope has seen the painting?”

Matilda nodded eagerly. “Yes, he said the original owner had died, and so the executor of the estate brought it to him for a valuation. He immediately recognized it as a Wallace and instantly snatched the opportunity to display it for a select group of art lovers. He is in negotiations right now with the owner to do just that, so naturally, I secured us an invitation to the viewing. You are welcome.”

“Why would anyone take a Wallace to Sir Thomas Hope for authentication?” mused Ezra. “He might collect art, but he’s far from an expert in any medium. This whole thing smells strongly of a hum to me.”

“You are insufferable!” cried his sister as she got to her feet. “I have half a mind to attend the viewing without you as punishment!”

Ezra grinned at her outrage, which only provoked her to use some language that would definitely incur the wrath of Aunt Ursula if she heard it before she began to stalk out of the room without so much as a glance at the bonnet and gloves she'd casually discarded upon her arrival.

“Now, now, Tilly! Don't be like that! I'm touched that you know the name of my favorite artist and that you put up with the attention of both Clarence and Hope to secure me an invitation. You're a treasure of a sister, Dear Heart. An absolute treasure.”

Matilda paused at the door to the study and turned her head to face him.

“Of course, I am a treasure, no one could ask for a better sister than me,” she declared, her eyes just daring him to contradict her. When he did not rise to the bait, she relaxed her stance just a little. “Very well, you may accompany me to the viewing, if only so I can have the satisfaction of hearing you admit you are wrong.”

“A rare treat indeed,” he replied solemnly, and Matilda burst out laughing.

“You are a *beast* of a brother, and I should throttle you in your sleep. Instead, I will console myself with the knowledge that the owner of the painting did not consider you to be an expert on Wallace despite your collection, and that the nymph has not appeared to you, begging you to find her. Perhaps you are not the connoisseur of art you fancy yourself to be, Ezra! Think about that!”

She exited the room with a dramatic flounce but did not stoop so low as to actually slam the door. Ezra rose and went to his desk where a pile of ignored invitations had steadily grown since the beginning of the Season. On the top was a gilt-edged card from Sir John Hope, cordially inviting him to the *Unveiling of An Unknown Masterpiece*. He ran his fingers across the edge, thinking back to the kiss from the unknown woman at the edge of the Serpentine.

“Who are you really, my beautiful nymph?” he asked the silent room. “And what kind of game are you playing?”

CHAPTER TWO

“*I* assure you, Mr. Bragg, I am not playing any sort of game,” said Cecilia, raising her chin as she spoke. “I am not asking you to make any changes to the agreement you had with my father, I’m simply asking you to delay *this* installment by a fortnight.”

“And why, my girl, would I want to go and do something like that?” asked the moneylender, “especially without some compensation for the inconvenience?”

“Because I have never missed a payment before, nor asked for leniency—not even when my brother was so sick, I was forced to borrow some extra,” she said, her rehearsed speech delivered with more confidence than she actually felt. “I am not asking for an extension on the loan itself—*that* will be paid in full this Michaelmas, as originally agreed.”

Seth Bragg, the middle-aged man sitting behind the old, scratched-up desk between them, and leaned back in his chair as he regarded her thoughtfully. It was not a pleasant experience, and it took all of Cecilia’s will not to look away in fear as the silence between them dragged on.

Not that his looks were the type to inspire fear; quite the opposite, in fact. Her inner artist was objective enough to state that Bragg was at worst a plain-looking man, and in the right light could have even been considered a handsome one. His features were sharp and defined, like those of a Roman senator, and his hair was flatteringly styled a la Titus. He was neither thin nor portly, but rather had the soft build of a leisurely gentleman who wished for an athletic physique without being willing to work for it. His clothing was of a quality that would make the Price Regent weep with envy, and yet his outfit had not been put together with any sense of refinement. His coat, for example, was of a bottle-blue superfine, yet the buttons and prolific frogging were over-large and bright gold. His red silk neckcloth, accented with an emerald pin, was arranged as a horse collar tie with little regard to suitability. He wore a ring on every finger, where emeralds, rubies, diamonds, and sapphires all battled to stand out among their peers. He should have looked ridiculous, but somehow, the absurdity of his dress made him seem all the more threatening.

“A man who cares little for the opinions of others is a dangerous man indeed, Cecy,” her father used to say to her in those years before his demise. *“Never trust any man whose clothing clashes, or who sees no fault in wearing spots beside stripes. Such a lack of aesthetic taste is indicative of a depraved mind. Stay away.”*

She hadn't understood at the time, but now it was apparent that Augustine Wallace had been talking about Seth Bragg. There were rumors about the fate of those who had crossed him. There was also plenty of evidence that the rumors were true if one was brave enough to look for it.

Cecilia had looked two years ago. As a result, she had been very careful to make sure that Mr. Bragg's payments were made first, even before food or lodging. This was not a man

whose power she wished to be in for any longer than necessary, but just then, she had no choice. Her purse was down to coppers, and she had as much chance of stealing the moon as she did of finding the ten pounds her family owed him.

“What reassurance do I have that you will be able to pay in the future, my child?” said Bragg, his eyes roving over her body as though she was a farm animal he was considering purchasing. “I am not aware of a reversal in your fortunes. You are not to be wed, at least not to my knowledge, nor is there any indication of your grandparents swooping in to save the day.”

Cecilia winced at the mention of her estranged relatives. “I can assure you, Mr. Bragg, that I am hopeful of a windfall in the very near future. In fact, I am certain of it, and on that, you have my word.”

Mr. Bragg laughed, dry and humorlessly. “Forgive me if I know better than to trust the word of a Wallace, my dear girl. Your father used up any goodwill in that regard. No, I do not think I will allow you to forgo this payment. I expect the amount in full by Friday. Good day, child.”

“Please, you don’t understand,” she began, but Bragg held up a hand to silence her.

“Ah, the refrain of many a debtor unable to settle their obligations,” sighed the moneylender. “I will own that in your case, the loan was hardly your fault—your father’s debts, coupled with that sickly brother of yours, were not a good hand to be dealt, that much I concede, but I do not see why I should continue to fall short on account of your family problems.”

“There must be something we can do,” said Cecilia, leaning forward to lay a gloved hand on the desk. “Perhaps an extension of just a few days? Surely, that is no inconvenience to you?”

Bragg did not answer. He stared at her hand for a moment, then slowly raked his gaze up her body, lingering at her chest for longer than was appropriate before raising his eyes to hers.

She lowered her gaze, withdrew her hand from the desk and placed it back in her lap, hoping he could not see her shaking.

“You could always choose to keep me company as a way of repayment, Miss Wallace,” he said in a pleasant tone. “It would do an old bachelor like myself good to have a pretty thing like you on my arm, both day and night.”

Cecilia swallowed. It was a suggestion she had expected him to make eventually; he’d made it to her father once, who’d been outraged at the idea.

“That’s not the type of man you tie your affairs to, Cecy,” he’d said. *“He may look like a gentleman, but he’s a snake at heart.”*

“But if I marry him, will he let you off with your debts?” she’d asked.

Ambrose Wallace had pulled her tight into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

“No, my girl. And from now on, you must stay away from him.”

But then her father had died and left her to fix all his messes by herself, and she’d had no choice but to meet with the moneylender.

“I don’t believe that’s the best option for either of us,” she said quietly.

“It might be your best option if you do not pay what you owe,” he replied, almost pleasantly. “You know what happened to Old Lil when she tried to fleece me, don’t you?”

Cecilia couldn’t help shuddering.

“Yes, I know Old Lil,” she whispered. *Everyone* in Spitalfields knew Old Lil, and probably half of London besides, but the local women knew the details and whispered warnings to young girls at risk of falling into disfavor with Seth Bragg.

“Good, I knew you were a clever girl,” said the snake, slithering back into the skin of a gentleman as easily as he had shed it. “Look at me, please. That’s it, raise your eyes... ah, there you go. No need to look so despondent, child, for I am not utterly heartless.”

He chuckled as though sharing a great joke, and Cecilia forced herself to smile in response. It was best to smile—safer.

“How about this,” he continued, his eyes roving over her body once again, as though he could see what was below her walking dress and spencer. “You give me one good reason to extend the due date on your installment by *one* week, and I will grant it.”

She hesitated for only a second.

“I have found another one of father’s paintings,” Cecilia blurted out but was too afraid to enjoy the shock that momentarily inhabited the moneylender’s face.

It was quickly replaced with suspicion. “I was the one who completed the inventory of your father’s possessions, my girl, so you cannot lie to me. Every painting of his is accounted for.”

“Not this one,” she insisted. “It’s called *The Nymph at Sunrise*.“

“Never heard of it.”

“It is mentioned in his planner,” she said truthfully. “Along with a few others. He must have forgotten to add them to the main ledger, for whatever reason.”

The man crossed his arms over his chest. “Did he, indeed? It’s on the list of planned works, but he failed to make a note in his ledger before his sudden demise? How fortunate that he completed it, and even more fortunate that you have so miraculously uncovered it. Up the chimney, was it? Behind the dressing table?”

“It was on loan,” Cecilia improvised, “to a friend of the family, but was recently returned to me. Anonymously.”

“Convenient and fortuitous,” said Bragg, almost chuckling at her. “Do not think you can pass off a forgery of your father’s painting as payment of the debt, child. I require them to be settled in guineas, as well you know.”

“I am not giving the painting to you, Mr. Bragg; I am selling it by private auction,” Cecilia replied as haughtily as she could. “I’ll have you know that Thomas Hope has authenticated the work, and there are already several interested parties.”

The moneylender smiled, seeming genuinely diverted by her revelation.

“Has he now? Well, well, it must be an exceedingly well-executed painting for Thomas Hope to declare it a Wallace,” he said, his viper gaze not leaving her face for a moment. “I suspect it might be a Wallace, although perhaps not the one he believes it to be. This shall be entertaining. Very well, child; I grant you an extra week to pay your installment, but not without penalty. Fifteen guineas to be paid by next Friday, and a further eighty-five by Michaelmas.”

“But that’s an additional twenty guineas on the debt!” she gasped.

Bragg shrugged. “Then pay me ten by the week’s end. Now go on, get out of here, child, before I regret my generosity toward you.”

Cecilia opened her mouth to argue but shut it again almost immediately. She stood with as much dignity as she could muster, bobbed as small a curtsy, and then left the tiny, forlorn office, hurrying past the bored-looking clerk in the front room and exiting into the bright sun of Artillery Lane.

It was not until she had walked down the street and turned the corner—out of sight of Mr. Bragg’s windows—that she let out a shaky sigh of relief, followed quickly by a wave of nausea.

Oh, how she *hated* that man!

“Evil, bloodsucking leech,” she muttered, then quickly glanced around to make sure no one had heard her say it. She sighed again, and then set out in the direction of home at a clipping pace.

The streets and lanes in the Weaver’s quarter of Spitalfields ranged from broad thoroughfares to narrow alleyways where it was possible to touch shop fronts on both sides of the road at the same time. It was busy and full of people, and for once, Cecilia was glad she could fade anonymously into a crowd. Her grey spencer and walking dress were of decent enough quality, without ornamentation, and appropriate dress for any but the richest merchant class ladies who lived in the area. There were no carriages to dodge in the narrow streets and practically no horses to speak of, so it was easy enough to slip around her fellow pedestrians at a brisk pace until it felt like only moments had passed before reaching her current home on Elder Street.

The house, owned by a kind widow called Mrs. Fletcher, looked impressive from the front, with its wide frontage and

ornate front door, but like most of the houses in the area, appearances were deceptive. It was only once you were inside that it became obvious the home was only one room deep, and that it had been at its best perhaps twenty years earlier before the current owner had fallen on hard times. Everything was clean and neat, for which Cecilia was deeply grateful, but close examination revealed material that was faded and patched, and furniture that was well made but deeply unfashionable.

“Is that you, Cecy?” called a young male voice from the kitchen as she closed the front door.

Cecilia allowed herself a smile as she removed her gloves and bonnet. “Who else would it be, you goose? I hope you have been well-behaved while I was running errands.”

She stepped through into the warm back room, where a fire burned in the stove and the delicious scent of fresh stew wafted from the large pot set upon it.

“He’s an angel as always, Miss Wallace,” said her landlady with an indulgent smile. “He’s even managed to eat a slice of bread and a bite of chicken if you’d believe it.”

“A definite improvement, no doubt a direct result of your excellent cooking,” she replied with genuine gratitude. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“Hush with all that,” said Mrs. Fletcher, moving her hands in a strange flapping motion. “I’ll leave you two be for a while and go and see whether Bessie has finished cleaning the parlor. Help yourself to some stew, Miss Wallace. You’ll end up as

frail as the little master here if you don't keep up your strength."

"I'm not frail!" protested the nine-year-old boy around a mouthful of bread, but the landlady merely gave him an indulgent pat on the head before leaving.

"How are you feeling, Robert?" Cecilia asked, taking the seat beside him.

"As stout as a trumpet, so I do wish you would all stop fussing over me."

Cecilia couldn't help the smile pulling at her lips. "As stout as a trumpet, are you? Does that mean very stout indeed?"

"Very stout. Stouter than a stovepipe, at any rate, but not as stout as an elephant, I'll wager."

Cecilia gave a solemn nod. "That is an improvement, but I don't think I'll be happy until you're as stout as an elephant."

Her brother rolled his eyes. "Hardly anyone gets that stout, you know. There's no need to worry about me."

"I'm your sister, *stupid*," she replied, then leaned forward and planted a kiss on his forehead before he could object. "It's my job to worry about you."

“Well, you don’t have to... because I have a plan,” he declared, pushing away the plate with a half-eaten slice of bread upon it. Cecilia resisted the urge to tell him to eat it up; he was still far too thin and pale looking for comfort, but she knew better than to nag at him over such things.

“Is it a good one?” she asked, then picked up the remains of the bread and began to eat it herself.

“Of course, it is, it’s one of my plans,” he said with a dismissive shake of his head. “I am going to join the navy.”

“Are you indeed?” she said politely.

Robert studied her for a moment, and when he seemed content she was not dismissing his plan, carried on enthusiastically. Cecilia kept quiet, although she chewed each bite of bread far more thoroughly than necessary.

“Mrs. Fletcher told me all about her friend’s son who became a ship’s boy when he was only a year or so older than I am, and she said he was so smart and diligent, he became a great favorite with the captain, who looked after him, and then the boy became an officer! There might be a bit between that I’ve missed out, but she did say that smart boys can do worse than join the navy, like her friend’s boy. He died a hero at Trafalgar, but you shouldn’t worry about that. I am sure ships are much safer than they were before I was born.”

“You no longer want to be an architect, then?” Cecilia asked lightly.

“I rather would, if truth be told, but you can’t afford to send me to school,” he replied with perception beyond his years. “That’s why I decided against the army, too, because Mrs. Fletcher said commissions cost a lot of money, and I don’t think I would much like being in the rank and file.”

“I don’t think you would either,” she agreed, trying to make it seem as if she would never have reached that conclusion by herself. “And don’t worry about schooling, my dear. It’s most important for you to rebuild your strength, and I have almost cleared the last of the debts, so we should have enough left over for you to return to your studies once you’re as stout as an elephant again.”

He ignored her teasing, his small face turning stubborn to the point of mulish. “It’s my job as the man to take care of my sister.”

“And so you will once you are well again,” she replied, “but until that time you have to put up with me caring for you.”

For a moment it looked like he was going to argue with her, but his little shoulders slumped in defeat. He smiled at her, but it was as though a sudden wave of exhaustion had washed over him.

“I suppose you are right,” he conceded with such sadness, it was all she could do not to wrap him up in a bundle and rock him on her knee.

“Have you been up to the attic today?” she asked, determined to take his mind off his recovery.

Robert visibly brightened. “Are you going to let me see it?”

“Only if you promise not to be too critical.”

Her brother grinned as he got to his feet but didn't say anything.

They made their way up the narrow staircase, past the first floor, where Mrs. Fletcher and Bessie had their rooms, past the second floor, where Cecilia and Robert shared a room of their own, and finally, up into the attic.

The late Mr. Fletcher, like so many of the men living in this part of London, had been a weaver by trade, and although his widow had been forced to sell all his machines to make ends meet, the attic remained a bright, airy space with large skylights, making it a perfect studio for a budding artist. Both Cecilia and Robert sighed with happiness as they entered, neither of them aware of doing so.

All around the room, there were makeshift easels topped with wooden painting boards or the most precious of their commodities, canvas. Only three paintings were complete—a four-foot-square board upon which their father, the renowned painter Ambrose Wallace, had completed a family portrait a year after Robert's birth, and then two, much smaller, portraits of their mother. Two old, pitted mirrors belonging to the Fletchers were set facing each other at the narrowest point of the room, one atop some empty crates, the other on a small table housing a myriad of brushes and paint jars. The air was heavy with the scent of oils and turpentine, and the atmosphere thick with creative potential. Even Robert, as thin and pale as he was, seemed to grow with strength and vigor every second he stood surrounded by his father's old things, and his eyes

were greedily feasting on some old, unused sketchbooks and sticks of charcoal.

“She’s over here,” said Cecilia, taking her brother’s hand and guiding him to the far end of the attic. “I was shocked when I found her, and it was not until Sir Thomas Hope agreed to sell it that I felt confident enough to show it to you, but I truly want to know what you think of it. Be honest, now; Father always said you were born with an eye for composition.”

Propped up against a roof beam, there stood an enormous canvas, at least eight feet in height, upon which the back view of an ethereal nymph leaning against an old oak tree had been rendered in rich oils.

Robert squeezed his sister’s hand.

“I think it’s beautiful. Everything is so detailed, it’s like you could step into it and dance with the fairy.”

Cecilia felt her heart swell. “Do you really think so?”

“I rather do! It’s the best thing you’ve ever painted, Cecy. It’s even better than anything Father painted, except for the ones of Mother.”

Cecilia turned to look at him, laughing nervously.

“Whatever can you mean? This is one of Father’s paintings!”

Her brother raised a brow in that scornful way only small children can manage. “You want me to believe that we have just happened to have a huge painting of father’s lying around for two years and didn’t notice? I’m not a fool, Sis!”

She rubbed at the back of her neck, looking first at her painting, and then back at her brother.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked nervously. “Sir Thomas seemed to think it a genuine Wallace.”

Robert squeezed her hand. “It is a Wallace! A *Cecilia* Wallace! Your works are worth just as much as Father’s, and he trusted you to do the finishing work on his commissions. You should exhibit at the Royal Academy!”

Cecilia smiled at his enthusiasm but didn’t know how to explain to a loving nine-year-old that no, her paintings were not worth as much as those of her celebrated father, no matter how good they were, and that the Royal Academy was not about to allow a penniless, nineteen-year-old spinster to show her paintings in their hallowed halls. It was the name Ambrose Wallace that held value, but after selling all of his works to save their little family of three, his legacy to his children was one of debt. She had almost sold off the last of his canvas and paints the year before, but then she’d seen the sketch he’d made before his death, and an idea had struck her.

“Perhaps, in the future, dearest, but there are a few collectors who would pay handsomely for one of Father’s paintings, and I would like to pay our rent to Mrs. Fletcher on time for once.”

Robert didn't say anything. He studied his sister's face for a moment, then turned back to look at the painting for what felt like an eternity before speaking.

"It looks like the painting of Mama," he said quietly. "Only better. I think everyone will know it is a Wallace as soon as they study it."

His carefully chosen words, delivered while studying the painting rather than looking at his sister, both warmed and shamed Cecilia. She crouched down and pulled him into a hug. He resisted only a moment before wrapping his arms around her neck and returning the embrace.

"It is the last of Father's paintings," she mumbled into his hair.

"Promise me that the next one will be yours," he mumbled back.

She planted a kiss on the top of his head, much to his objection.

"I promise."

"Who is this?" asked Robert, picking up the small wooden board on which Cecilia had begun sketching out her latest painting.

Her cheeks flushed as she took it from her brother's hands. "He's nobody in particular, merely a figure I am working on for a future painting."

“He looks like a real person,” continued Robert. “You’ve reworked his jawline a great many times.”

“I simply have a very specific idea of what I want him to look like,” she replied, glancing around before deciding to slip the board behind one of her earliest attempts to replicate their father’s style.

Robert crossed his arms and regarded her with a thoughtful expression, looking just like their mother as he did so. Cecilia was a terrible liar, according to her parents, and it appeared that he had inherited their ability to discern when she was telling the truth.

“Fine! It was a gentleman I met at Hyde Park when I was walking,” she said as she arranged and then rearranged the perfectly set-out painting brushes. “Not even a meeting, really, more of a brief nod, merely to acknowledge each other.”

“And you thought him handsome?” asked her brother, with just a tinge of disgust at the idea of attraction between adults.

Cecilia put down the last paintbrush and gripped the sides of the table. She closed her eyes, to better picture the gentleman who had so cautiously sat beside her when she was playing at being the Nymph and listened to her sing. She remembered the desire his kiss had sparked within her, and how difficult it had been not to give in to the temptation of exploring his lips further.

“He was quite the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen,” she admitted before straightening herself up. She glanced at her

brother and smiled. “Father would have adored the opportunity to paint him. Tall, athletic, exquisitely dressed, with a mop of black curls on his head, but the saddest eyes you can imagine.”

Robert groaned. “Have you been reading those novels to Bessie again? It’s bad enough having her tell me about how she wants a handsome beau. I am afraid I shall fall gravely sick again if you start at it as well, for I don’t care what anyone says; the boy who brings the milk does *not* have a smile like a summer’s day. What does that even mean? That his breath smells like the privy drain when it gets hot? That his lips are all brown and cracked like mud when there’s been no rain? It makes no sense!”

Cecilia couldn’t help but laugh. “There is no poetry in your soul, Robert Wallace, and you leave Bessie alone to dream however she wants to.”

Her brother shook his head. “Girls,” he muttered in disgust.

Cecilia ruffled his hair. “Don’t you worry yourself over such a trifle. I would simply like to paint the man, nothing more.”

She knew she was lying. Whomever the man was, he had been haunting her dreams ever since their meeting. Perhaps, after she had cleared the debts with Mr. Bragg, she could try to find the dark-haired gentleman who had so casually awoken a need in her that she’d never known existed.

“Just paint him,” she repeated, but from the expression on her brother’s face, it was obvious her lies could not even fool a child.

CHAPTER THREE

Thomas Hope's mansion on Duchess Street, just off Portland Place, was as magnificent as all the rumors claimed it to be, and Cecilia felt dizzy with appreciation as she walked through the various themed rooms that her host had so kindly opened to his guests as part of the sale.

"It is so incredibly kind of you to do this for us, Mr. Hope," Cecilia said for the tenth time in as many minutes. "Oh, I wish I had brought Robert after all; he would be speechless with delight at the Egyptian Room!"

Her host, whose arm she had taken as he guided her through his statue gallery, patted her hand with fatherly care. "It is nothing, my girl, nothing at all for the daughter of my dearest Julia Wallace. You know well the affectionate regard in which I always held your mother, even after the scandal."

Cecilia's smile didn't falter at the thoughtless comment. "For which both she and my father were eternally grateful, I assure you."

"They were among the few who truly understood my concept of interior design," he sighed, making a sweeping gesture at

the room with his free hand. “Exquisite taste, the both of them, almost as refined as my own.”

I know, for I can see half of their prized possessions on display as examples of your taste, Cecilia thought darkly, but quickly forced the bitterness down before it could show on her face.

The truth was that Mr. Hope had shown them great kindness over the years, buying many of her parents’ things at reasonable prices whenever lack of money had been an issue for them. And then, following their deaths, the noted arbiter of taste had purchased the rest, sight unseen and at over the asking price, which had allowed Cecilia to clear the most pressing of the family debts.

“You must allow me to bring Robert once he is better, Mr. Hope. I know I have no right to request any favors from you, but it would be great practice for him, as he hopes to become an architect.”

Hope chuckled. “There are members of the *ton* who would sell their left eyebrows for the opportunity to view my collection; I wonder how piqued they would be to learn I welcomed in a mere child to indulge his interest in my trinkets?”

“Oh, I did not mean to be impertinent—” she began, but Hope cut her off before she could finish.

“My dear girl, it would be the greatest jest I can think of! Yes, of course, you may bring the wee fellow to my humble abode, but I do have a price.”

Cecilia's smile faltered. "What would that be, Mr. Hope?"

He leaned in with a conspiratorial whisper. "If you can ever be induced to part with a portrait of your mother, then I shall like to have it."

Relief flooded through her veins, and she was unable to stop the strange, high-pitched giggle that escaped her lips. "I would consider no other, Mr. Hope, but I am sorry to inform you that we have no intention of ever parting with either of them."

He gave her a strange look but smiled kindly. "Indeed, child, indeed, but I hope you know that should financial matters become... difficult for you, I can always be relied upon to stand as your friend."

A lump formed in her throat as she thought of the debts held over her by Seth Bragg, and it was difficult not to hug the strange little man beside her. "You have done more for us than I can ever repay already, Mr. Hope, and by hosting this sale of *Nymph at Sunrise*, you can rest easy knowing Robert and I will be comfortable."

"Your parents would be very proud of you, child. Now, let me introduce you to some of the potential buyers of this Wallace masterpiece."

"Thank you, and please, remember—I am Miss Watson for this evening."

He shook his head and sighed. "I am unhappy with this subterfuge, Cecilia, but I shall do as you request. Come,

everyone is gathered in the picture gallery, where the Nymph is displayed to perfection.”

Cecilia was soon pleased to discover that her eccentric host had not been exaggerating. His home, which had been held up as the epitome of taste for over a decade, was everywhere furnished with works of art, but the picture gallery was spectacular to behold. It was a long, airy room, with high ceilings supported by Greek columns that divided the space neatly into sections for specific collections to be gathered. Huge, heavy curtains hung from the cornice along each wall, better to protect the paintings from the damaging effect of the sun, but for now, they were pulled back to reveal Hope’s truly spectacular collections. Down the center of the room was set a series of large tables, upon which sketchbooks and portfolios had been artfully arranged, while a select few pieces of furniture and statuary were strategically placed throughout the gallery. At the farthest end of the gallery, even with the forty or so guests of Mr. Hope’s milling about, Cecilia could see the replica Athenian organ resplendent with richly embroidered drapery that hid the pipes and topped with elaborate carvings of Apollo. It was here that her host had chosen to display her painting in all its glory, and even though she had spent months with the piece, the sight of it properly framed in such a setting almost brought tears to her eyes.

Her more logical side, however, was watching the reactions of the guests to *Nymph at Sunrise*, and slowly increasing the asking price.



“Sophie will be so jealous when she learns I’ve been inside Mr. Hope’s home,” half-whispered Matilda, as her wide eyes tried to feast on everything at once. “I am so sick of her acting like she knows the difference between oil and gouache, or that

she has a superior eye for composition. I don't think she even knows what the word means."

Ezra smiled at his sister as they slowly made their way down the length of the picture gallery. "Do *you* know the difference between oil and gouache, Tilly?"

"You very well know I haven't the foggiest, but I *do* know what composition means, unlike Cousin Sophie. Besides, *I'm* not the one trying to convince everyone that I'm some sort of aesthetical genius."

"But you do know how to put together a striking ensemble, Dear Heart," he said, giving her arm a light squeeze, "and trust me when I say that is far more difficult than achieving a cohesive interior design, despite what our host might say."

Matilda brightened as she tore her gaze away from a golden sphynx to turn a smile upon her brother.

"Do you really think so, Ezra? I was so terribly afraid that purple would make me look like a giant bruise, but I just adored this spencer paired with my shako."

He stepped back, raised a quizzing glass to his eye, and pretended to study her as if she was one of Hope's statues. She giggled in delight, and then struck a dramatic pose without a word passing between them, oblivious to the admiring glances several of the other male guests threw in her direction. Or at least, they did until they caught Ezra's eye, at which point they hurried away, looking at anything but his raven-haired sister.

“You are a diamond of the first water, Tilly, and don’t let Cousin Sophie or anyone else make you feel the contrary,” he said, slipping his eyeglass back into his waistcoat pocket.

Matilda’s smile faltered a little as she retook his arm.

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have to listen to her rabbiting on about how differently she sees the world now she’s married.” She raised her nose in the air and began speaking in a ridiculous, high-pitched voice. “*It is one thing to go shopping as a mere miss, you know, and quite another to do so as mistress of your own establishment. You can have no notion what it is like to be a Lady.*’ Ha! As though she doesn’t know perfectly well that I am Lady Matilda Spencer and have been since I was born. I blame *you*, Ezra.”

“How is it my fault that you and Sophie have been at each other’s necks since you were in the cradle?”

“Because you’ve called me Tilly in front of the family since we were children, and now, Sophie uses that as an excuse for not addressing me by my title,” she shot back moodily.

Ezra pretended to look thoughtful. “Tell me, Dear Heart; have you ever addressed Sophie by *her* title?”

“I acknowledged that she was the Marchioness of Tickham on her wedding day,” replied Matilda with a dismissive wave of her hand, but could not disguise the glint of mischief in her eyes.

“You are both incorrigible, and I shall not be the least bit surprised if you cause a scandal by dueling to the death in Hyde Park one morning.”

“To whose death, mine or Sophie’s?”

“I have no idea. I shall have to wait to read about it in the papers, like everyone else.”

She punched him lightly on the arm, but there was no opportunity to continue their banter, for their promenade had finally brought them to the far end of the gallery, and Matilda’s gasp of astonishment as her eyes fell upon the mysterious painting echoed his own carefully restrained feelings at the sight of it.

“She’s so beautiful,” breathed Matilda, and Ezra could find no words more accurate than his sister’s.

Nymph At Sunrise had to be one of the most exquisite paintings he had laid his eyes upon. The titular figure dominated the composition, her back to the audience, her head turned to face the edge of the lake to her left. She wore considerably less than the nymph he had met at the Serpentine, but there was no doubt in his mind it was the same woman, even with her face obscured by the delicate veil, both in life and in oils. The vibrant, bold colors in the flowers at her feet stood in stark contrast to the light that had created the gauze that covered her from her head to halfway down her thighs. The warm glow of an imagined sunrise bathed everything in hues of pink and gold, giving the whole painting a sense of magic that did not fail to cause a reaction in the heart of any person viewing it.

“She’s exquisite, isn’t she?” came a voice from behind them.
“I’ve quite made up my mind to possess her.”

“Lord Tooley,” said Ezra, turning slowly to face one of his least favorite members of the *ton*. “What a surprise to see you here.”

“How nice to see you in public, Your Grace,” said Tooley, with the barest shadow of a bow. “I am one of the select few to whom the Nymph has chosen to reveal herself. Naturally, Hope invited me when I advised him of the fact. What has tempted you to venture out of Spencer House?”

“My brother has an extensive collection of Wallace paintings,” said Matilda before Ezra had a chance to open his mouth. “He is quite a connoisseur of art, as any known expert will attest to.”

Lord Tooley gave a smug, closed-mouth chuckle as he inclined his head in her direction, and his condescension made Ezra itch to punch him.

“Lady Matilda, any gathering is raised from insipid to sublime by your mere presence,” said Lord Tooley, his eyes sweeping over her in a most ungentlemanly fashion.

His sister yawned, pressing her small, gloved hand to her lips. Ezra had never been so proud of her.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Lord Tooley, but your ownership of this painting is far from certain,” he said, drawing the Earl’s

attention back to himself. “From what I understand, you will have stiff competition in trying to purchase it.”

“I can outbid them,” replied Tooley with such confidence that Ezra couldn’t help but laugh.

“You underestimate your competition.”

Matilda, bored with the exchange, let go of her brother’s arm and wandered off to admire one of the sketchbooks on display. Ezra was barely aware of her departure, his mind trying to take in the idea of Lord Tooley, of all people, possessing such a delicate creature as the Nymph. The only sensation it produced was disgust.

“You seem determined to own this particular piece, Your Grace,” said Tooley, looking almost bemused by the notion. “I thought your collection is focused on landscapes and the like?”

“I have to have it,” said Ezra, his gaze turning back to the painting. He remembered the woman at the Serpentine and her beautiful singing voice. He could almost feel the innocence in her lips as they pressed against his own.

Tooley made a deep-throated chuckle. “Oh, dear, please tell me you do not believe it is magical as well!”

Ezra raised a brow. “Did you not inform me yourself that you are here because you have met the Nymph?”

The Earl spread his hands wide. “Indeed, I did, and a delightful little thing she was, too, but this painting is no more enchanted than an image of the prettiest of opera dancers bathed in moonlight.”

Before Ezra could grudgingly agree with Tooley’s assessment, a new voice interrupted them.

“But it is magical, my lord,” she said, her tone full of amusement. “It is an original Ambrose Wallace, after all, and the man could truly make magic through his art.”



Cecilia put on her most charming smile for the two men before her, conscious of Mr. Hope’s opinion that Earl Tooley, the man on the left with a foppish air, was the more likely to part with a large amount of money for her painting, but that the Duke of Marlborough, the tall, black-haired man with his back to her, was the wealthier lord. When they both turned to regard her after her interruption, however, she felt as though someone had punched her hard in the chest and forced all the breath from her body in one quick gasp.

The man from the Serpentine! Her mind screamed at her, torn by a heady mix of horror and triumph. The man who had so delightfully kissed her in Hyde Park was none other than *the Duke of Marlborough!* He had looked so different in the woodlands, true, but how had she failed to realize his identity?

“He was certainly one of the greatest talents of our lifetime, Mrs....?” said Lord Tooley politely, leaving the question hanging between them, as if as a rebuke for her impertinence.

Cecilia felt her cheeks warm but was not about to run away from this opportunity.

“Watson. *Miss Cecilia Watson,*” she lied as she bobbed into a curtsy. “I need no introduction to you, my Lord Tooley, or to you, Your Grace. Mr. Hope assured me that only those who truly appreciate the genius of Ambrose Wallace should have the opportunity to view my painting.”

The Earl and the Duke glanced at each other, the latter’s expression unreadable, but it was obvious to her that Lord Tooley was not impressed by Cecilia’s interruption, and she was fighting every instinct to flee from their presence. Her dress was a plain, good-quality muslin that had belonged to her mother, and though her shawl was richly embroidered, it was a few years out of style. She had been pleased with her appearance at first, thinking it portrayed the air of a wealthy but country-dwelling woman, but under the critical gaze of Lord Tooley, she felt about as refined as a beggar.

“*Your painting?*” said the Duke, an eyebrow raised in question.

Good grief, her imagination had not embellished details at all! He was even more handsome than she had first thought him to be, with a tightly cut black coat drawing attention to his broad shoulders and muscular frame. There was nothing soft about him, not as there had been at their first meeting, and had she not experienced the heart-melting tenderness of his kiss she would have rendered him in paint as the Roman god of war, Mars; devastatingly beautiful, but unapproachable, and perhaps, deadly.

Cecilia was suddenly very, very sure that trying to trick this man into buying her painting had been a very bad idea.

“It-it is mine, yes,” she replied, faltering as the Duke stared at her. She turned her head, gave a delicate cough into her hand, and then returned her attention to the two lords. “It was my father’s, originally. A commission piece from Ambrose Wallace several years ago, with quite a lofty place in our home. When my dear papa left this world, his will stipulated that *Nymph at Sunrise* be sold to someone who would appreciate her in the manner she deserves. Mr. Hope was so kind as to agree to facilitate that transaction, and so here we are.”

“A very detailed response to a simple question,” said the Duke, and this time Cecilia just knew her cheeks would be shining like a pair of bruised apples.

“Forgive me, Your Grace; I am not used to mixing in such refined circles,” she replied, her eyes cast down.

She heard the Earl chuckle. “You’ve embarrassed the poor girl, Marlborough! Very bad form!”

There was an awkward moment of silence. Just as Cecilia was about to excuse herself from the situation, her eyes still firmly fixed on the floor, a gloved hand reached into her field of vision. She looked up and met the Duke’s eyes, and while he could not be said to be smiling, he did not look quite as foreboding as he had a moment before.

“It is you who must forgive me, Miss Watson. Tooley is right, and there is no excuse for my rudeness. Will you accompany me to the far end of the gallery for a glass of wine? We can discuss the painting as we walk.”

Cecilia blinked rapidly, looking first at the unreadable expression of the Duke to the irritated frown of the Earl, and then back to the Duke.

He is considering buying it! Her heart began pounding against her rib cage at the thought. *The Duke of Marlborough wants to buy my painting!*

She accepted his proffered arm as gracefully as she could and, after taking their leave of Lord Tooley, they began to stroll along the picture gallery at a leisurely pace. They were not interrupted as they walked, although a strikingly beautiful girl in a purple coat did flash a quizzical smile in their direction. Cecilia quickly concluded that few people dared to bother the Duke of Marlborough unless he wanted to be bothered.

“Well, what would you like me to tell you about *Nymph at Sunrise*, Your Grace?” she said, mostly to break the increasingly awkward silence between them. “I can assure you; she has been kept in excellent conditions in our home, and—”

“I would like to know who you are and what you are playing at, Miss Watson,” said the Duke, once again slipping behind the facade of a dangerous Greek god.

“I-I don’t understand, my lord...” she mumbled, thinking how terribly unfair it was that a man could be so attractive and so unsettling at the same time.

The Duke’s mouth twisted into an unpleasant smile.

“Ambrose Wallace kept meticulous records about his paintings. I should know, for I own a great many of his works. Now, while I can accept there might be a painting whose title was perhaps changed or unrecorded, I do know that he never sold a commission piece to someone by the name of Watson.”

Damn my father's record-keeping! I should never have said it was a commission! Cecilia screamed at herself inwardly.

“It was commissioned by my, um, stepfather,” she improvised. “We have different names.”

“You are a terrible liar, Miss Cecilia Watson, which is a severe problem if you wish to embark on a life of fraud.”

“Fraud?” she gasped, anger vying with fear for dominance in her brain. “I am no fraud, Your Grace!”

“Perhaps you are not, but your painting most certainly is.”

Cecilia stumbled, but the iron grip of the Duke upon her arm prevented her from falling.

“I can assure you, Your Grace, that *Nymph at Sunrise* is a genuine Wallace!”

“Do not waste your breath on denials, girl. I can see how you fooled Hope, and would likely fool a dozen other men about the painting's authenticity, especially with that charade you have orchestrated, pretending to be the Nymph.”

Cecilia gasped, and the Duke steered her to face a wall containing an exquisite painting from Hope's collection, but she could not focus on it.

“Did you think I would not recognize you, my girl?” he said in a conversational manner. “A clever ruse to drum up interest in the painting, to be sure, but a dangerous game, indeed. How do you think Lord Tooley would react if he made the same connection I have? Or, God forbid, if the Duke of Clarence had done so?”

“What do you want from me?” she murmured, the corners of her eyes stinging with unshed tears. All that work and planning! If Marlborough exposed her now, she would have no way of repaying Seth Bragg, and his treatment of late debtors was both cruel and terrifying.

“I want you to sell me the painting.”

Cecilia turned her head to look at the profile of the Duke.

“I'm sorry, what did you say?”

“I said that you will sell me the painting, and no one will learn of this little subterfuge.”

She bit at her lip. “Why... I mean... well, why should you want to buy a painting you think is a forgery?”

The Duke scoffed. “I don’t believe it a forgery, my girl, I know it to be one. While the colors and techniques displayed by the Nymph’s painter and Wallace are almost identical, he was notable for the strong, practical edge to his brush strokes, while our forger is practically whimsical in their approach.”

“Hardly whimsical,” she muttered, but he gave no indication of listening. He began walking again, and she had no choice but to join him, lest it appear he was dragging her along like a pet puppy.

“Forgive me for asking, Your Grace, but if you are so convinced in this matter, why not allow Lord Tooley, or Bingham, or any other of the gentlemen here purchase her instead?”

“No,” he said gruffly.

A flicker of hope sparked to life inside Cecilia, and the flame was fed by grains of pride.

He likes my painting! He likes it so much he is determined to buy it, even if it is by some unknown, valueless painter.

“I am afraid I cannot let her go cheaply,” she dared to say. “My family requires the funds.”

The Duke made an odd, growling sound in his throat. She waited for him to try and blackmail her, to threaten to expose her secret unless she gave him the Nymph for a pittance, but the threats never came.

“What is your price, Miss Watson?”

Fifty? Sixty? Seventy-five? Surely, it was best to start high and negotiate down.

“One hundred guineas,” she blurted out, shocked at her own audacity.

“Done,” he said. “I will discuss the finer details with Hope.”

“I will need a note from your bank by the early morning if you please,” she continued, choosing to ignore the eyebrow he raised in her direction. “There are some pressing matters I must deal with.”

He looked at her for a long moment, and as ashamed as she was to admit it, she was too afraid to meet his gaze.

How can he be so different from the tender man who kissed me?

“I can have the papers sent around this evening, but there will be a price for my acquiescence on this matter.”

“I am afraid the price of the painting is not negotiable.”

“It is not a financial penalty, girl,” he said, his expression irritable. “You will call at my home at your earliest convenience—within the week at most—and you will tell me the truth about this painting; the artist, the provenance,

whatever I want to know. Everything I ask, you will answer honestly. Can you meet such terms?"

They had finally reached the end of the picture gallery, where Mr. Hope was overseeing his footmen as they handed out glasses of wine to his guests. Hope looked over to Cecilia and motioned at the Duke with a questioning smile.

She nodded to her gracious host before turning to face the Duke, releasing his arm as she did so. He was at least a foot taller than she and held himself with all the arrogance and assurance a man born to his rank in life was wont to do.

His eyes, though. When every other part of his being commanded her to obey, in his eyes was a trace of the former softness that seemed to beg her to reach up and kiss him.

It sent a pleasant shiver down her spine which she did not want to think about too closely.

"I will tell you everything, Your Grace," she lied.

CHAPTER FOUR

*M*atilda let out a squeak of excitement as the two footmen removed the brown paper packaging from around Ezra's new painting, the living embodiment of the hidden emotions that swirled in his chest.

"I can barely believe you purchased it, let alone that it is really here in our home," she said, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. "Sophie is simply going to *die* of envy."

Ezra shook his head, still not entirely sure how or why the rivalry between his sister and their cousin had developed. "Why should Sophie be jealous?"

"Because I was the one who brought it to your attention, and you rely on my opinion when it comes to art," she replied, somehow managing to keep a straight face.

"I shall be sure to work that into conversation with her husband next time I see him at the club."

"No need, you can tell them at our *soirée*," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand before turning her attention to the footmen as they lifted the picture up to the space she'd had

cleared above the sitting room fireplace. Ezra, who so far had been lounging on the sofa, suddenly straightened up.

“Forgive me, Tilly, but I must have misheard you. For a moment there I could have sworn you mentioned something about a soirée.”

“Don’t be so obtuse, Ezra. We are in London during the Season, and you are a Duke. We are expected to provide entertainment.”

“We had a ball last month! We’re having another in July!”

“Two balls are hardly entertainment,” scoffed Matilda. “Jefferson, can you move the painting just a smidge to the left? Perfect!”

“Jefferson, you need to move it a smidge back to the right,” Ezra told the footman, who, as he fully expected, completely ignored him in favor of his sister’s directions. “Tilly, oh dear, sweet, obedient sister of mine, how can two balls be considered ‘hardly entertainment’? Because if that’s the case, I would like to know how they end up being so dashed expensive.”

His sister rolled her eyes. “You know very well I didn’t mean they lacked in the entertainment factor, however, you are expected to host your peers multiple times over the Season, as well you know. Our parents held such events almost every week, and when you were married, there were at least seven parties in our home.”

Ezra gave a sad smile as he thought about his late wife. “Eloise enjoyed the company more than I did, Tilly. It seems ridiculous to invite the very people I am seeking to avoid to dine with me in my own home.”

Matilda dismissed the footmen with thanks and waited until they had closed the door behind them before responding.

“I know it is frustrating to have every matchmaking mama in the *ton* pursuing you, Ezra,” she said as she came to sit beside him on the sofa. “Especially when half of them didn’t have the decency to allow you to grieve before throwing their daughters into your path. I am so grateful you’ve returned to Society on my behalf, but you cannot hold yourself away forever. Art is beautiful, but it is supposed to connect us, not provide a wall for you to hide behind.”

He reached over and flicked her on the chin. “There’s no reason to worry about me, I am perfectly content.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, that’s not acceptable, I wish for you to be perfectly happy.”

“We should make a deal then, my dear. When your future happiness is secured, we can worry about mine.”

“Excellent. Then you agree that a small *soirée* and a few other entertainments are necessary. I mean, if you want me to find a suitable husband at some point, the most effective way of doing so is to invite eligible gentlemen to visit.”

Her smile was triumphant, although she squealed as he launched a small decorative pillow at her head.

“A career in law or politics would suit you, Tilly! Very well, a small and very select party can be held next week, to allow people to view our new acquisition—but I mean it when I say very select!”

“Of course! Other than Cousin Sophie, I shall only invite people you find tolerable.” A sly smile crept over her lips as she began to study her fingers. “Perhaps that new friend of yours from yesterday... what did you say her name was? The lady selling the painting?”

“I very deliberately refrained from giving you her name, nor will you invite Sophie to the soirée,” he said as he got to his feet.

His mind flew back to Miss Watson in her severe outfit, so at odds with the ethereal persona she'd presented to him at the Serpentine. It was a good disguise, and on the surface, he could see why the likes of Tooley had been unable to make the link between the painting's owner and the delightful Nymph. But her hair! How in God's name had they not realized that the tightly pinned tresses of Miss Cecilia Watson, even when she was hiding her glory beneath an unflattering bonnet, was the exact same shade of strawberry blonde flaunted by the beautiful nymph begging to be found in the painting—even though the painting itself showed her as a brunette?

There were times when he wondered if his peers in the nobility were incapable of observing the world around them, or just ignorant of it. “You seemed rather taken with this mystery woman,” said Matilda hopefully. “Perhaps you would enjoy her company?”

“It is strictly a business relationship, Tilly,” he called over his shoulder as he made his way to the door.

“Well, perhaps it could double as a business meeting?”

He grabbed the door handle and turned it. “I already have a business meeting arranged, thank you.”

The cry of triumph from behind him let him know that Matilda had, once again, outmaneuvered him.

“I knew it! I knew you were enchanted by your mystery woman!” she crowed.

Ezra exited the room and shut the door behind him, unwilling to give his sister the satisfaction of being right.

He made his way back to his study, safe in the knowledge that even his irritating sister was smart enough to allow him some privacy when he needed it. This room was his sanctuary and had been so ever since the death of his pregnant wife all those years ago.

A pang of guilt stabbed at him as he thought about her. He went to his desk and picked up the miniature he kept there, gazing at her face. There had not been time to commission her portrait; he’d believed there would be a lifetime to get it done, and had her mother not had the good sense to have this miniature copied, he feared he may have forgotten what she looked like completely.

“Would you be jealous, Eloise?” he said softly to the wide-eyed, black-haired girl who stared back up at him, the merest hint of a smile on her delicate features. “Or would you be amused that my interest has finally been stirred again, by a painting of all things? I like to think you would laugh at that.”

The miniature gave no indication of her feelings on the matter. Ezra sighed and replaced it on the desk.

He'd paid far too much for *Nymph at Sunrise*, especially if it was confirmed to be a forgery, but his regret at this fact was minimal. Whatever Miss Cecilia Watson had been hoping to achieve with her small act of theater, he was oddly grateful for it. Her kiss had been a pleasant distraction, and without it, he might never have come to learn of the painting until it was in the hands of some idiot like Tooley. If by some bizarre twist of circumstance, he turned out to be wrong and the artist in question truly was Ambrose Wallace, then he was now the proud owner of that painter's greatest work. What—or rather, *whom*—had inspired the man to capture such a beautiful woman in paint remained unclear, although his suspicions remained strong that some unknown hand was responsible for the work.

Ezra allowed himself a little smile. He was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, whether Miss Watson wanted him to or not, and perhaps, in the process, he could also discover the identity of the Nymph currently hanging in the sitting room.



After leaving Robert in the care of Mrs. Fletcher, Cecilia walked the short distance to Artillery Street, where Seth Bragg

had his business premises. Dressed in her grey spencer, muslin dress, and a plain straw bonnet, she felt more than confident in the unflattering nature of her outfit. Inside the sock purse clutched to her chest was a roll of banknotes for Coutts amounting to almost a hundred pounds.

A bell rang with a jarringly merry jingle as she pushed open the door to Bragg's premises. The shop front, such as it was, consisted of bare floorboards, unadorned walls, a row of rickety chairs where various nervous-looking gentlemen and heavily veiled ladies were sitting, and a single wooden desk occupied by a miserable-looking clerk.

Cecilia hesitated for a moment, not used to seeing other people in the moneylender's shop, but shook off her surprise by reminding herself that it was not as though she was in the habit of frequenting such establishments, so for all she knew, this was the normal state of affairs. She strode confidently across the room and presented herself to the clerk, quietly letting him know she was expected.

"Take a seat," the wiry man replied without looking up from the ledger in front of him.

"My apologies if I wasn't clear; I mean that I have an appointment with Mr. Bragg," said Cecilia, nodding pointedly at the small carriage clock on the man's desk.

The clerk gave the deep sigh of a person severely put upon by the tribulations of the world.

"Mr. Bragg is occupied just now, miss. Take a seat, and he will see you when he's ready."

Cecilia pursed her lips, but as the wiry little man seemed intent on ignoring her presence, there did not seem to be anything she could do but follow his instructions. She reluctantly made her way to a free chair far away from the window and did her best to make herself comfortable on the bare wooden seat.

No one spoke. Everyone did their best to avoid meeting each other's eyes or doing anything to indicate that anyone in the room was aware of anyone else's identity. Cecilia started to wish she had worn a veil, as the other women had chosen to do. There were five other clients of Mr. Bragg in total, and the swiftest of glances at them was enough to confirm that they represented a broad swathe of social ranks between them. No lords, perhaps, but certainly one or two people were of *tonnish* appearance, while the heavily veiled widow to her side was quite obviously struggling to make ends meet. Cecilia clutched her sock purse tighter.

It's almost over. You'll still have to be frugal, but at least you'll never be in the clutches of a moneylender ever again.

The shabby red curtain at the far end of the room was pulled back, and an aspiring dandy not much older than herself stepped out of the back room, his face ashen. He practically fled from the shop, and Cecilia had to fight the instinct to run after him, to be sure he had not cast up his accounts in the street outside.

The clerk mumbled something, and the destitute-looking widow made her way to the velvet curtain and disappeared behind it.

Ten minutes of silence passed. Cecilia glanced at the carriage clock, noting it was five minutes past the hour, and five minutes past her appointment time, but she supposed that the four people waiting alongside her had a greater claim to see Bragg before her turn came. Still, she did not like waiting in that manner, not with so many bank notes clutched on her lap. Her foot bounced in agitation as she waited.

The widow reappeared, walking with the dignity of an undertaker as she progressed across the room without taking her eyes off the door. The bell jingled merrily as she left.

The middle-aged man of *tonnish* appearance went next. Five minutes of silence passed, then a great commotion of shouting and banging, as though furniture was being flipped over and punches were thrown. Cecilia was on her feet before she knew it, then she froze with indecision. What was she supposed to do in such situations?

She looked at Bragg's employee and motioned toward the curtain. "Shouldn't we help, or do something?"

"No need to worry, miss," said the clerk with a yawn. "Mr. Bragg's associates will make sure he comes to no harm, while they'll show the client out of the back door."

The gentleman beside her scoffed. "It isn't Bragg any of us worried about, now, is it?"

The clerk narrowed his gaze. "And it won't do anyone any good to develop a bleeding heart all of a sudden, now, will it? Best to ignore the kerfuffle and forget you ever saw that. And sit down, miss. It isn't your turn to see the Old Man yet."

Cecilia felt more out of her depth than ever before, looking around at the other waiting clients, who all studiously avoided meeting her eyes. She sat back down.

“You’re almost free,” she whispered to herself. She thought the clerk laughed, but when she snapped her head up to look at him, he appeared to be coughing instead.

The curtain was pulled back again, this time by the biggest, roughest-looking man Cecilia had ever seen. He grunted at the clerk, who in turn grunted at a trembling woman, clearly to inform her that Mr. Bragg was ready to speak with her.

Silence again, then the curtain pulled back, and the client rushed out. The cycle repeated until Cecilia was the only one left waiting, and even the clerk had given up any pretense of working. No one else had entered, she realized.

“Does Mr. Bragg usually arrange to meet us all at the same time?” she asked his employee, who gave a world-weary sigh when she addressed him.

“It’s his hours, miss. It’s when he’s open to be seen. First come, first served.”

Cecilia rubbed the back of her neck. “How strange. He’s always been punctual in his meetings with me before.”

The clerk looked over at her with a smile that made her want to shudder.

“Ah, well, those meetings were different, miss. Those meetings were for a client at no risk of defaulting, while these are for what we call higher risk individuals.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand what the difference is.”

The curtain was pulled back, and the merchant-class man hurried out. The clerk sniggered.

“Well, you’re about to find out for yourself. In you go now, and don’t mind the Bruiser. He only bites if Mr. Bragg tells him to.”

What a horrid little man! Cecilia bit down on her tongue so she wouldn’t say it out loud. She chose to ignore the clerk instead, which he apparently found even more amusing as she passed through the shabby curtain and into the moneylender’s office.

“Miss Wallace, how pleasant to see you! Do take a seat, won’t you?” said Bragg cheerfully, although he did not rise from behind his desk. The giant of a man she’d seen earlier—she guessed this was the Bruiser the clerk had referred to—pulled back the chair for her as though he was her dining partner.

“Thank you,” she murmured before sitting down. The Bruiser, she noticed, remained standing behind her.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?” asked Bragg, emphasizing the word pleasure with a lick of his lips.

Cecilia forced her brightest smile onto her lips as she pulled back the rings on her sock purse and removed the roll of bank notes. She placed them onto the desk in front of the moneylender with a satisfied nod.

The sooner this is over, the better, she thought. If I never set foot in here again it will be too soon.

“You will find the amount there in full, Mr. Bragg. I believe this meets your terms, and that my debts to you are now cleared. I am even early, which you led me to believe is a rare occurrence in your world, so I hope this is a *pleasant* surprise.”

The moneylender smiled at her. He did not glance at the roll of paper before him. Cecilia felt her own smile faltering.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Bragg?” she asked. “I assure you, the notes are from Coutts, and as you know, they are as good as guineas.”

“I see... I’m afraid you’re mistaken, my girl. The terms of my agreement, both with your late father and now with yourself, is that I’m to be repaid in *guineas*.”

Cecilia almost laughed. She gripped her sock purse with both hands to prevent them from shaking.

“They are bank notes, Mr. Bragg. From Coutts. They are not insubstantial. They can be taken to the bank and exchanged for guineas if that is how you prefer to keep your money.”

“Then that’s really what you should have done if you didn’t wish to default on your loan,” he told her, his tone apologetic but his eyes gleaming with malice.

This time Cecilia did laugh; it was high-pitched and frail, and she despised herself for making such a small and desperate sound.

“I am a woman with no account there! Without a man to vouch for me, they are hardly about to let me cash in these notes!”

“Then it’s a pity you didn’t consider that sooner, child, for I would have been happy to accompany you on such an errand. For a fee, naturally,” the moneylender replied. He got to his feet and began to slowly make his way around the desk.

“We could... well, then we could go right now, together,” she said, getting to her own feet as he approached like a snake encircling a mouse.

“We could, we could but then the fee for my inconvenience, not to mention that for my time, would be added to the amount you already owe me, girl, and I am not about to lend you any further capital.”

“But I don’t need capital, I am here with payment in full!” she cried, her heart thundering so fast in her chest, it drowned out all sounds but the moneylender’s wicked chuckle.

“And we’ve established that a roll of flimsies does not constitute repayment in full, child, and by my reckoning, it’s

twenty minutes past the hour, so you were late to boot.”

“I was here early! Your clerk made me wait! Mr. Bragg, this is enough!” Cecilia declared but could not stop her voice from shaking.

She thought of Old Lil. Of the people who disappeared when they crossed Bragg. Of the girls who only wished they’d disappeared instead of the fate he inflicted on them.

Damn you, Father! How could you leave me in this man’s power?

The moneylender was right in front of her now, but the wooden chair pressed into the back of her legs ensured she had no way to escape him.

“My clerk was doing his job, Miss Wallace. You failed to do yours,” he said, his eyes roving over her face with an expression uncomfortably close to hunger. “But I’m not an unreasonable man. Had your father failed to pay I *might* have been forced to break his ankles, but I have no desire to do such violence to a pretty thing like you, not when there are other ways you can repay me.”

Cecilia swallowed. It felt as if there were hot coals in her throat, and tears threatened to pour from her eyes, but she found a kernel of anger hiding amongst her fear, and she seized onto it for dear life.

“I have nothing of value left to give you, sir,” she stated, lifting her chin just a little.

Bragg smiled like a tiger as he ran one bony finger down her cheek. “Oh, you have more value than you know, my little spinster. I’ve taken quite a fancy to you, truth be told, and I might even be induced to keep you to myself.”

“How dare you!” said Cecilia as a wave of bile rose in her throat. “I would rather end up in the gutter than marry a man like you.”

His reaction was not what she expected.

There was no anger, only genuine surprise that caused his eyes to widen and his mouth to form a capital O before he dissolved into guffaws of laughter that were echoed by the Bruiser behind her.

“You-you thought... oh, my dear Miss Wallace, it appears I am losing my touch,” he said, wiping an imaginary tear from his eye. “Marriage! Good Lord, why would any man of wealth want to marry a girl like you?”

“I... what?” she mumbled, confusion driving out her fear. “I don’t understand.”

Bragg leaned against the desk, his expression transitioning smoothly from mirth to malevolence.

“You’re poor, unprotected, and on the verge of going to a debtor’s prison. There’s plenty of men who will pay me well for your company, and far more besides for your virtue, but

marriage? Your delusions would be charming were they not so pathetic.”

“How dare you!” Cecilia seethed. she drew back her hand to slap him, but the Bruiser caught her wrist in his tight grip.

The moneylender chuckled. “Careful, Jack, we don’t want to damage the merchandise. Our clients don’t like seeing bruises they didn’t inflict themselves.”

His lackey loosened his hold, and Cecilia ripped her hand free.

“I still have until September to pay what I owe,” she said, refusing to show her fear.

Bragg’s smile was sinister. “You do, you do, but by my reckoning, that’s over a hundred and fifty guineas, thanks to late fees and interest.”

She knew he was lying, but she finally realized that she had no power against this man. If he decided she owed him two hundred, or four hundred, or even a thousand guineas by the following morning, what could she do to fight him? She’d be thrown into the debtor’s prison while the mess was sorted out, and there were no options for Robert’s care that did not end up with him dangerously ill, or worse.

She snatched up the roll of banknotes and stuffed them back into her purse. She forced herself to walk rather than run out of the office, pushing back the curtain with as much dignity as she could muster.

The clerk was still at his desk. His expression showed no pity, but nor did it show contempt. Cecilia had the horrible thought that this was nothing new to the man, and that to work for Mr. Bragg meant abandoning any sense of decency. There was no help there.

She left the shop, the merry jingling of the shop bell taunting her with every step along Artillery Street.

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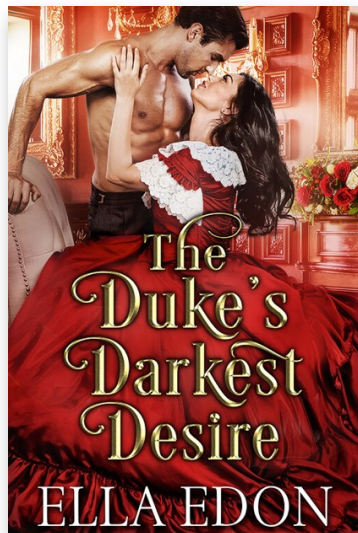
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CHAPTER FIVE

The following morning found the Duke alone in the sitting room, still in his riding clothes, as he contemplated his newly acquired painting. The more he studied it, the more convinced he became that Ambrose Wallace had not been the hand behind its creation, although he could see the man's influence all over it. The intricate detail in the rendering of the oak bark and the way the whole scene was illuminated by the unseen sunrise were both signatures of his style, but the love expended on the flowers at the nymph's feet was unusual in his work. This, perhaps, Ezra could have explained away as experimentation on the part of the artist, but it was the nymph herself that was proof the work was by another hand.

"Who are you, my beauty?" he murmured. "Who painted you with such devotion?"

Predictably, the room remained silent, and he chuckled at his foolishness.

The door to the room opened, and his butler entered, his face schooled into that inscrutable expression the man reserved for any visitors he deemed less than worthy of a duke's attention.

“There is a Miss Watson here to see you, Your Grace. She claims you requested her presence.”

Ezra sat up in surprise. “I did not expect her to visit for a few days, at least. Show her in, Anderson.”

The butler bowed and left without another word, giving Ezra a moment to get to his feet and straighten his clothes. For a moment, he considered racing upstairs to change into more appropriate attire but quickly dismissed the impulse without examining it too closely.

The door reopened, and Anderson announced his guest.

Ezra’s first impression of Cecilia Watson had been that she was pretty, but now he had the opportunity to study her at his leisure, he realized he had been wrong; she was beautiful.

She was wearing the same dress as their first meeting, but her hair was pinned in a flattering style about her face instead of being tucked up beneath a cap, the strawberry blonde curls shining in the morning light rushing in through the windows. Her blue-green eyes were large and full of intelligence, her nose straight, and her lips a perfectly formed cupid’s bow. She was too thin for the dress she wore, but she stood straight and moved with elegance. Whoever she was, whatever game she was playing with the painting, Cecilia Watson had the type of beauty that would have taken the *ton* by storm had she been born to the *Beau Monde*.

“Your Grace,” she said as she dropped into a deep curtsy. “You wished to discuss the painting with me.”

A statement, not a question, he noted. A timely reminder that while she might be beautiful, she was lying to him.

“Indeed, Miss Watson. I wish to know where you acquired it.”

Her gaze was steady, allowing him to sink into those eyes as she responded.

“I inherited it from my father, Your Grace.”

Irritation flared in Ezra. “Miss Watson, credit me with enough intelligence to know when I am being lied to. Neither you nor Hope are skilled in prevarication, and I am not a man to be trifled with.”

Her gaze did not waver. “What is it you want from me?”

Ezra didn't answer straight away. He turned to look at the painting again, studying the curve of the nymph's back and the light dancing across her form.

“I want you to put me in touch with whoever really painted this picture,” he said and put up a hand to forestall any objection from his beautiful guest. “No, please do not say ‘Ambrose Wallace’; we both know that is not the case, and I am tired of whatever game you are playing. Introduce me to the real artist of *Nymph*, or failing that, find his model.”

“Model?” she repeated, looking confused.

Ezra glanced at her in surprise.

“Of course, there was a model. Look here,” he said walking toward the painting and motioning at the Nymph. “Look at the way the light falls on her shoulder blades. Do you see it?”

Miss Watson stepped forward, looking up at the area he was indicating. Her brows knitted together as her eyes searched the canvas.

“The brushwork has an amateurish edge, I suppose, and the veil is a touch heavy-handed, but—”

“My word, you are a critic, aren’t you?” he said with a slight chuckle. “The brushwork is beautiful, and the veil is so sheer it looks like the slightest breeze will send it fluttering off about the room. But the light, the light just there? That’s not the light of an imagined sunrise; it’s candlelight.”

She turned to look at him, her expression filled with sheer incredulity.

“Candlelight?” she scoffed. “You expect me to believe you can tell the difference between the illumination of the sun and a candle on bare skin when it is rendered in paint?”

“My dear, I have had the pleasure of studying the beauty of a woman’s body in both forms of light, and I am confident that this was painted from life,” he replied.

Her eyes widened, and her delicate lips parted in surprise. She glanced away from him; her cheeks flushed pink with embarrassment.

Or perhaps desire. The voice whispered at the back of his mind. Pull her against you. Kiss those lips so thoroughly, while thoughts of your fictional nymph are chased away.

He coughed into his hand and turned his back on both his guest and the painting.

“So, you will fulfill this obligation, Miss Watson? You will bring the artist’s, or his model’s, identity to me?”

“I-I don’t think I can,” she said, sounding almost hopeless. “You never believe a word I say, Your Grace.”

Something about her voice stirred him. He remembered the lilting delicacy of her tone as she sang, which was followed swiftly by the desire to start kissing her right there and then, consequences be damned.

He thrust the urge down before it could cause a scandal, although a tiny part of his brain was determined to revisit the thought at the earliest opportunity.

“I don’t believe you when you lie to me, Miss Watson,” he said, returning to sit on the sofa. “Be truthful with me, and you will find me a great friend.”

“And if you believe me a liar?” she asked.

He paused, hardening his heart to those tragic eyes and perfectly bowed mouth.

“Then you will find me far more dangerous than your worst enemy. The choice is yours, but I expect your response within the week.”



Cecilia left the Duke’s mansion in a daze, her mind so full of tumultuous thoughts, she was afraid the world might spin out of control.

“Candlelight!” she spluttered at no one in particular, seizing on the one, tiny detail of the last twenty-four hours that did not threaten to consume her. “He knows the *Nymph* was painted by candlelight? Of all the nerve!”

Although, naturally, the model *had* been painted by candlelight, there was no possibility that he was such a connoisseur of the female form, he could have known it for certain. And as for his assumption, it was a man who had lovingly rendered the body of his beautiful muse for all eternity... ha! How disappointed His Grace would be should he ever learn no delightful woman was posing for a lovesick artist! How satisfying it would be to see his dark eyes widen in surprise should he discover that not only was she, Cecilia Wallace, the creator of his beloved painting, but that thanks to two mirrors borrowed from Mrs. Fletcher, she was also the model for his nymph.

How wondrous it would be to see his lips part in desire when he realized she was the woman he’d kissed on the banks of the

Serpentine. How magical it would feel to have his arms wrap around her as he kissed her passionately.

Cecilia touched her fingers to her lips, remembering that kiss. Her anxiety and disquiet melted away, to be replaced by a sense of longing, then guilt, and then finally, shame.

The Duke, she realized, was not a bad person, and he was right about her: she *was* trying to con him. After the price he had paid, he had every right to know the identity of the artist, but how could she tell him the truth? What could she possibly do or say that would not land her in more trouble than she was in now? Seth Bragg wanted more money from her, but she would not be able to sell any more paintings unless she could convince His Grace that they were genuinely the work of her father, or perhaps convince him they were the work of one of his students. No, there was no hope there; he'd made it clear he knew they were not painted by Ambrose Wallace, and he would only want to meet the mysterious student artist, whom he'd then, no doubt, pressure into giving up the identity of the Nymph.

“Why couldn't you have just let Lord Tooley buy the painting?” she muttered to herself, certain the Earl lacked the Duke's refined skill when it came to an appreciation of artistic nuance.

She dismissed the possibility of telling the Duke the full truth the very moment it occurred to her. For one thing, it would implicate Thomas Hope in her deception, and she would not bring shame upon the man, not even to save her own skin. For the other, it was unlikely he would regard her as a virtuous woman when he learned she'd been running around London in a shift pretending to be a nymph, and dear God, when he realized she was the practically naked woman currently hanging over his sitting room fireplace...

Cecilia shuddered at the idea. For some reason best not examined too closely, it was very, very important that the Duke of Marlborough should have a good opinion of her.

She reached Hyde Park and made her way to some of the quieter pathways, studiously avoiding the old Cheesecake House and the woodland where she had met the Duke. No matter what her traitorous heart was demanding, she could not think about him just yet, nor the problems caused by the painting. She could not think about his hands slipping about her waist as he pulled her close, or the feel of his lips on her mouth, her cheeks, her neck. She had not the time to indulge in daydreams about how it would feel to bury her hands into his hair and surrender to his kisses, or what it would be like to have him study her naked form first by the light of candles, and then by the sun. How it would—

She let out a small scream of frustration. A few people glanced over at her but otherwise gave her no notice.

“Stop being a fool, Cecilia,” she told herself, no longer dawdling idly but instead marching like a soldier on his way to battle. “He is not your suitor, and he is certainly not your biggest problem. Bragg. Focus on how to get rid of Bragg.”

She considered and quickly discarded various schemes to come up with the money necessary to free herself and Robert from that hideous man’s clutches and contemplated some truly impossible plans before five minutes had passed. She slowed down her pace, eventually coming to a stop right where the path before her forked in two; one way led back up toward Spitalfields and to Elder Street, where Robert waited for her, while the other...

Her shoulders slumped.

“I’m sorry, Father, but there is no one else I can turn to for help,” she said, staring at the path she had to take. “Besides, Robert’s health is more important than your pride, and it’s certainly more important than mine.”

She started walking, with no conviction she was doing the right thing, but with no other options left open.

It felt like she had only taken five steps before she was at the doors of a mansion that was both familiar and alien to her. Cecilia hesitated on the bottom step, tempted to go around to the servant’s entrance, as she had the last time her father had brought her there, following her mother’s death. But the memory of that particular humiliation still stung, and no matter how desperate she might presently be, she still had her pride. She lifted her chin and marched up the stairs, then knocked on the door smartly.

It opened almost the second Cecilia let go of the brass knocker, to reveal the face of a handsome footman, whose gaze swept over her with the contempt of a royal prince.

“I wish to see Viscount Chalmers, if you please,” she said with as much confidence as she could muster in the face of such disapproval.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but he will see me,” she said, lifting her chin. Cecilia decided she was heartily sick of butlers, footmen, and hired bruisers talking to her like she was a silly little girl on behalf of powerful men. “You can take my hat and gloves while the butler announces my arrival.”

The footman raised an eyebrow. “The Viscount is not at home to... acquaintances, miss,” he said with the tiniest trace of a leer, and rather than making her cheeks burn with embarrassment, Cecilia let her rage fuel her conviction.

“And were you better at your job, my dear man, you would have known the moment you laid eyes on me that I am not a mere acquaintance to Lord Chalmers, nor would you have had the insolence to speak to me in such a manner. So, unless you wish to lose your position, I strongly suggest that you admit me at once, and let your superior know I am here.”

The footman actually stepped back in the face of her reproof, but he was not so lost to his duty that he actually let her into the house.

“Who... who should I say is calling?” he asked, now in a situation he’d never adequately trained for.

Cecilia, feeling the smallest trace of pity for him, smiled.

“Please, let the Viscount know that his granddaughter is here to speak with him.”

CHAPTER SIX

“*Y*ou have some nerve thinking you can just stroll into my house whenever the fancy takes you, my girl, and with the audacity to use the front door at that! Ha!” said Viscount Chalmers as he hobbled slowly into his study, leaning heavily on an ebony and gold cane. “I had half a mind to send you packing, but Lady Chalmers thought you might kick up a fuss if I did not give you ten minutes to say your piece, and I see the wisdom in her observation. You have my attention, child. Speak and be done with it.”

“I see your gout is still troubling you, my lord,” said Cecilia, dropping into a curtsy, even though the grey-haired curmudgeon before her was yet to so much as glance in her direction. “I had hoped to find you in a better state of health.”

“And hoped a better mood as well, all the better to fleece me no doubt,” replied the Viscount with a contemptuous snort. He dropped into the high-backed, leather chair behind his desk, which creaked alarmingly at his weight.

Cecilia clenched her teeth behind her smile. “I have never tried to fleece you, my lord. I have never even asked for so much as a trinket from you before today.”

The Viscount finally looked up at her as he raised one hairy eyebrow high. “Before today, Miss Cecilia? So, we are at the truth of it already! Today you come to ask for much more than a trinket. I knew as much, which is what I told my lady when she made her foolish observations.”

Think of Robert. You’re doing this for Robert.

“How is Grandmother?” she asked politely. “I have not seen her for a number of years, but I hope she is well.”

“Lady Chalmers is in excellent health, as always,” replied the Viscount, his eyes narrowing. “If I find out that you’ve been going about using your connection to the Viscountess and me for your own advantage, my girl, it will end badly for you.”

“Yes, you made that very clear when my father asked for your help after my mother’s funeral,” said Cecilia before she could help herself. “Trust me when I say that we have faithfully obliged you in that matter.”

“Faithful? Ha! Your parents didn’t know the meaning of the word, running off to get married against my wishes like that. A Gretna marriage! We have barely lived down the shame!”

Perhaps it was the shameful way you treated your only daughter both before and after her marriage that you can’t live down. She wanted to scream it at him, but the thought of Robert and his health kept her from giving in to the temptation.

“Be that as it may, my lord, you cannot accuse me of having used your name for credit, nor have I ever come to you for help or support.”

“You tried to wheedle money out of your grandmother with some faradiddle about your brother not six months ago,” replied the Viscount. He took hold of the decanter on his desk and filled a single glass with what smelled like port.

Cecilia swallowed. “Robert contracted influenza, and his fever was dangerously high, my lord. The doctor thought... well, he thought my brother might not live to see the morning, and I felt it was only right to let Grandmother know how he did, in case either of you wished to see him.”

The Viscount gave a bark of laughter, pausing with the glass halfway to his lips.

“But he lived, I see. How fortunate.”

“Indeed, it was fortunate, for he is a truly splendid little boy, who used up much of his strength in that fight for his life,” she replied, far more hotly than she intended. “The doctor, while effective, was an expense I could not readily afford at the time, however, and so—”

“And so, you want me to pay your debts,” finished the Viscount. “And there it is. Just like your parents, only sniffing around when you want money from me.”

“In my defense, Lord Chalmers, you have made it very clear that I was not to darken your doorstep unless it was an

emergency.”

“Debts are not an emergency,” he said before taking another drink of his port.

“They are when failure to pay has consequences,” Cecilia snapped in response, but her only reward was to see familiar anger and indignation cloud the face of her oldest living relative.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath to calm herself.

“My apologies, Lord Chalmers, I have no right to speak to you in such a way. I do not wish for you to pay my debts, but only to exchange some bank notes for guineas on my behalf, then loan me a few more that I will repay come quarter-day. Please, I did not ask for your help after father’s death when we became homeless, nor for your support when Robert became so ill. I swear that I will never ask anything else of you after this either, but for this one trifling thing, where you will lose nothing by lending me your aid. No one even needs know it came from you if that is what you wish, but I cannot take care of my brother unless someone stands my friend, and for the love of your daughter, my mother, if not from any sense of love toward her children, I beg of you to do this one, tiny thing to help us.”

The Viscount stared at his port glass while a moment stretched into an eternity.

“No,” he replied and took another sip.

The silence beat at Cecilia's ears like an ocean storm, threatening to drown her at any moment.

"Apologies, my lord, I don't think I quite heard what you said."

"You heard me perfectly, Miss Wallace. Now, if that concludes your business, I bid you good day."

"Then you don't have to help me, just Robert, he would be no trouble to you at all, I swear—"

"We are done here, Miss Wallace," said the Viscount, with a world-weary sigh. "I would prefer it if you would leave quietly, but I am more than prepared to have the footmen drag you to Bow Street if you wish to make a scene."

She tried to keep the tears from flowing from her eyes. "Please..." she whispered, but she knew there was no point. She stood and left the study without another word.

She was halfway toward the front door before she realized that both the butler and footmen were conspicuous in their absence. A maid appeared at the top of the stairs, glancing around as if she was afraid of being seen.

"Follow me, miss," said the girl in a loud whisper. "Her ladyship wants to see you."

Cecilia opened her mouth to speak, but the maid glanced over at the closed door to the Viscount's study with wide-eyed fear,

and so she swallowed down all her questions and ran after the girl as quietly as she could. She followed her to the upper floor, where the family apartments were located, and the atmosphere seemed to lighten the further away from the Viscount's study they got. Cecilia had never been in this part of the house before—in fact, she didn't think she'd ever been further than the hallway before that day—but she knew where she was being taken even before the ornate double doors had been opened.

Her grandmother, it seemed, wished to meet her in her private apartments.

The Viscountess was pacing the length of her retiring room as Cecilia entered, apparently indulging in the unladylike habit of chewing at her fingernails. It was not until her maid drew her attention that she looked over, and her dark eyes widened as she beheld her granddaughter for the first time in almost five years.

“Good Lord, for a moment I thought you were your mother,” she said, her voice trembling with emotion. She stepped forward, her arms open for an embrace, but then faltered in her approach, no doubt realizing that such a display of affection may be unwanted after a lifetime of distance.

Cecilia desperately wanted to run to her and submit to any display of maternal affection her grandmother wished to provide, but she squashed the traitorous emotions down before they could overwhelm her. The Viscountess—better to think of her that way rather than as Grandmother—the Viscountess had allowed her daughter to die in penury, consumption slowly stealing her vivacity, instead of making her last few years on earth comfortable. There was no forgiving that.

“You wished to see me, my lady?” said Cecilia after dipping into a perfectly executed curtsy,

The Viscountess flinched as though she had been slapped. “Yes, I suppose I have no right to expect you to address me as Grandmama. Please, come and sit for a moment. My husband will not disturb us in this room, and the servants will not betray your presence here.”

Cecilia couldn’t help but raise an enquiring eyebrow at that, and the Viscountess gave a wry smile. “In my experience, loyalty comes from good treatment rather than high wages, although gifts do help where necessary.”

“I suppose that depends very much on your financial situation,” replied Cecilia as she perched on the edge of an overstuffed chair.

The Viscountess let out a tiny, humorless laugh before taking the seat closest to her. “Very true, and I deserved that blow. Has it been very hard for you since your parents passed?”

Were it not for the earnest, worried expression on the face of Lady Chalmers, Cecilia might have believed the woman was mocking her.

“Yes,” she eventually replied. “I wrote to you when Robert was sick, in case he did not pull through, and—”

“Robert was sick?” repeated the Viscountess. She grabbed Cecilia’s hands, squeezing them tightly in her own trembling

fingers. “Did he recover? Is he well? Oh, God, you did not come here to inform us he has passed, did you?”

“He’s recovering,” said Cecilia, cocking her head to one side as she regarded her grandmother carefully. “You did not receive my letter?”

“My husband is very particular about ensuring I only receive correspondence he deems appropriate,” replied Lady Chalmers, not even attempting to keep the bitterness from her voice.

“I had to borrow money for medicine. What little I inherited from Mama was covering the debts Father incurred paying for her care, and then those he built up after her death when he took to drinking. Grandfather is officially our guardian, but he refused to do anything. Do you know the type of man who holds my debts, my lady? The type of man you left holding my future in his hands?”

The Viscountess put her hands to her face. “I had no idea. My husband never told me.”

Cecilia hardened her heart. “You knew.”

The Viscountess dropped her hands to her lap but did not look up. Silence dragged out between them and, for the first time in her life, Cecilia had the opportunity to truly look at her grandmother.

Lady Chalmers was only a few years past forty—over two decades younger than the Viscount—but her petite frame and

strawberry-blonde hair made her look much younger. She was fashionably dressed in luxurious materials, in the way a doll might be clothed to show off the possessions of the owner. She should have been beautiful the way Cecilia's mother had been beautiful, but the sadness she radiated was practically overpowering.

Cecilia knew she should pity her grandmother, but with Seth Bragg's threats hovering over her head, all she could feel was anger.

"I need money," said Cecilia as matter-of-factly as she could. "Specifically, I need to exchange a roll of banknotes for guineas immediately. I am not looking for a handout, just an exchange."

The Viscountess looked surprised. "What an odd request."

"The moneylender I am indebted to will not accept any other method of payment."

Lady Chalmers did not answer. She motioned for her maid to approach, and the two women had a quick, whispered conversation too quiet for Cecilia to catch. The maid looked up at her for a moment, gave a brief nod, and then hurried out of the room. The Viscountess turned back to her as though the interlude had not occurred.

"I cannot access that much money, my darling, even if I wanted to. My husband keeps a very close eye on my finances, and I have no faith that the bank would not contact him directly if I attempted to make such a transaction."

Cecilia choked out a laugh that was unsettlingly close to a sob.

“Then you are no more use to me than my grandfather,” she said, getting to her feet. “Forgive my intrusion, I will not bother you again, my lady.”

“Wait!” cried the Viscountess, reaching out to catch her arm. “There is at least something I can do.”

The maid returned at that moment; her arms laden with a pile of clothing ranging from a sumptuous gold satin evening dress to a plain white muslin.

Cecilia stared at them, not quite comprehending their meaning.

“I know how expensive clothing can be,” said the Viscountess by way of explanation.

Cecilia turned to stare at her, the chasm between them having never been so vast as it was at that moment.

“Dresses? You’re giving me dresses?” she exclaimed.

The Viscountess at least had the good grace to blush as her maid thrust the piles of material into Cecilia’s arms.

“It is the only thing he does not keep track of,” she said, staring at her own feet. “Perhaps you will find a use for them. Now, follow my girl down the servant’s stairs so you are not

seen; the coachman will take you home in the gig, to keep you safe.”

There were so many things she could say. So many things that she wanted to scream at this woman who looked so like her mother and yet whose personality could not have been more different. She opened her mouth a few times, but no words came out, so she clamped it shut and followed the maid out of the room without so much as a backward glance.



After successfully convincing his sister that no, she absolutely did not require his presence at Lady Stanley’s musical evening, not unless she wished to see him snoring his way through every recital, Ezra had intended to spend the evening at his club, safe from the gossip and forced conversation of polite Society.

It had not turned out that way.

Rather than being allowed to enjoy a cigar and peruse a few journals in peace, he’d been spotted by Lord Tooley, who’d immediately invited a group of his cronies to gather on the brown Chesterfields around Ezra, where they attempted to tease him about his latest acquisition.

“I was all set to make my bid to Hope when I discovered His Grace had only gone and charmed the owner directly, cutting me out as if I am a greenhorn!” laughed Tooley, while the rest of his hangers-on guffawed as though he was a first-class wit. “All I can say is that Marlborough’s encounter with the Divine Nymph must have been far more delightful than mine.”

“At least you saw her,” complained one of their companions. “I lingered in various parks all week and had no mystical encounters to speak of, unless you count being propositioned by an exceedingly soiled dove last Tuesday.”

“Better a soiled dove than a fat pigeon,” retorted Tooley, and everyone but Ezra began laughing at the Earl’s nonsensical comment.

“Are you going to let us all come around and ogle at your nymph, then, Marlborough?” asked Lord Fairfax, a man Ezra had once been on friendly terms with but whose interests no longer aligned with his own.

“I believe my sister is arranging some soirée or gathering for anyone interested in art,” replied Ezra, purposefully turning over the page of his magazine with the hope that the men around him would get the hint.

“Lady Matilda, eh?” said Tooley with a suggestive leer.

“Indeed, unless you are implying that I have another sister locked up in a tower somewhere,” he replied coolly.

“Hoping to fire her off this Season?” continued Tooley, glancing at his companions. “Anyone in particular you favor for her hand?”

There were some vain attempts to stifle laughter. Ezra gave a dramatic sigh and folded up his magazine. “If that was an unsubtle attempt to rile me about the betting books being rife with speculation about my sister’s marriage prospects, I’m

afraid you've missed your mark. I can give you no tips save that you did not make it out of the starting gate, Tooley, let alone fall at the first fence."

The Earl turned a bright shade of beetroot as all the gentlemen within earshot fell about laughing at Ezra's jibe. Matilda was the greatest catch on the matrimonial market, and while the Earl had openly considered himself a great catch for many years, most of the available girls and their matchmaking mamas appeared to think otherwise.

Ezra bid them all goodnight, certain he would get no peace if he remained at the club. He had barely made it three steps before Tooley's snide tones caught up with him.

"Off to dally with the Nymph, Your Grace? Rumor has it that you believe she can come to life, but I never thought I'd see you rush home to embrace the fairy that's replaced your ghost."

"I say, Tooley, that's below the belt," snapped Lord Fairfax, and Ezra was touched to see that many of the other gentlemen were nodding in agreement. He favored the Earl with a cold stare that he knew from experience could make a cat look away first with shame.

Tooley blinked first and looked down at the table. Ezra turned ever so slightly, making his cut to him much more obvious.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Those of you whom my sister deems worthy of attending our soiree will have the opportunity to view *Nymph at Sunrise* then," he said, and then made his way out of the club without a word to anyone else.



“The quality of this material, Cecilia! It’s as fine as anything my husband used to make, God rest his soul,” said Mrs. Fletcher as she examined the dresses that had been unceremoniously dropped onto the kitchen table. “A gift from your grandmother, you say? She must work for a very fine lady if she was gifted these.”

“Something like that,” replied Cecilia. Very few people knew she was the granddaughter of Lord and Lady Chalmers, and she preferred to keep it that way. She had an awful feeling that Seth Bragg would use the information against her. “What do you think?”

Mrs. Fletcher nodded thoughtfully. “Taken to the right families, I expect you’d make several pounds for the evening dresses based on the silk alone, and not much less for the walking dresses, what with the silver embroidery. It might take me a while to sell them at the best prices, but I can do it if you have a mind to trust me.”

Cecilia nearly burst into tears of relief. “I would trust you with my life, Mrs. Fletcher!”

“It won’t fill your pockets any time soon, I’m afraid, not if you want the best price for them.”

“I understand completely,” Cecilia replied. While making the quarter-day payment to Mr. Bragg was her most pressing concern, she would be foolish to ignore the need for money beyond that. If the worst happened... well, at least it would

pay for Mrs. Fletcher to take care of Robert and keep him out of the moneylender's hands.

"I'm sorry I can't do more," the woman sighed. "I know you don't like to talk about it, so I won't say anything further, but it's not right what that man is holding you to."

"You are the best landlady and kindest friend a girl could ask for," said Cecilia, meaning every word. She knew full well that the Fletchers could have charged higher rents, and that young Bessie was under no obligation to look after Robert the way she did. Mrs. Fletcher had even worked her magic on Cecilia's clothing over the last year, making work dresses look new without asking for a penny in return. "I've never been so thankful for the good fortune that brought me to your home, for I'd be lost without you."

The older woman flushed pink with happiness, and then picked up the topmost dress from the pile. She held it up against Cecilia with a critical eye.

"This one is not for sale," she said with a matter-of-fact air.

"But why ever not?" asked Cecilia, unable to resist the urge to hold the ballgown tight to her body as she imagined wearing it. "I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life."

"I agree with you there, but it's the color," explained Mrs. Fletcher. "That shade of cream silk with the gold gauze overdress... there are not many ladies who can wear it to advantage, but with that hair of yours, my darling girl, you'd be the toast of London."

It was Cecilia's turn to feel her cheeks grow warm. "You are very kind, but I have more need of the money than I do of a pretty dress."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Fletcher, folding her arms over her ample chest. "Every girl deserves to own just one dress that makes her feel like a queen, if not for herself then because it's a tool in her kit for catching a husband. I've hoarded away some fine material for when my Bessie's old enough to be courting, and like it or not, Miss Cecilia, a good marriage is the best way to keep both you and master Robert secure."

Cecilia smiled at her landlady's intensity.

"I have not had the time to think about marriage," she admitted as she stroked her fingers down the whisper-thin silk of the dress.

I wonder what the Duke of Marlborough would think of this dress? The tiny voice whispered in the back of her mind. What would he think of you wearing it?

"*Make* time," said Mrs. Fletcher so firmly, Cecilia had to laugh.

"For now, I have to think of debts and of Robert."

"Your brother's sleeping soundly, and there's nothing you can do about money tonight."

“Ah, on that point you have missed the mark, my dear Mrs. Fletcher, for this dress has given me the most wonderful idea.” Cecilia planted an impulsive kiss on the older lady’s cheek, and then practically raced up the stairs to the attic.

The full moon cast its silvery light into her makeshift studio, but Cecilia still risked the extravagance of lighting a few candles beside the tall mirror she’d borrowed from her landlady shortly after moving in with Robert. She stripped out of her clothes quickly before slipping into the cream and gold silk ballgown her grandmother had gifted her, sighing with delight as the sensual fabric slid over her skin. She could not lace it properly—the Viscountess must not be able to dress without the help of a maid, she realized—but at least she was not afraid it would drop from her body of its own accord.

Cecilia looked at her reflection critically. The neckline of the dress was shockingly low, and the delicacy of the gauze overdress blurred the line between where the silk ended, and her skin began. It clung to every curve of her body, while the light of the candles made the material shimmer and dance with every tiny movement. It was a dress that hinted at seduction yet met every requirement of propriety. After a moment of consideration, she began to remove her hairpins one at a time, until half her hair had fallen in free waves about her shoulders, and the rest merely threatened to do the same.

“*Nymph by Sunset*,” she murmured. “He’ll want to buy it immediately, I just know it.”

It might not be the best plan, she conceded to herself, but a plan it was. Between the moneylender and the Duke, Marlborough was far less of a threat to her, and might even prove to be a solution.

He knew her father had not painted *Nymph at Sunrise* but had purchased it anyway. If she came clean about being the artist and sweetened the deal with a new painting, she hoped he would once again pay for the artwork, allowing her to clear her debts and keep Robert safe.

He wants to meet the model, said a traitorous voice in the back of her head. *He wants the model for himself.*

Cecilia ignored the sensual shiver that ran through her body, determined to stay on task, now she had the slimmest thread of hope to hold on to. She rushed to the far side of the attic to grab one of her precious remaining canvases and dragged it back to the easel. After modeling a few different poses in the mirror, she grabbed a stick of charcoal and began to furiously sketch her reflection.

It was only when the candles began to gutter that Cecilia realized she'd been up there for hours. She stood back, running a critical eye over her drawing by the last flickers of light, and was pleased by her work. Any hope that had begun to rise in her chest, however, was squashed as she turned her attention to the remaining paints on the table.

"I need more materials," she murmured, and then rubbed at her eyes. Tiredness flowed over her body, and she sank to the bare floorboards with dismay as she realized her whole evening had been wasted on a feverish, futile hope.

Even if she started painting right that moment, it would take weeks for her to finish the picture, and still longer before she could even hope the Duke would pay for it. She had no real reason to believe he would pay for it, not once he was made aware the very confidence trickster who'd tried to pass off *Nymph at Sunrise* as an Ambrose Wallace was the same

fraudulent artist who'd created it in the first place. She'd be completely at his mercy, the way she was also at the mercy of Seth Bragg, and the thought of being beholden to any man—even a handsome, brooding duke—was more than she could handle.

Her candles sputtered and died. Outside, a cloud crossed over the moon to extinguish its light, and the attic plunged into darkness.

Cecilia began to cry and, for the first time since her father's death, she indulged the tears, letting all her frustration, anger, guilt, grief, and desperation flow out of her.

"It's not fair," she whispered to the room. "I just want to keep Robert safe! It's not fair that I have to do all this alone! I don't know what to do."

Moonlight began to slowly fill the attic once again. Cecilia looked up, her eye catching on the stunning portrait her father had painted of her mother back when she was still radiant with good health and happiness.

Cecilia got to her feet. She took a few steadying breaths before addressing the picture.

"I'm sorry, Mama, but I know you will understand. I believe he's a good man and will take very good care of your portrait."



It was a short, uneventful walk back to his mansion, where the butler informed him that Tilly was still out with their cousin

Sophie and was not expected to arrive home until after midnight.

“Excellent, Anderson. I’m going to lock myself away in the study, so when she finally does decide to return to the roost, under no circumstances are you to tell my sister that I am already home, on pain of excruciating death.”

“Understood, Your Grace,” said the faithful retainer, without so much as a twitch of his lip. “To the best of my recollection, you are still at your club.”

“Good man, I knew you’d understand,” said Ezra, patting the butler on the shoulder before heading to the comfortable sanctuary of his library. He shrugged off his coat and vest, discarding them onto his desk chair, and then did the same with the heavily starched cravat he loathed wearing. He poured himself a large whisky and settled into his favorite chair before the fireplace, intending to catch up on some reading but never quite managing to focus on the page. It was only when he heard someone singing that he glanced up to see the Nymph materialize before him, her dress even sheerer than he remembered, but her veil somehow obscuring even more of her features.

“Hello, again,” he said, taking it in his stride that this ethereal creature had appeared out of thin air in the middle of his study.

“Why haven’t you found me yet, Ezra?” she asked, that perfect bow mouth of hers turned into a delicate pout.

He reached up to catch hold of her fingers, drawing them down so he could place his lips against the cool skin.

“You’re hanging over my fireplace as we speak,” he reminded her gently. “I don’t think you can be much more found than that, my dear.”

She cupped his cheek with her hand, the delicate touch sending a shiver through his soul. He turned his head and planted a kiss on her exposed wrist. The Nymph gave a breathy moan of pleasure before sliding into his lap. He pulled her closer, aware of how her delicate shift now seemed to be made of translucent gauze that enhanced every curve and line of her body. She arched her back like a cat as he ran one hand along her spine, the gossamer-thin material pulling taut across her breasts as she did so.

“You haven’t found *me*, yet, Ezra,” she whispered before leaning down to kiss him. This time there was no innocence in those lips, but a hunger and urgency that aroused him more deeply than he’d felt in years. The Nymph buried her hands in his hair as the kiss became one of desperate need that threatened to be his undoing, but she pulled away suddenly, stepping back so she was just out of his reach.

“Tease,” he growled, far from unhappy with this game.

“You have to find me in the painting,” the Nymph insisted, then lifted her veil to reveal the innocent face of Cecilia Watson as the brown hair morphed into strawberry-blonde before his very eyes. “Everything is explained in the painting, Ezra.”

“I’m dreaming, aren’t I?” he said, rubbing at his face. The Watson Nymph gave a husky laugh before sliding back into his lap.

“Perhaps a taste of what awaits you will encourage you to find me,” she said, guiding his hand to slide beneath the hem of her diaphanous dress and along the pale skin of her thigh. She kissed him again, guiding his hand up beneath the material until it cupped her breast and she let out an arousing sigh of pleasure.

Ezra awoke with a start as a commotion from the hallway broke through his pleasant reverie. He cursed the interruption and got to his feet just as the door to the study flew open and a woman in a gold silk evening dress strode into the room.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace, she pushed past me before I knew what she was up to,” said the butler, obviously flustered by the turn of events.

“It’s quite all right, Anderson, you are not at fault here,” said Ezra, his voice far calmer than he actually felt. “Can I help you, Miss Watson?”

Cecilia looked up at him with wild eyes, her cheeks flushed and her hair loose about her shoulders as though she’d forgotten to pin it into place.

“Please, Your Grace,” she said, before sinking down to her knees in utter submission. “I think you might be the only person who can.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cecilia felt the Duke's hand take a very light grip on her arm as he helped her to her feet.

"I am not in the business of making people beg for my help, Miss Watson," he said gently. "I can see that something is troubling you greatly. Please, take a seat while Anderson fetches you some wine. Whatever is upsetting you, I'm sure we can fix."

This gentle kindness was so unexpected, Cecilia allowed him to guide her to a chair, and even found herself responding to the polite nothings which filled the time until his butler had set a glass of red wine before her and then silently withdrawn from the room.

The Duke pressed the glass into her hands. "Take a few sips before speaking, my dear. It will help steady your nerves," he said before pulling his own chair closer to hers.

Cecilia felt herself shaking. In his determination to ensure her comfort, Marlborough was spectacularly oblivious to the fact he was not wearing a jacket or a cravat. She had never seen any man in a state of undress, and the deep V of the neckline revealed just enough of his chest to cause considerable

distraction. She was fighting the urge to stare, perhaps even reach out and lay her fingers on his skin before pressing her lips to his shoulders, jawline, and throat.

She shivered.

“Are you cold, Miss Watson? Do you require your shawl?”

“I... I didn't bring one,” she admitted. “I'm sorry, I'm being so foolish, Your Grace! I only needed to speak with you urgently, and I am desperate, so I... I just came here right away. I don't know what I was thinking. I mean, I wasn't thinking, and your shirt is not helping matters, and—”

Cecilia snapped her mouth shut as she realized what she'd just said. There was the tiniest spark of amusement in the Duke's eyes, and something else, something much warmer, as he studied her intently. She turned away and took a large gulp of wine.

“This is very good,” she whispered, indicating the glass.

“I apologize for the distraction caused by my shirt,” said the Duke, without making any attempt to adjust his clothing, leaning toward her as he spoke. “I was not expecting company, nor am I the sort to allow ridiculous notions of propriety to prevent me from lending assistance to a damsel in distress. Please, let me be of assistance.”

In all the ways she'd imagined this meeting going, Cecilia had never stopped to consider that he might be kind. The speech she'd prepared flew out of the window as she looked into his

umber eyes, which promised either seduction or safety. Both, if she was lucky.

“I need you to buy another painting,” she blurted out. “With guineas, this time. The actual coins. And maybe exchange the banknotes you gave me for *Nymph at Sunrise* for guineas as well.”

To his credit, the Duke did not appear in the least bit flustered by her request, which Cecilia supposed was a good thing, since she was growing increasingly flustered herself.

“Your latter request can be arranged first thing in the morning, Miss Watson. As for the former, well, I suppose that depends. Have you found the real artist for me?”

“No. Well, yes, but I mean that’s not why I’m here. The painting I have... it’s an original Ambrose Wallace that was once displayed at the National Gallery. It’s quite exquisite, and of a woman far more beautiful than the model for the *Nymph*. It’s... it’s of his wife, you see. When they were first married.”

His expression shifted and hardened as he sat back, the cold Duke she’d met at Hope’s viewing replacing the warm, handsome lord of moments before.

“Miss Watson, you continually underestimate me. I know the portrait you are referring to, and it is not possible that you inherited it from your father.”

“But I did! I swear it!” she cried, the sense of panic that had been building over the last few weeks threatening to overcome

her once again.

The Duke shook his head. “Ambrose Wallace married the daughter and only child of Viscount Chalmers; it was quite the scandal back in the day. The lady was cut off from her family, but it was said to have been a true love match between her and Wallace. It was her portrait that truly made him famous, but he was adamant it would never be sold, for he claimed that part of her soul had been poured into it. They had children—a daughter and son, I believe—so, following their deaths, I suspect it was inherited...”

He trailed off, suddenly staring at Cecilia as though seeing her for the very first time. He leaned forward again, capturing one of her loose curls and studying it closely.

“Strawberry-blond hair...” he murmured. He raised his eyes to meet hers, the intensity of his gaze sending waves of warmth to her most intimate regions. She felt her face burn with embarrassment but refused to look away from his face.

“You *are* Miss Wallace,” he stated.

“I am, Your Grace,” she replied, her voice steady but her heart thundering.

“Why did you lie about your identity? Why all the games about the Nymph coming to life?”

This time she did look away, channelling all her focus onto her hands. She realized there was charcoal dust embedded under one fingernail, so tried to pick it clean.

“I did not want anyone to know what dire straits my brother and I have fallen into,” she said quietly. “I did not want to tarnish my father’s memory any further. But we needed the money, and quickly. I masqueraded as the Nymph to try to increase interest in the sale. My father’s work has value, I know, but not as much as I hoped, considering. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and I convinced myself it was an excellent plan, but I did not expect you to question the authenticity of the work.”

His hand cupped her cheek gently, guiding her to look at him once again.

“Why did you kiss me?” he asked, his voice thick and heavy. Cecilia’s heart started beating even faster, and her breathing became shallow. “I know you did not kiss the others, nor let them close. Why did you risk your reputation with me? Was it planned?”

There was something about his expression that demanded the truth. There was a desire that matched her own, but also something else—a need, or a longing. For the first time, she wondered if even a Duke could feel as lonely as she did.

“No, I didn’t plan it,” she replied with perfect sincerity. “I let you kiss me because I wanted you to.”

His arms were about her in an instant, and Cecilia had no time to protest before finding herself in his lap with his mouth fixed firmly to hers. If the kiss in Hyde Park had been gentle and sensual, this one was drenched in passion and hunger. One hand cradled the back of her neck, holding her close as their tongues collided time and again, while his other gripped at her

thigh. She took his face into her own hands, pulling away from his lips to indulge in her desire to kiss and taste his jaw and his neck. He groaned with pleasure at her inexperienced exploration.

“My God, woman, you’ll drive me mad if you keep doing that,” he growled as he pulled her away. She paused, confused as to whether she’d done something wrong, but the wolfish smile he favored her with was oddly reassuring.

“You don’t know how that feels, do you?” he murmured. “Would you like to?”

Cecilia’s breath caught. He ran a single finger from the base of her ear and down her neck, then traced it still further over the collarbone and across the swell of her breast, pausing only when he reached the flimsy line of silk covering her. He leaned forward, closing the gap between their bodies as she offered no resistance.

“Would you like me to kiss you here?” he asked, stroking the exposed skin of her décolletage with a feather-light touch. She swallowed and nodded her head in response.

The duke chuckled. “Not like that, my little Nymph. You have to ask me.”

Her body was on fire. Every glide of silk across her flesh was arousing, and every place where the Duke’s limbs pressed against her own felt about to burst into flame. She could think of nothing but the pleasure of his touch and a desperate need to discover how far and how deep this feeling could consume

her. There was no worry, no panic, just a need for this glorious, handsome man to take control of her utterly.

“Please,” she said, trying to sound sultry and experienced as she placed her hand over his, their fingers half on the silk of her bodice, half on her bare skin. “I want you to kiss me everywhere. Kiss me here. Please, Your Grace. I need to feel you kissing me.”

His response was a guttural sound of pure desire that contrasted with her yelp of surprise as he hooked a finger about the neckline of her dress and tugged at it, causing the seam to tear. Cecilia had barely registered that the material of the bodice had dropped open to expose her breast, for the duke had taken it into his mouth and begun to suck and tease. Shock at his action mingled and swirled with arousal, and she squirmed with pleasure in his lap. She could feel his own arousal through the barrier of their clothes and felt powerful for inspiring such a reaction from him. She was not so sheltered from life that she was unaware of the mechanics of sex—it was impossible to live in Spitalfields and remain innocent of such matters—but she had never expected to feel so... *free*. She had never wanted anything for herself before this, and she could think of nothing she could desire more than the Duke’s naked body intertwined with her own.

The door to the study was thrown open with the energy of a thunderstorm.

“Don’t be silly, Anderson, we know full well that Ezra’s in his study, and it’s of vital importance that he explains to Sophie it was thanks to my brilliance that he was even able to acquire the painting, isn’t that ri—oh, my!”

Cecilia looked up in horror to see two fashionably dressed ladies standing in the study doorway, one with her mouth hanging open in shock, while the other was smirking in delight. The Duke's harried-looking butler was trying—and failing—to shepherd them out of the room, but they remained firmly rooted in place. She tried to scramble to her feet, but Marlborough held her gently but firmly in place. He sighed with exaggerated disappointment as he carefully tucked the torn silk of her bodice back into place to cover her.

“Tilly, how many times must I tell you to knock and wait for an answer before entering my rooms?” he said with the disapproving tones of an older brother. “And now you have dragged Cousin Sophie into another of your mishaps! It won't do, my girl. It won't do at all.”

Cecilia was sure she'd turned the color of beetroot as he helped her to his feet, but he caught tight hold of her hand before she could run. The Duke did not look at her, but something about the way he refused to let go of her was oddly reassuring, as if he could somehow make all the embarrassment magically go away.

He's the Duke of Marlborough. He's powerful enough to make anything he dislikes go away.

“Of all the things to accuse me of, Ezra! I am not the one discovered in—”

“I would think very carefully before finishing that sentence, Tilly,” he said, still not getting to his feet. “It would not do for you to insult an honored guest in our home just to score a point against me.”

The girl snapped her mouth closed while her companion tittered into her fan. Cecilia, still fervently praying for the ground to open up and swallow her, tried to ignore the fact that he hadn't looked away from her for a moment despite the intrusion.

"Please, let me go, Your Grace," she murmured. Waves of regret were flooding over her, along with the realization that her moment of abandon might have just made her situation a thousand times worse.

"Trust me," he replied and planted a kiss on her hand.

"Ezra, what is going on?" asked the dark-haired lady with considerable exasperation.

The Duke finally stood up and smiled.

"Tilly, Cousin Sophie, allow me to present Miss Cecilia Wallace. My fiancée."



Ezra did not expect his sister to react in the way she did, but he was glad for it.

"I knew it!" she squealed with excitement. "I knew you were captivated by her! Didn't I say just that, Sophie? Oh, I am so very glad to meet you, Miss Wallace! May I call you Cecilia? I am Lady Matilda Spencer, but everyone in the family calls me Tilly."

Ezra took a step back as a wide-eyed Cecilia was enveloped by the whirlwind that was his younger sister. The poor girl looked like a startled fawn, but he knew from experience there was no escape from Tilly in full flow.

“Your hair is such a beautiful shade! I’m cursed with the drab black of the Spencer line, but for once, I am perfectly content about my coloring, for we shall make a striking couple when we promenade about town! Oh, you poor thing, your dress is torn! Ezra, you brute, this silk is worth a small fortune! Don’t worry, Cecilia, I shall scold him roundly about it later. Come up to my room with me; we are about the same size, so you must borrow one of my dresses while my girl mends this tear. No, you must allow me to make operations for my beast of a brother! Sophie, are you still here? Be a dear and scold Ezra before you leave.”

Cecilia was gradually led across the room by Tilly, who barely paused for breath the entire time. She threw a look of desperation at Ezra, but he wouldn’t have intervened even if he could. As the two of them disappeared from view, followed silently by his butler, he turned his attention to the immediate threat to his family.

Cousin Sophie.

“How nice to see you, Lady Twixham,” he said with a perfectly executed bow. “I trust everything is well with you?”

Sophie favored him with a smile that she probably thought was arch, but only made her look smug. At twenty-one, only a few months older than Tilly, she had been married for three years already, and seemed to think herself far wiser and more worldly than she truly was.

“Indeed it is, Your Grace, although I am not so sure the same can be said of you!”

Ezra poured himself a whisky, but pointedly did not offer refreshments to his unwanted guest. “An odd statement to make in light of my upcoming nuptials.”

Sophie tittered into her hand. “Dear Ezra, there is no need to hide your intentions for my sake! Unlike your darling sister, I am not ignorant of the little peccadilloes men of your station like to engage in, although I am shocked that you would bring her to your home! I thought you were much more discreet than that. I shudder to think what influence that... that bird of paradise may have on our naive little Tilly.”

Ezra gripped the glass tightly in his hand as he forced himself to smile. It was going to be difficult not to put Sophie firmly back in her place, but he had to tread carefully.

“You have greatly misunderstood the situation, Sophie, but as I have kept my personal business so private over the years it is not surprising. I can trust you to be discreet with my confidence?”

His cousin’s eyes grew wide with anticipation, and she enthusiastically nodded her head. “Of course, you can! I can be trusted completely, furthermore, you know how I despise gossip.”

Ezra gave a solemn nod. He put down his glass and walked over to his cousin before hooking his arm through hers and leaning in with a conspiratorial air.

“Cecilia Wallace is indeed my fiancée,” he told her quietly, “but our engagement has been kept a secret thus far.”

“Why?” breathed Sophie, apparently unaware that Ezra was slowly guiding her out of the study and into the hall.

“She is concerned about the reaction of her grandfather, Viscount Chalmers, should he learn about it before we are wed.”

“Lord Chalmers? But he doesn’t have any grandchildren; his daughter eloped with that painter Tilly goes on about so much, Ambrose Wallace—oh!”

Ezra smiled. “Indeed, and everyone in the *ton* knows how vindictive he was following that marriage, and he’s famed for that controlling nature of his.”

Sophie looked thoughtful. “But he would not oppose a marriage to you, surely? He would see it as a redemption for his daughter.”

“Cecilia is afraid he might try to make me pay for her hand,” Ezra improvised. “It is a complicated family situation. I’m sure a lady of your experience will understand better than I how such relationships work. But you must promise me, Sophie, that your absolute discretion in this matter is assured!”

His cousin looked strained, and he could practically see her brain trying to decide which version of the tale had the greatest

potential for gossip. It was time to deliver the ace up his sleeve.

“I am dependent on you to help introduce her to the *Beau Monde* when the time comes; your influence as Lady Twixham will, no doubt, shield her from any schemes concocted by her grandfather, and I would be forever in your debt.”

That sealed it. Sophie’s back straightened, and a smug grin appeared on her face.

“You must know that Twixham and I will help you in any way possible,” she assured him. “What else is family for? But a word in your ear, my dearest Ezra; marry your girl quickly, for while I would never breathe a word of what I just witnessed, such behavior—should it become public—could damage her reputation if there is too long a delay before marriage.”

“I will do as you say,” he informed her. “Now, allow my footman to escort you back to your carriage. Thank you, dear Cousin, for your support, as always. Are you still hosting your ball next week? Perhaps that would be a good opportunity to introduce Miss Wallace under your sponsorship. We will talk more, but do not let me keep you.”

Ezra did not exactly close the door on his cousin’s face, but it came close.

“Anderson?” he called. His butler appeared with the silent magic that characterized the man’s profession.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“Do you think she bought my tale?”

“I see no reason for her to think you were anything but truthful, Your Grace,” replied Anderson. “Miss Wallace is your betrothed, after all. Your servants have been gossiping about it for days, and, no doubt, will be telling their counterparts in other noble houses all about it in the morning. Lady Twixham is sure to keep the knowledge a secret, of course, save for just a handful of her intimate, trustworthy friends.”

Ezra smiled. “Remind me to increase your salary, Anderson.”

“Very good, Your Grace. Shall I bring Miss Wallace to you in the study or the sitting room?”

Ezra remembered the feel of Cecilia on his lap, her bare breast in his mouth. He rubbed at the back of his neck.

“The sitting room. Definitely the sitting room. And bring her another glass of wine. After being talked at by Tilly, she’ll no doubt need it.”

But by the time Cecilia rejoined him, it quickly became clear that he’d underestimated her.

Now wearing a plain muslin day dress—high necked, Ezra noted with disappointment—and her hair pinned back into a severe-looking bun, she radiated composure as she took a seat on the sofa and politely refused a glass of wine.

“Lady Matilda wanted to join us, but I explained that we had much to discuss privately before all her questions could be answered,” she said coolly.

Ezra raised a brow. “Did she ask that you use her title?”

Cecilia’s composure cracked for a few seconds, revealing the exasperated amusement that frequently attacked those to whom his sister took a shine.

“No, she insisted quite forcefully that I call her Tilly before then spending the rest of our time together explaining why she will never forgive you for saddling her with such a pet name.”

“That sounds more like her,” he said as he took the seat beside her. “Tilly must be overjoyed by the idea of our marriage if she was able to keep out of this conversation.”

Cecilia’s cool facade slid back into place. “Yes, about that. Why did you claim we are engaged, Your Grace?”

He tried to smile. “I am not a monster, Cecilia. I am aware that you are the most damaged by my indiscretion, and I can only apologize for my behavior earlier. It was wrong to treat you so recklessly, and I regret it.”

She clasped her hands in her lap but did not respond. She resembled nothing so much as a prudish governess whose virtue had been offended, and it was doing nothing to ease the growing sense of guilt consuming him. God, he’d never wanted a woman so badly before. He wanted to see how she

looked when that glorious hair cascaded over her naked body and hear her cry out his name with unrestrained passion. She'd wanted him, too. He had not imagined her desire, nor the passionate, untutored exploration that had come close to destroying all his self-control. But just then, dressed with such propriety and with her crowning glory ruthlessly caged, the magnitude of his behavior could not be denied.

“I should not have taken advantage of your innocence,” he said quietly, “and I understand your reluctance to marry a man who has not behaved well towards you, but I promise that will not be something you need fear again. You will be a duchess, and aside from the expectation that you maintain the station’s dignity, I will make no demands on your body or your time.”

She turned to study him, her face as passive as stone. “You took nothing I was not willing to give, Your Grace. If you are willing to complete the purchase of my mother’s portrait—and exchange the notes for guineas—then I believe we can put this incident behind us and go about our separate business in tolerable harmony.”

“If only it were that simple,” he replied.

She cocked her head to one side. “What complications could there possibly be?”

Ezra scratched his cheek as he tried to find the best way to explain the situation. There were the things that had happened while he was grieving, things that had taken so much effort and time for Tilly to overcome, but her status in the *ton* remained precarious. Any scandal, even one attached to his name, could ruin her chances forever.

“Do you know Lady Twixham?” Ezra eventually asked. Cecilia shook her head. “Well, she’s my cousin, but there’s no real affection between us, and never has been. Sophie and Tilly have been caught in a war of outshining each other since they were in leading strings, and it only becomes more vicious as they both get older. After my wife died, Sophie, or at least her mother, decided that the best way to bring me out of my grief was to attempt to capture my affection and get me to marry again.”

“And you engaged in a flirtation?” asked Cecilia, her eyes bright to the point of feverish. “Did you commit a similar indiscretion with her as you did with me?”

“Good God, no!” cried Ezra, horrified at the mental image her words had conjured.

He shuddered at the thought.

“My apologies for assuming the worst of you, Your Grace,” said Cecilia her posture a touch more relaxed than it had been a moment earlier. “I take it you rejected her advances?”

Ezra grimaced at the memory. “She was a child, and Eloise was not a year in the grave. The *ton* was not kind to her, although she made a match with Twixham a few months later. Since then, she’s taken a perverse pleasure in attempting to show the world that she is far superior to the Duke of Marlborough, but our families are so intertwined that we are forever connected. I have no doubt she will use this incident to humiliate Tilly somehow.”

“I can see how that would be an awkward experience, Your Grace, but it was me that was caught...” Her cheeks flushed delightfully as she looked away from him, “I was caught in a scandalous situation, not Lady Matilda, and you *are* a Duke. I’m sure that any gossip would be uncomfortable, but hardly enough to cause lasting damage.”

She was perceptive, he realized, but inexperienced in the ways of the *ton*.

“If we were a normal family, I would agree,” he sighed. “It is not my place to share my sister’s history, but suffice to say that any scandal, even one involving me, could do irreparable harm to her reputation, and I cannot allow that.”

“And so, your answer is to marry me,” Cecilia said in a matter-of-fact manner. “To protect your sister.”

“In part, yes, but there will be advantages for you as well,” he continued. “You’d be a duchess, and that offers certain protections that I think, perhaps, you currently require.”

“Purchasing my mother’s portrait would be sufficient for that,” she replied. “I know I must sound awfully foolish saying this, Your Grace, but I have always intended to marry for companionship, if not love.”

“I don’t think you are foolish,” he replied softly, “but I am afraid that the prestige and security of the Marlborough name are all I can offer you. It is not the stuff of fairy tales, but you will never find me demanding or a tyrant.”

Cecilia shook her head sadly, but still did not raise her eyes to meet his.

“It has been my observation, Your Grace, that the security marriage provides for a woman is at best an illusion, and at worse, nothing but a cage.” She got to her feet, keeping her eyes downcast. “I should like to return home if you please, Your Grace. It has been a very trying evening.”

Ezra fought down the urge to take her into his arms and kiss away her sadness, doubting that she would appreciate such attention. He stood in front of her and slipped his little finger under her chin, gently tilting her head so that she was looking at him.

“It won’t be so bad, Cecilia. There are worse fates than being a duchess,” he said. She stepped away from him, casting her eyes back down.

“I know,” she said. “It’s not as though I have much choice in the matter. Please, I think I have a headache. I would like to go home.”

“Of course, I will have the carriage brought around for you immediately,” replied Ezra.

He stayed up long after she had gone, knowing he’d somehow made the entire situation worse, but he was quite unable to work out why.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cecilia had been sure that rest would never find her again, but she had inexplicably fallen asleep as soon as she'd laid her head upon her pillow, and she stayed that way for a long time after the breaking of the dawn. She may have stayed that way for the entire day, had Robert not charged into the room and begun to violently shake her by the shoulders.

"Cecy, Cecy, wake up!" he cried. "Cecy, don't be such a sleepyhead."

She tried to pull the blanket over her head and groaned in protest at her little brother's attentions, but he was having none of it.

"Cecy, you need to get up now! There's a great big coach outside with four horses and a pretty lady who hasn't stopped talking since she came inside, and her footman has a treasure chest just like a pirate would have, and Bessie says he's handsome, and poor Mrs. Fletcher has brought out her tea caddy and best cups, but I can tell she's nervous because she almost shouted at me to come and get you, and she never shouts at me," he blurted out, pausing only to draw another deep breath.

His words had pierced through the sleepy oblivion that had been comforting her, and as she sat bolt upright, she instinctively brought her hand down across her brother's mouth.

“Robert, did you just tell me a lady is sitting in the kitchen with Mrs. Fletcher, but she's really here for me?”

He mumbled a response, rolled his eyes when she did not move her hand, and signaled that she was correct with an exaggerated nod.

Cecilia swallowed. “And she has a money chest with her? And a footman?”

Another nod.

“How did they find out where we live?” she groaned and then squealed in disgust as Robert licked the hand she still had pressed over his mouth. “Oh, you disgusting little wretch!”

“Serves you right for trying to silence me,” he replied cheerfully. “Are you coming down, or should I tell them you're deathly sick with a fever?”

Cecilia hesitated and then shook her head. “No, it would only put them off for a moment, and then Mrs. Fletcher or Bessie would charge in here to start administering their remedies. Oh, dear, I am not even dressed yet! Go down and tell them I'll only be a moment. And ensure Mrs. Fletcher does not panic. I'll be down directly.”

Robert grinned and bolted out of the door.

She got dressed in haste, her only delay caused by a misplaced hairbrush that had inexplicably hidden itself inside one of her boots. But while Cecilia was confident that she was both clean and neat in appearance, she knew she'd look like a pauper compared to the splendor of her visitor. In this, she was quickly proven correct, for although Lady Matilda was sitting on a functional rather than a beautiful chair at the edge of Mrs. Fletcher's kitchen table, her blue carriage dress was enough to make the most fashionable woman weep with envy, while the matching hat set at a jaunty angle on her shining black locks just emphasized her natural vivacity. Mrs. Fletcher's finest china teacup was nestled in her gloved hands, and she chatted merrily to her hostess with the ease of someone at home in any surroundings.

"It *is* you! I knew I had the right address!" Lady Matilda squealed with happiness the moment her eyes fell on Cecilia. She set down her teacup, and then rushed in for an embrace.

Cecilia, overwhelmed by this unexpected display of affection, couldn't help but hug the girl back.

"I confess I'm surprised to see you, Lady Matilda. How on earth did you find me?" Cecilia asked as the unexpected guest released her.

"How many times do I have to tell you to call me Tilly? Everyone important does, you know. Isn't that right, James?" she asked, directing this last question at the handsome footman standing in the corner of the room.

“I believe that is the case, Lady Tilly,” he replied, his expression stoic, but his mistress let out a gurgle of appreciative laughter.

“You wretch, James! I shall demand His Grace beat you for your impertinence!” she declared, but her expression turned serious when she saw how shocked her hosts were at her threat. “Don’t worry, it is just a jest we share! I’ve known James since he was still a stable boy, and my brother encourages their shocking habit of teasing me in front of family. And you are family, Cecilia—or at least, you will be soon.”

“Lady Matilda tells us that you’re going to marry the Duke of Marlborough, Cecilia,” said Mrs. Fletcher, her voice quavering as her eyes darted from one person to the next. “I am sure I would have remembered you mentioning such a thing as that.”

“It was all a bit of a whirlwind,” said Cecilia by way of explanation. “I was as surprised by his proposal as everyone else was last night.”

“I did not even know you were acquainted with His Grace,” said the landlady, with just enough admonishment in her voice to make Cecilia blush with guilt.

“He bought one of the paintings,” she said, hoping that no one pressed the matter further.

Lady Matilda clapped her hands together. “The painting! I almost forgot about that! James, bring the chest over, will you? I believe it contains the payment from my brother for the paintings, or some such thing, which seems silly to me since

you are to be wed soon. But Ezra does take some funny notions into his head.”

The footman obediently set the small chest onto the table before her, and then opened it to reveal stacks of golden guineas, a folded sheet of paper tucked behind them.

“His Grace had me fetch your address from Mr. Hope, and then bid me deliver this to you directly, my lady,” he explained.

“And I ambushed James before he could leave and insisted he bring me along to see you,” said Lady Matilda with a broad grin. “I confess, I’m rather pleased with that bit of cleverness.”

“Then I must fetch you the other painting,” said Cecilia as she reached out to pluck the folded letter from the top of the chest. Could this be real? Was there really enough money here to pay back Seth Bragg and buy her freedom?

“I can get it. Which one did you sell?” asked Robert, appearing at her side.

Cecilia winced as she realized she’d not had a chance to tell him what she’d done. The note was discarded on the table as she dropped to her knees so she could look her little brother in the eye.

“It’s the one of Mother, the portrait that made Papa famous. I’m so sorry I didn’t consult you first, Dear Heart, but the duke is a great fan of our father’s work and will take exceptionally good care of her.”

Her brother was motionless save for a deep swallow. “Was it to pay back the bad man?” he asked eventually.

Cecilia closed her eyes and struggled to maintain her composure. She had fought so hard to protect Robert from everything, and it was easy to forget just how perceptive he was for his age.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “This way, we never have to worry about the bad man again.”

Robert squared his narrow shoulders and lifted his chin. “Then it was the right thing to do. And if you’re going to marry the Duke anyway, then perhaps I can visit her from time to time.”

“Nonsense!” declared Lady Matilda, dropping to her knees beside Cecilia. She had tears clinging to her dark lashes. “You won’t need to visit her because you’ll be living in the very same home.”

Robert studied her with interest, screwing his face up with thought.

“But won’t the Duke just want a wife and not a new brother?”

“I am perfectly convinced he will be delighted to have a new brother, for he has informed me at least a thousand times that he would have much preferred another male in the house rather than being saddled with a sister.”

“He must not be very intelligent then, because I have a sister, and it’s the best thing in the world,” Robert declared.

“Robert, you must not say such things about His Grace!” said Cecilia, both touched and horrified by her little brother. Lady Matilda, on the other hand, seemed to be absolutely delighted.

“Aren’t you just an absolute darling! I can already tell we will be great friends...” She trailed off, looking suddenly uncertain. “Well, that is, we might be if you wouldn’t mind being saddled with a second sister. I’m not very clever, truth be told, but I am awfully good at jackstraws and snapdragon.”

Robert looked thoughtfully at Cecilia, and then back to Lady Matilda.

“Well, so long as you don’t mind Cecy being my favorite sister,” he said.

Lady Matilda very solemnly put her hand on her heart. “I promise not to be the least bit jealous, so long as you call me Tilly, and occasionally accompany me to Gunter’s for ice cream.”

“Ice cream!” breathed Robert before impulsively flinging his arms about Matilda’s neck in happiness. “Let me go and get the painting at once!”

“You are very good with children, my lady,” said Cecilia, and the sentiment was echoed by Mrs. Fletcher.

“Nonsense,” replied their guest, wrinkling up her nose in dismissal. “He is an absolute delight, although, if you forgive my impertinence, he is awfully small for a boy of nine.”

“Poor thing was so very sick over the last year, and Cecilia nursed him like an angel,” said Mrs. Fletcher. “I thought we would lose him once or twice, like some of the other little wretches in the neighborhood. That fever was nothing to laugh about, I can tell you. It took two of my nephew’s children in the blink of an eye, and the others were sick for weeks.”

“How terrible for you,” said Lady Matilda with what looked like genuine sympathy. “It must have been so difficult.”

“He’s better now,” said Cecilia, not wanting to dwell on those dark nights for any longer than she had to.

“Eloise died from the fever too,” said Lady Matilda, her eyes going out of focus as she stared at the china teacup on the table before her. “She was Ezra’s first wife, and I worshipped her. We all did. But the fever came on so fast, and she was gone before we even knew how sick she was. My brother didn’t make it home in time, although he tried. It felt like he died as well that day.”

There was a long silence after these words, Mrs. Fletcher lost in recollections, and Lady Matilda sipping thoughtfully at her tea. Cecilia didn’t know what to say.

Is that why he said he could not give me love, or even companionship if I marry him? Because his heart broke so completely, he is incapable of loving again?

Lady Matilda gave herself a little shake and turned her radiant smile toward Cecilia.

“Well, that’s all in the past now, and you have certainly brought my brother back to life, for which I am inordinately grateful, even if your approach was somewhat unconventional.”

Her mischievous grin softened the blow of the words, but Cecilia still felt her cheeks burn at the innuendo. Luckily, Robert chose that moment to return, the portrait of his mother held reverentially in his hands.

Lady Matilda was generous with her compliments, but there was no hint of condescension in them. Within minutes, she had Robert eating out of her hand, and Cecilia was hard-pressed to decide whether she was an exceptional actress or if she really was interested in how bridges were constructed in the Roman era. Mrs. Fletcher was likewise drawn into her ladyship’s orbit, spilling her life story and sharing how her young tenants were more like kin to her than she’d ever expected. Even Bessie and James were undertaking a gentle flirtation in the corner, although it seemed as innocent as the gamboling of newborn lambs, judging from the few snatches of conversation that caught her ear.

This could be your life if you marry him. All the people you care about, safe and happy and loved.

But not me. My husband would not love me.

The little voice in the back of her head scoffed at the sentiment. *And what chance will you have at being loved if*

you stay here? Do you really think Mr. Bragg will let you walk away now he knows you have no protection?

It was a sobering thought. She looked over at Robert, whose face had lit up with laughter at some silly jest made by Lady Matilda.

Is it not worth giving up on love if it means your brother will have every advantage in life?

He could end up being a man like Seth Bragg. The moneylender had seemed like a gentleman at first. In fact, he'd been much kinder than the Duke on their first meeting. Yet Bragg had turned out to be a dangerous man whose influence could ruin her. How much harder would it be to escape a husband who might keep his cruelty buried until it was too late?

Cecilia thought back to the way the Duke had touched her, the way both her body and mind had demanded he touch her everywhere, and how empty, how frustrated she'd felt before the shame of the interruption had overtaken the sensation. The Duke already had her in his power in terms of her desire. She was not sure she could trust him while holding that as a bargaining chip when negotiating their marriage.

"Is this true?" demanded Lady Matilda, her voice cutting through Cecilia's reverie and bringing her back to the present.

"Is what true?"

“I told Tilly about how Mr. Bragg charged you so much money when you had to borrow some for the doctor,” said Robert. “That’s why you’ve sold the paintings, isn’t it?”

“Robert you should not share our business outside of the family,” snapped Cecilia, but Robert was unperturbed.

“Tilly *is* family. Or she will be after the wedding.”

“But is it true, Cecilia? Is that why you needed all this money?” pressed Lady Matilda.

“Yes, but I have enough to pay off all our debts now if you please, so there’s no need to talk about it further,” she snapped in response.

If her guest was offended by Cecilia’s brusqueness, she gave no sign of it. Instead, she called over James to collect the chest.

“James, be a dear and take this money to one Mr. Bragg of Artillery Lane. And make it clear that Miss Wallace’s debts are considered fully paid. Get a receipt while you are at it—he’s a slippery fish apparently, and not to be trusted.”

The footman, for his part, looked as though he’d relish an opportunity to demonstrate to Seth Bragg the folly of being a slippery fish.

“I’ll take care of it, my lady. You may count on that.”

“I’ll show you the way there, shall I?” said Bessie, rushing out of the house before her mother could make any objection.

Lady Matilda clicked her tongue in disgust. “Seth Bragg is a toad of a man, and I am sorry that you found yourself under his power.”

“You know him?” asked Mrs. Fletcher and Cecilia at the same time. Matilda’s cheeks went pink.

“It was not my finest moment, I confess, and I was eventually forced to call Ezra to my aid, but I know it is no small task to get free of him once he has you in his clutches. My dearest Cecilia, promise me that next time you get into a scrape you will tell my brother everything instead of trying to find a solution on your own.”

“That might not be appropriate,” replied Cecilia, regretting her words immediately.

Matilda’s brows knitted together in confusion. “Why would it not be appropriate to ask your husband for aid?”

“Because I am not sure that your brother wants to marry me,” sighed Cecilia. “And besides, he never actually asked.”



Ezra had spent the morning with his man of business looking over the implications of his marriage, then most of the early afternoon trying, and failing, to compose a letter to Viscount Chalmers. While he was confident that half of the *ton* would now be gossiping about the secret romance he was supposedly

sharing with Cecilia, it felt like things might go more smoothly for her when she entered the *Beau Monde* if Lord and Lady Chalmers were willing to stand beside her.

He heard his sister return home and was momentarily diverted by the sheer ruckus she made on her way to the study. She gave the door a cursory knock but did not wait before opening it up and striding in as if she owned the place.

“You, my dear Brother, are a nincompoop,” she declared.

Ezra glanced past her and caught the expression on the butler’s face before he closed the study door as he left.

“Tilly, darling, I think you have broken my staff. I swear Anderson just smirked. Smirked! Butlers are forbidden from completing their apprenticeships with the guild if they are caught showing such emotion!”

Tilly paused, momentarily diverted by this information. “Do butlers really have to complete an apprenticeship with a guild? Do they even have a guild?”

“It’s more of a secret society if Anderson is to be trusted on the matter. Now, what are you blasting me about this time?”

His sister, still standing in front of his desk, put her hands on her hips.

“I’ve been visiting with Cecilia Wallace this morning.”

Ezra felt his good humor vanish.

“You’ve been what?”

“I did what *you* should have done!” She declared. “Brother dear, I am not the complete idiot you take me for; I know full well the two of you were caught in a compromising position last night, and that you were trying to make the best of it. I thought that maybe she had tried to entrap you at first and was just being more aggressive about it than Sophie had been, but five minutes alone with her convinced me she was truly shocked and ashamed about the whole thing.”

“How nice to know I inspire such feelings in women.”

“This is not the time for flippancy. The poor girl is dealing with enough as it is. Oh, did you even *think* about how this might affect her?”

He blinked in surprise, never expecting such anger from the biggest supporter he’d ever had in his life. “Quite frankly, Tilly, I thought she’d be overjoyed at the prospect of becoming the Duchess of Marlborough. Are you saying that isn’t the case?”

His sister let out a frustrated scream and stamped her foot. “Men are such *infuriating* creatures, and I’m dismayed to discover that you are as bad as the rest of them! Pray, why do you believe you are betrothed to Cecilia?”

The question seemed a ridiculous one. “Because I asked her, and she accepted?” he replied, stating the obvious.

His sister slammed her hands on his desk, startling him. “Did you, dear Brother? *Did you indeed?*”

“Yes! My memory is not so shabby as that. It was after you... no, that wasn't it... wait...” Ezra looked up at his sister. “Dash it all, Tilly, I don't think I actually did. I announced it to you and Sophie, and then, because she didn't protest, I sort of assumed she was amenable to the idea.”

Tilly shook her head and then flopped down into a chair as though life itself had exhausted her. “As I declared: Nincompoop.”

“Wait, are you saying that Cecilia doesn't want to marry me?” he asked, feeling oddly untethered from reality. “Even though she'd be a Duchess? Even after we...”

“Even after that,” replied Tilly in a derisive tone. “Ezra my darling, I know you've been hunted for your status as long as you've been alive, but do you think women are so stupid as to marry for title alone? Every matchmaking mama and young debutante on the marriage mart knows all about you, good and bad, and have carefully weighed the benefits of wedding you against the risks. It's not enough to know you are titled and wealthy, consideration is given to whether you are kind, or foolish, or a gambler, or have the French pox.”

“How the devil do you know about the French pox?” he spluttered, but she ignored his interjection.

“The ladies of the *ton* do it for every man, and doubly so if they actually care for the welfare of their daughters and wards.

Being left on the shelf as a spinster, forever dependent on your family's good will for survival is a miserable fate for any woman, but it is even worse to be a wife under the thumb of a tyrannical or violent spouse."

"I'm hardly a tyrant, though," said Ezra, shifting in his seat.

Tilly threw up her hands at his comment. "Well, I know that, *stupid*, but why should Cecilia? Who is looking after her interests in the world? It took me ages to tease the whole story from her, but that poor girl has been let down and betrayed by every man she's ever turned to. Her only knowledge of you is, well, skewed in a certain direction, shall we say, and she has only my word to go on that you're not a stone-hearted kipper."

Ezra rubbed at his nose. "Tilly, please tell me you weren't interrogating the girl."

"I was getting to know my future sister," she shot back, "and I daresay I know far more about her than you do at this stage. I think she's delightful, but I am not about to condone a loveless union. You, my dear Ezra, deserve better than that, and she will need the support of a loving husband when the *ton* tries to tear her apart."

A flame of anger flared inside him. "No one in the *ton* would dare mock the Duchess of Marlborough."

Tilly snorted. "It will be their favorite sport of the Season with Cousin Sophie leading the charge. What do you expect? Since Eloise died, you haven't even attempted to retain your social status, and I do not have as much influence as I would like. No

amount of money and security is worth that kind of humiliation.”

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed at his face. “Sophie will have told everyone by now. There will be a scandal.”

“Do you want to marry her, Ezra?” asked his sister as she looked at him thoughtfully.

He didn’t know how to respond at first. Both as the Nymph and as Miss Watson, Cecilia had struck him as beautiful and intelligent, if a little devious. It was true that he barely knew anything about her, but last night, when she’d confirmed her identity and thrown herself on his mercy, something had stirred in him, something he’d thought long dead, and he was not prepared to let it go any time soon.

“It’s about doing my duty, Tilly, not about what I want,” he eventually replied, “but if I have to marry again, I’d rather be Cecilia than any other woman in my acquaintance.”

His sister nodded slowly. “It is a start, I suppose,” she eventually said, “but if this is to happen, you must at least try to be the charming man you were in your salad days. *Court* her, Ezra! She deserves affection at the very least.”

Tilly rose, slipping back into her cheerful façade as she got to her feet. “By the by, James is waiting in the hallway with the new painting you purchased from Cecilia. I promised Robert he can visit it whenever he wants, so expect a delightful little urchin to turn up and disturb your breakfast one morning—I assured him that you’d be delighted with his company, and may even take him to the museum.”

“Who on earth is Robert?” Ezra asked, but Tilly had already skipped out of the Study, laughing harder with every step she took.

CHAPTER NINE

The invitation arrived the following morning on a heavy cream card edged in gold, with the coat of arms of the Duchy of Marlborough embossed upon the back.

“Please do me the honor of joining me for a drive at the fashionable hour; your obedient servant, Marlborough,” read Robert, squinting at the words. “What’s the fashionable hour?”

“It’s when all the important members of the *ton* go for a walk or a drive along Rotten Row in Hyde Park,” replied Cecilia, more concerned with opening the bandbox that had accompanied the letter. “Oh, look, Robert, it’s the ballgown! Lady Matilda’s maid has done an exceptional job repairing it, you cannot even see it was ever torn.”

“Everyone goes out for a walk all at once? It must be very busy,” said Robert as he put the card into the bag where they kept their important papers. The receipt from Seth Bragg was tucked beside it, as well as some letters their parents had sent to each other.

Cecilia held the dress against her, thinking how wonderful it would be to wear nothing but such luxurious materials for the rest of her life.

As a duchess, she could swaddle herself in silk from dawn until dusk if she so wished. No luxury would be out of her reach.

Except for love. You will have all the riches in the world but still be starved for affection and love.

“It can get so busy, the coaches get stuck on the road, and everything comes to a standstill,” said Cecilia as she returned the dress to the box.

“Why don’t some of them go at different times, so they can move about?”

“Who would know they had been there if no one important was there to witness them?” said Cecilia, now looking over the dress her grandmother had provided. One of the gowns would make a sufficient walking dress, she mused. It would pair well with a straw bonnet and tan gloves, and now there was no need for her to sell them to pay back Seth Bragg.

“Why should it matter who saw them?” asked Robert, looking perplexed at her answer.

“People don’t walk at Rotten Row because they need the exercise, silly. They walk there so other important people can see them walking, and then writers make comments in the newspapers exclaiming how handsome or beautiful or stylish they are.”

“That seems foolish to me,” said Robert with a shake of his head. “Fancy going on a walk just so other people can stare at you like you’re a hippo at the Tower of London.”

That comment drew a laugh from Cecilia. “I confess I’ve never thought of anyone that way, but I have a horrid feeling that now I shall think of nothing else, and keep giggling as I imagine every lord and lady I encounter as a well-dressed hippopotamus. Now shoo, I must change into something a bit more appropriate.”

“So, you are going to marry the Duke, then?” asked Robert as she pushed him gently out of her room.

“Perhaps,” she replied with perfect sincerity. “I do not know him well, but perhaps.”

It was with this mindset that she stepped out from Mrs. Fletcher’s home a few hours later, to be delighted by the sight of the most ravishing curricle she had ever seen. The chassis and wheels were lacquered in a deep red, while the hood and seats were of leather so black it seemed to absorb all light. At the head of the setup was a matching pair of handsome bay horses so perfectly alike that she could have sworn they were twins.

“Phoenix and Dragon,” said the Duke as she went to pat them. “Please do not blame me; Tilly claims responsibility for naming all the creatures in our house.”

“I can believe that,” she replied. She glanced back toward him, then frowned when she realized he had no servant with him.

The Duke appeared to read her mind. “It’s a curricle,” he explained. “I promise you, there is nothing unseemly about the two of us driving together. You are safe from my, erm, advances, as it were, Miss Wallace. You will be treated with nothing but respect.”

A traitorous part of her wanted to inform him that she had no wish to be treated respectfully, thank you very much, and would far rather continue the explorations of their last shocking encounter. Her cheeks began to burn at the thought, but she took his proffered hand and stepped up into the curricle.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said.

“My pleasure, Miss Wallace, but please, call me Ezra.”

There was no further conversation between them as the Duke steered the curricle down through the busy streets of Spitalfields before turning onto the even busier thoroughfare of City Road. Carriages and conveyances of every description were wandering along and across the street, with hordes of pedestrians weaving their way between them with disregard for the danger. The sound of horseshoes clacking against the cobbles was interwoven with the creaks and groans of the carriage wheels, street hawkers announcing their wares, and deliverymen arguing with jarveys. The air was, thankfully, clear that day, but the smell of so many horses was notable, so she pressed a scented handkerchief to her nose as she tried to take in all the sights at once.

Cecilia knew she was rare for genuinely loving the hustle of London. The *ton* only came to the city for the entertainment, and almost everyone else was here for work. Whenever the opportunity to escape to the coast or the country beckoned,

those with means to support themselves left the city for the cleaner air of smaller towns and rural estates. But Cecilia loved the streets of London, even the less desirable parts. It was a giant canvas full of complexity and wonder, containing characters representing every state of the human condition. It could be both beautiful and disturbing, and she wanted to paint it all.

“Is this your first time driving on City Road?” asked the Duke, breaking her reverie. “I assumed you would be familiar with the area.”

“I have lived here all my life, Your Grace, but there is always something new to be seen in the city. There is so much energy, so much life wherever I look. All around us people are experiencing their lives, and we might even be witnessing world-changing events without even realizing it. I want to paint it all.” She turned to look at Duke, to find he was smiling at her. She looked away with a tiny laugh. “My apologies, I must sound so silly to you.”

“Not in the least, my dear. It’s refreshing to meet someone with such intriguing observations.”

She glanced back up at him, trying to determine if he was teasing her, but his expression seemed genuine.

“You really think so?”

“Indeed, I do. Some of my favorite art depicts scenes from perfectly ordinary lives. Have you seen the works of Adriaen Brouwer? Ah, I shall infer from that giggle that you are familiar with his scenes of peasant life and tavern folk.”

“Very true, but I love those views into a world many others don’t look for, or ever have the chance to witness. Father always teased me for being infatuated with Turner’s *Fisherman at Sea*, when the mere idea of the ocean terrifies me.”

“I confess to having a soft spot for the works of Jean-Etienne Liotard,” he told her, leaning closer as though he was confessing a terrible secret. “I’ve always admired the way he could make his portraits smile. Wide cheerful grins that just make you want to smile back at them. So few artists are able to do that, and I have been swindled out of a ridiculous sum more than once just so I could possess one of his pastels.”

“I would love to see them,” she said without thinking.

“Then you shall have to come to a viewing of my collection,” he replied. “Tilly is organizing some such thing, but I would be very grateful for your opinion in a more private setting as well. While I might not have designed my home around their display the way Thomas Hope has done, I think you will find the long gallery quite tolerable.”

“That sounds lovely,” she said quietly and meant it.

They continued to discuss their favorite artists for the rest of the drive to Hyde Park, quickly falling into an easy rhythm of agreeing and then disagreeing with each other about various artists whose work they enjoyed. Cecilia quickly surmised that the Duke was drawn to portraiture in particular, but had an appreciation for a wide range of art forms. He was very knowledgeable on the topic, which was surprising; her father had always been dismissive of the intelligence of the Upper

Class, even though his wife came from those ranks. Marlborough, however, understood enough of the technical skills required for artistic genius, and she was quickly sure her parents would have liked him very much.

They finally reached Hyde Park, and Marlborough expertly steered the curricle through the gates. The greenery was in stark contrast to the city streets, but the abundance of people was not. Carriages, horses, and groups of pedestrians filled every path and walkway, often stopping to greet acquaintances without any thought to the people around them. While many of the people were obviously nobility, still more were wealthy families hoping to make connections, with servants trailing after almost every group, and there were even one or two striking women Cecilia recognized as actresses or entertainers.

“It’s so colorful, isn’t it?” she said. “Like a rainbow collapsed onto the city.”

“And hit a handful of ostriches on the way down,” said the Duke, which made her giggle. He seemed rather pleased with himself.

“There are a lot of feathers,” she admitted, “and certainly some interesting shades of dye have been used.”

“A deeply polite way of saying some people should never be allowed to choose their own wardrobe,” he replied.

“You should not be so harsh, Your Grace,” she admonished him. “It must be a great burden in life to be colorblind.”

“Which does not excuse choosing to include frogging, lace, feathers, and gold buttons in the same ensemble,” he replied, trying to look stern but with a smile threatening to ruin the façade.

He is incredibly handsome. Especially when he smiles.

“Perhaps a shocking lack of taste is also a medical condition,” she responded. “It would explain a great deal about the members of the *ton*, who surely have enough money to know the difference between stylish and vulgar, Your Grace.”

She was rewarded by a crack of laughter that warmed her heart.

“Very true, Miss Wallace! But please, will you call me Ezra? If we are to be more intimate, I would prefer we addressed each other with our given names.”

Cecilia’s heart stuttered at the word ‘intimate’.

“Are we to be?” she asked lightly. “I confess, I was under the impression that was far from what you desired.”

“What I desire right now is to drive you to my hunting lodge and finish what we started in my study,” he said conversationally, but he smirked at her gasp of surprise. “It seems you do not know what I want, after all, Miss Wallace. Would you like me to explain in explicit detail how I plan to make you come undone in my arms?”

Cecilia's cheeks flamed. "No, please," she said.

Please, yes, oh, please God, tell me everything!

"Then I shall refrain, but have you any idea what it does to me when you say 'please' like that? Would you like me to tell you?"

Cecilia licked her lips. "No... at least, not here."

There was something sensual about the way he chuckled at that, and it brought all the memories of his touch to life. A warm ache began to thrum between her legs, making her shift in her seat in a bid to control it.

"I did not handle things well in the study," he conceded, as the curricule finally turned onto Rotten Row. "I made a decision about your future without pausing to think that you may have other plans. Will you forgive me for that error?"

"Yes, Your Grace," she whispered.

"Ezra," he said firmly, but then his whole demeanor softened. "Call me Ezra. Please."

A tremble of longing ran through her body as her mind wondered about all the dark, delicious ways she could make him whisper that word to her.

“Yes, Ezra,” she said quietly and then turned her eyes up to meet his. “And you may call me Cecilia.”

He smiled, then turned his attention back to the road, where their progress was getting increasingly slow.

“Then we can be friends, Cecilia, if you wish it. My cousin will have spread a thousand rumors about us by now, and I cannot undo that, but if you allow me to be your friend, I will do everything in my power to keep your reputation intact, even if you decide that marriage with me is not something you can bear.”

Cecilia straightened up in surprise. “You think I am afraid of marrying you?”

“No, not afraid as such,” he said, taking one hand from the reins to rub at his jaw, “but rather, I was made aware of the fact that marriage, even to a titled gentleman, is not always a desirable thing for a woman, especially one with few allies in the world.”

Cecilia thought of her grandmother, surrounded by finery and opulence, yet unable to make a single decision for herself.

“It is not always a comfortable lot in the world,” she agreed.

“Given the choice, my dear, I would rather stand your ally than have you regard me as a fiend.”

She chuckled at the picture his words conjured. “I do not think it is possible to see you as a fiend, Your Gra-I mean, Ezra. But the truth is I do not want to entrap you into a loveless match either, even if unintentional. I would rather stand as your ally and friend than have you grow to hate me for forcing your hand.”

He raised his eyebrows. “So, you wish to protect me?”

“I suppose it sounds a little silly when you say it like that.”

“Not in the least, Cecilia,” he replied, staring at her with a surprised intensity she could not decipher. “I think that might well be the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

His words were intriguing, but there was no further time to continue their conversation, for they had been hailed by another carriage. Ezra drew his horses to a standstill, and then quickly set about making introductions.

“Lord Stafford, Lady Stafford, may I present to you my fair companion Miss Wallace, the daughter of the esteemed Ambrose Wallace.”

The correct pleasantries were exchanged, and Cecilia felt the Staffords were warm in their politeness rather than aloof which was the treatment she had feared.

“Have you met your match when it comes to expertise on Wallace, have you, Marlborough?” said the Marquess with a teasing lilt to his words.

“I’ve met my match when it comes to a knowledge of art in general,” replied Ezra. “Miss Wallace has also taught me much about the value of the word ‘please’. I don’t think I truly appreciated it before.”

The Staffords gave a puzzled laugh, while Cecilia surreptitiously punched Ezra in the hip. He didn’t acknowledge the hit.

“Have you been to the Royal Academy Exhibition yet, my lady?” said Cecilia loudly, trying to divert the conversation. “I hear George Harlowe has caused quite a stir with his submission.”

“The Queen Katherine painting! Indeed, it has!” said Lady Stafford. “As it happens, my husband and I are at odds over it ourselves.”

“I am simply impressed by the use of color to frame the scene,” said her husband with mock defensiveness.

“What rot, you just like it because Sarah Siddons is the model for Queen Katherine,” retorted the lady. “Harlowe has made impressive use of color, but at the sacrifice of his drawing and detail.”

“I’m afraid that I was not impressed with the painting at all,” confessed Ezra meekly. “Now, if we want to talk about the use of light, then I am happy to discuss Turner’s *Fall of the Carthaginian Empire!*”

“His maritime works are better,” said Lord Stafford dismissively.

“But what were your thoughts, Miss Wallace?” asked his wife before the two gentlemen could begin arguing. “His Grace evidently values your opinion.”

“I’m afraid I have not had the privilege of attending the Exhibition since my father’s death,” Cecilia admitted, “but Mr. Hope was good enough to allow me to look through the catalogue to see who is on display this year.”

“Well, this simply will not do,” said Ezra firmly. “We shall set up a party and attend the Exhibition again, only this time you can whisper intelligent observations to me, Cecilia, so that I can convince Stafford here once and for all that I do know what I’m talking about when it comes to art!”

“A fine idea, Marlborough!” laughed the Marquess. “Send me the invitation and we shall cancel all other engagements, won’t we, my love?”

“Without hesitation,” she replied, but her eyes were very much on Cecilia. “I am very much looking forward to getting to know you better, Miss Wallace.”

She heard him use my given name. Has his cousin’s gossip already reached her?

They took their leave, and each set their carriages to, neither party willing to cause a crush on Rotten Row.

“I hope you do not mind attending the Exhibition,” said Ezra, “but I think your knowledge of art will win over the Staffords, and I shall endeavor to make sure the rest of the party consists of people you are acquainted with.”

“Even if I were accompanied by my worst enemies, I should still attend willingly,” she replied. “It was my favorite event of the year before my parents passed away. Thank you, Ezra.”

“Careful,” he replied. “I think I might learn to like you saying ‘thank you’ as much as I enjoy you saying ‘please’.”

She thumped him in the side, which startled a deep-throated laugh from him so full of genuine mirth, she couldn’t help but start laughing herself. They were hailed by a group of men and women on horseback, who drew alongside the curricle as Ezra once again brought the horses to a standstill.

“Good God, my friends, His Grace is actually laughing! In public! Quick, someone check he still retains all his senses,” said the tallest of the group.

“No need to worry on that score, Fairfax, it’s simply that I have finally discovered a companion whose company I actually enjoy, whereas I am forced to tolerate yours,” said Ezra, much to the amusement of the riders. “Allow me to present Miss Wallace to you; she is the daughter of Ambrose Wallace, the painter. Cecilia, this wretched figure before you is Lord Fairfax, his sisters Emma and Kitty Fairfax—both the intellectual superiors of their brother despite his protestations—and our mutual friends, Mr. George Blatheby and Mr. Frederick Swanson.”

“How do you know Marlborough, Miss Wallace?” said the younger of the Fairfax sisters, Miss Kitty. Cecilia guessed her to be around sixteen or so, and she had yet to develop the art of hiding her feelings. “I am certain I have not been introduced to you at any events this Season.”

“Miss Wallace has been kind enough to lend me her thoughts on my art collection, Kitty,” said Ezra in a brotherly tone. “Thomas Hope introduced us.”

“Oh, well, it must be a rare treat for you, to have a man of Marlborough’s intelligence deigning to notice you,” said Kitty without even bothering to smile.

“True, I’m used to conversing with men of a higher intellect, but it seems rather rude to point it out so clearly,” replied Cecilia, which provoked a mixture of shocked gasps and laughter from her new audience.

Ezra sighed dramatically. “It seems my fair companion still does not forgive me for doubting the provenance of my latest acquisition. It is a hard blow to my pride, but I am forced to admit that the daughter of Ambrose Wallace has a better understanding of his work than I.”

“Anyone who can force His Grace to admit fault is a friend of mine,” said Lord Fairfax with a sharp look at his sister. “I look forward to discussing his many faults in more detail in the future, Miss Wallace. We had better move on before we cause a sad crush. Your servant, Marlborough.”

“You handled that well,” said Ezra as his friends rode out of earshot, “although, I hope you do not truly consider me a man

of limited intellect.”

“I’m sure both your reputation and pride can withstand the bruising,” she replied, “but no, I don’t find you to be a man of limited intellect. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

The rest of their drive passed in a blur of introductions, small jokes, and a surprisingly large number of invitations extended to Cecilia. She knew that most of them came from curiosity, for Ezra was honest with her that he rarely drove out in Hyde Park, and even then, only Tilly or one of his married female relatives would accompany him. Nevertheless, she was entertained by the attention and confided as much in Ezra.

“Are you sure it has nothing to do with your beauty, my dear?” he replied.

She rolled her eyes. “Hardly! I am vain enough to admit I am pretty enough, but I would be arrogant indeed to believe I could hold a candle to the diamonds of the *ton*. But thank you for the compliment, Ezra.”

“You are a strange thing, aren’t you?” he said with a smile. “Come, I had better get you home. May I call on you tomorrow?”

“I should like that.”

“As would I.” He paused. “We are friends, then, my dear?”

“Only if you promise to take me to the Royal Academy Exhibition,” she replied with a cheeky smile.

“Done,” he replied, “although, I hope your feelings toward me grow warmer the more time we spend together.”

“I suppose we will have to see,” she replied, glad he could not hear the way her heart was thundering in her chest.

“I look forward to the challenge,” he replied, and something about his smile made Cecilia feel she was going to enjoy it very much as well.

CHAPTER TEN

Four days passed, and Ezra spent as much of it as possible with Cecilia. The trip to the Royal Academy exhibition was a success, as was the small soirée organized by Tilly. Even Lord Tooley, who had met her as Miss Watson at the sale of *Nymph at Sunrise*, did not seem to connect that dowdily dressed young woman with the pretty Cecilia Wallace, nor with the magical nymph at the Serpentine.

He'd often considered his peers to be shallow and unobservant, but this oversight on the part of these lords just confirmed it.

For her sake, Ezra was glad of their ignorance. Even marriage with him would not completely wipe away the sort of scandal that her previous actions had caused. And if she did not marry him... well, it would ruin her before she had a chance to establish herself.

“Have you raised the prospect of marriage again?” asked Tilly, disturbing his reverie. They were in the ducal carriage, trundling toward Spitalfields to collect Cecilia, yearning to be in her company again, before heading to the theater.

“I thought your advice was to court her properly before I venture back into that territory.”

“Yes, but it’s been an age already, and I am concerned you might have changed your mind,” she replied, fussing with the reticule in her lap.

Ezra raised his brows. “I have been living in her pocket for almost a week, my dear. Why should you think my position had changed?”

“Well, you haven’t done much about the competition,” she replied flatly. “Lord Fairfax has offered to take her out riding, Mr. Blatheby is escorting her to the British Museum, while Mr. Swanson has twice now insisted that she visit his father’s estate to view the portrait collection there.”

“George and Fred taking an interest in art, are they? Wonders will never cease.”

“They are taking an interest in Cecy,” she said with an exasperated sigh. “If you are not careful, she will be stolen out from under your nose.”

Ezra considered the matter. “I thought George was on the hunt for an heiress to marry. Is he aware that Cecilia has no fortune?”

“She has a very respectable portion for a lady of her position,” sniffed Tilly, “and besides, she’s the only living descendent of Viscount Chalmers.”

“Who disowned her mother. And how do you know about her portion?”

“Because she asked me if I thought she could better support Robert if they lived outside of the city. I have not the slightest idea of what rents would be in some out-of-the-way place like Liverpool or Bristol, but I told her I did not think it would be sufficient. You are welcome.”

Ezra rubbed his eyes. “I did ask you not to interfere or harangue the poor girl, Tilly.”

“I am not haranguing her in the least, I am just trying to advance your interests, dear Brother. You might be a duke, but you are neither the richest nor the most amiable catch in London. And after the shocking way you handled the proposal, do not be surprised if she chooses any other offer over yours!”

“How blessed I am with a sister who concerns herself with my own marriage prospects instead of contemplating her own,” he responded. The cut had the desired effect, and Tilly turned away from him to silently sulk for the next few minutes.

Ezra was not immune to her arguments, however. His own conduct had left him responsible for Cecilia’s future, and at the very least, she deserved to be both safe and happy. If there was another man who could fulfill that obligation for her, then naturally, he would support her decision. Any disappointment, he assured himself, would be carnal in nature, and completely understandable. His dreams were haunted by images of her laid naked and inviting upon his bed. Their banter had developed over the week to a level where Ezra was sure she found ways to say “please” to him for no other reason than to drive him mad with desire.

But if she decided on another suitable gentleman, then he would gladly step aside. It was just unfortunate that Fairfax was a bit of a loose screw and, while he was a good friend, he would no doubt make a terrible husband, thanks to his gambling and carousing. Frederick Swanson had money but lacked the wit to truly engage Cecilia, while George Blatheby was famed for being in the petticoat line—associating with women of easy virtue. As for men like Lord Tooley—they could not be depended upon to take care of Cecilia should scandal become attached to her name.

No, he'd thought this over several times, and Ezra could see no option for Cecilia's future happiness than to be married to him. It might not be the love match most girls dreamed of, but the advantages he could offer would be enough for her. He was sure of that.

“She would be good for you,” muttered Tilly as the coachman drew their carriage to a standstill outside Mrs. Fletcher's abode. “You smile when you are with her, Ezra. You smile when you think about her. I would welcome her into our family with open arms for those reasons alone.”

“I know, Dear Heart,” he replied, touched by his sister's concern for his own happiness, “but have no concern for me. I have my art, and it is enough.”

He did not catch Tilly's response, but he guessed it was not one of agreement.

His footman had climbed down from the box and opened the door to the carriage, revealing Cecilia standing on the pavement in the half-light of the dusk.

Ezra's breath caught as he put out a hand to help her inside. She was wearing the same cream and gold gown that she'd worn that night in his study, and a plain cream shawl about her shoulders. Her hair was pinned high at the back of her neck but cascaded all about her face in a series of perfect ringlets. White gloves encased her slender hands, but there were no jewels, no accessories, save for a thin silk ribbon tied about her throat.

"Could you be any more beautiful, Cecy?" complained Tilly as Cecilia took the seat beside her. "Be warned that I will have no choice but to hate you if that happens."

Cecilia gave a self-conscious laugh as she straightened her skirts. "Thank you, but congratulations must go to Bessie; I had no idea she harbored a desire to dress hair for a living, or I would have taken advantage of her sooner."

"You look lovely," said Ezra politely, trying very hard not to entertain the memory of tearing that dress before taking her breast into his mouth.

"And you both look exactly how I would expect the Duke of Marlborough and Lady Matilda to look on the way to the theater—perfect!" she said, a becoming flush on her cheeks. "I have never had the opportunity to sit in a private box before, and I confess to being both excited and nervous at the prospect!"

"You will do fine, I promise," said Tilly, leaning over to give Cecilia's hand a squeeze. "Ezra has invited the Fairfaxes to accompany us—but not Kitty, the tiresome creature, who is apparently in bed with a cold."

“The poor child, I hope it is nothing too serious,” said Cecilia with real concern.

“That’s very charitable of you,” said Ezra, remembering Kitty’s behavior at Hyde Park.

Cecilia looked adorably confused. “In what way? Colds make everyone miserable.”

“Very true,” said Tilly, throwing a speaking look toward Ezra, which he was certain was her way of saying, “*She’s an angel and too good for you!*”

“Can you tell me about the play?” asked Cecilia with a hopeful smile. “I am terrified I will make a fool of myself by laughing at the serious moments, or worse, being brought to tears during the farce.”

“Not to worry, I will explain exactly when you are supposed to look deeply moved by the performance,” said Tilly, and so, the rest of the ride to the theater was filled with conversation about the upcoming entertainment.

Fairfax and the elder of his sisters, Emma, were already waiting for them at the grand entrance on Brydges Street, and the final member of the party, a Captain Darcy, joined them a few moments later. Cecilia gripped Ezra’s arm tightly, and he enjoyed the gasp of wonder that escaped her as they made their way from the outer hall and into the great rotunda. The grand staircases on either side, while larger than those seen in most stately homes, were nevertheless full of both patrons and servants as they proceeded to their destination of choice.

Footmen and fruit sellers rubbed shoulders with lords and ladies, creating a chaotic scene of life that he knew she would appreciate.

“It is glorious,” she whispered, her eyes darting about as though she was trying to take in everything at once.

“Wait until we enter the theater itself,” he replied, “but first, let us fetch a glass of wine.”

He steered her through the throng, followed closely by his sister on the arm of Fairfax, and Emma on the arm of the Captain, until they made it into the grand saloon where Cecilia’s appreciation was once again on display.

“I simply have to bring Robert here,” she said, apparently impressed by the curved walls and the giant Corinthian columns. “I hope it is not unfashionable to be impressed, or I am afraid I must appear very vulgar.”

“Never,” he replied, giving her arm a little squeeze. “It is refreshing to see someone take innocent joy in beauty rather than feigning boredom with everything.”

“I do not think I could ever get bored here,” said Cecilia, whose gaze had found its way to the striking and notorious courtesan, Harriette Wilson, and the gentlemen who surrounded her. “Who is that woman?”

“Not someone you should probably associate with,” he replied, steering her toward the end of the saloon.

Eventually, they made their way to the great stairs and up to the corridor leading to his family's box. His parents and grandparents had all held boxes at every theater of note in the city, and despite the expense, Ezra had continued the tradition, a fact he was once again glad of when he saw Cecilia's look of approval when they entered. He was also far from unaware of the stares their arrival elicited; ladies and gentlemen in the other boxes had no compunction about ogling his party, some even going so far as to use opera glasses to do so.

Tilly was preening under the attention, much to Ezra's amusement, but Miss Emma Fairfax was confused by all the fuss.

"Why is everyone staring at us so, Your Grace?" she asked, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "I am sure we are not interesting enough to explain such attention."

He was spared the need to answer by her brother, who was in a surprisingly diplomatic mood.

"It's Marlborough's own fault, my dear. He has not personally used his box in over four years, if I have my dates correct, so naturally, everyone wants to know whom he regards as important enough to accompany him."

Ezra gave his friend a grateful nod in acknowledgment as Tilly expanded on the theme.

"It is the same everywhere, Emma, and most tiresome! But I suppose a duke of marriageable age is always of interest to the *ton*—especially one who has so consistently eschewed his duties as a host until this last week."

“Then I am glad to have been included in this party,” replied Miss Fairfax, before turning to the Captain to ask for his opinions on the matter.

Cecilia leaned in toward Ezra, her voice lowered so only he could hear her.

“Have you really avoided Society all this time? You should not put yourself in any trouble on my behalf, you know that.”

Ezra gave her ringlets a playful flick. “I have not put myself out in the least, my dear girl, other than suffering Thomas Hope’s pontification at your behest.”

Her expression turned mischievous. “You thoroughly enjoyed that conversation, especially the part where he explained why your collection of Roman pottery was incorrectly displayed.”

“The things one does for love,” he sighed before capturing her hand and planting a kiss on her fingers.

Her eyes went wide, and Ezra winced at his words. He thought to apologize, but his tongue had stuck to the roof of his mouth, and he had no idea what he wanted to say, let alone how to say it. Cecilia’s confusion turned to embarrassment, and she turned her attention to the stage, where a group of performers had appeared. Ezra, well aware that half of the *ton* was watching them, schooled his features into a look of polite indifference and pretended to watch the opening act of the play.



The things one does for love.

Cecilia could not shake the words from her mind despite her best attempts. She was not such a fool as to believe Ezra loved her—how could he, when they barely knew each other? Yet she did not think he was the type to lie about such things.

Her whole world had been turned upside down in the space of a week, and the thought of marriage to Ezra no longer filled her with dread. Now the moneylender had been paid and Robert continued to regain his strength, Cecilia had become aware of how little fun she had experienced in her life, and Ezra was doing everything in his power to entertain her.

She had heard the whispers spread by his cousin already. The *ton*, it seemed, was laying bets as to their marriage date, and seemed split between those who wished them happy and those who expected her to be nothing more than his mistress. Not that she cared for their opinions on such matters, but she was conscious of Ezra's concern for his sister's reputation.

What harm would there be in marrying him? He is handsome, kind, and a duke, for heaven's sake! Why be greedy for romance, when friendship is far more lasting?

Toward the end of the first act, Cecilia began to feel as though a predator was staring at her. She looked out across the theater at the other boxes, and while, yes, there was still plenty of attention being aimed at her group, it was not done out of malevolence, but more in the hope of seeing something entertaining. She placed her gloved hand on her neck,

suddenly feeling both vulnerable and exposed in her low-cut dress.

Tilly leaned in close to her.

“Is something the matter, dearest?” she murmured. “You look like a startled deer.”

Cecilia forced her hand back into her lap. “Nothing, I swear it. I was just not expecting to have so many people stare at me so.”

“Well, that’s what you get for being beautiful,” replied Tilly, but there was humor rather than malice in her tone.

Cecilia knitted her brows. “No, that cannot be the reason, for both you and Miss Fairfax are diamonds of the first water, and yet you have not provoked so much interest.”

Tilly shook her head and sighed. “You are impossible to compliment, Cecy, do you realize that? Very well! It is only because you are new, and because Ezra has a reputation for being impervious to feminine wiles. The *ton* is perpetually bored, and because you are new, they stare in case you do something entertaining.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at that. “What do they expect I might do? Launch into one of Shakespeare’s soliloquies?”

“I think they are rather hoping to see you kiss my brother,” replied Tilly, looking rather smug as Cecilia’s face began to

burn.

“That’s enough, Matilda,” said Ezra, his eyes still on the stage below them. He sounded bored as he spoke, but from the way Tilly winced at the use of her full name, Cecilia suspected he had just delivered a very cutting rebuke.

The actors finished their performance on stage and received a fair amount of applause for their efforts. Captain Darcy got to his feet and offered his arm to Emma, declaring a need to stretch his legs. Lord Fairfax promptly did the same for Tilly, who promised to fetch back some wine for Cecilia, while pointedly ignoring her brother’s existence. Within moments, she was alone with the Duke, save for the hundred eyes still watching them as gossip buzzed about the theater.

“Was this too much?” Ezra asked. He was lounging in his chair as though the world bored him, but his gaze was intense.

Cecilia forced herself to relax her shoulders and tried to mimic his display of bored indifference. “It was unexpected, but I suppose one grows used to it.”

He raised one brow. “Feeling the *ennui* already?”

She gave up the attempt to look fashionable and instead leaned toward him with an excited grin.

“Not even a little bit! My only regret is that I did not bring my sketchbook, for I do not trust my memory to record all the wonderful scenes and moments that I am being a witness to. I’ve barely had time to watch the play itself, for there are so

many interesting things happening all at once. It is a little uncomfortable when people stare, but then I get the opportunity to study their faces in return.” She paused, remembering the odd sensation she’d had only a few minutes before. “Well, mostly. I had the oddest feeling that I was being watched by... by a lion, or some such thing. I suppose everyone feels that way.”

But Ezra was no longer looking at her, instead, he turned a stony expression to the curious onlookers in the audience. Without turning, he reached out to take her hand into his.

“No, Cecilia, that is not the usual feeling, not even here.”

His demeanor had returned to that of the unapproachable duke she had met at Mr. Hope’s house, not the kind and sensual man she was growing to care about. She regretted raising the issue, not willing to lose the softer Ezra for even a moment.

“Your Grace, do not let it concern you,” she said, stroking his hand with her own. “I would far rather have your attention on me than on the members of the *ton*. Please.”

He turned back to face her, his expression darkening with hunger.

“An unfair advantage, Cecilia,” he replied, his voice heavy with suggestion and promise. “It is already a battle not to pull you into my lap and free you from the confines of that dress.”

Her breathing became shallow, and heat began to build at the apex of her thighs. She was painfully aware of all the attention

on them and worried it was not enough to prevent her from doing something truly scandalous.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Please.”

Ezra muttered a creative oath that Cecilia had not heard before. He shifted on his chair so that he could cross his legs, and then dragged a hand over his face.

“You are going to be the death of me, woman,” he groaned. Cecilia couldn’t help the giggle that escaped her, and Ezra did not look impressed at her mirth.

Someone rapped their knuckles against the entrance of their box.

“They are back early,” said Ezra, still looking uncomfortable, but his expression changed to shock as two people entered their box. Cecilia, following his gaze, jumped to her feet as her eyes locked with those of a man she hated.

“Hello, Granddaughter,” said Lord Chalmers. “It seems we have things to discuss.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ezra got to his feet, trying to assess the situation unfolding before him. Cecilia had curtsied to the Viscount and his wife in a very proper manner, but it was as if waves of ice were flowing off her shoulders. Lord Chalmers looked like a bird of prey trying to decide whether this mouse was worth the effort of eating, while the Viscountess...

Good grief, the longing in that lady's eyes when she rested them on Cecilia was enough to break the hardest of hearts. The woman looked too young to have a granddaughter of any age, let alone an adult one, and would have been beautiful in a waifish sort of way were it not for the cloud of despondency hanging over her.

"My lord, I trust you are acquainted with His Grace, the Duke of Marlborough," said Cecilia without the barest hint of a smile.

The Viscount glanced at Ezra, and it was plain from his expression that Lord Chalmers did not consider a young duke to be of a higher social status than himself, no matter what protocol demanded.

“We have met many times,” said Chalmers, unsmiling. “And what of you, girl? In what manner have you caught the attention of a duke renowned for his disinterest in the ladies of the *ton*?”

Ezra felt his mouth drop open at the insinuation. Cecilia gave a squeak of pure rage, while Lady Chalmers winced at her husband’s insinuation.

“How dare you—” Cecilia began, but Ezra placed a calming hand on her shoulder. This was not the place to vent her very justified anger.

It was also not the place for Ezra to land a flush hit on the Viscount’s face, but he allowed himself a moment to indulge in the fantasy.

“Miss Wallace was so good as to authenticate a painting for me,” he said, drawing attention away from Cecilia. “When I discovered how well-educated she is on artistic matters, I found myself seeking her opinion on a great many issues concerning my art collection, only half of which were completely made up.”

The slightest flicker of uncertainty danced on the Viscount’s face, but Lady Chalmers practically sagged with relief.

“So, the rumors are true!” she said, disentangling her arm from her husband. “Lady Twixham insisted to me that a marriage between you was forthcoming, and so I told Lord Chalmers.”

“Lady Twixham is a twittering fool,” said the Viscount without rancor.

Ezra wanted to be offended on Sophie’s behalf, but since he held the same opinion about his cousin, he decided to let it slide.

“That may be, Lord Chalmers, but nonetheless, it is true that I asked your granddaughter for the honor of her hand.”

The Viscount betrayed no emotion as he removed a gold snuffbox from his coat and took a pinch, neglecting to offer any to Ezra. Lady Chalmers, on the other hand, was like a porcelain doll that had suddenly come to life. She reached out and took Cecilia’s hands in her own before the girl had a chance to react, and for one horrible moment, it seemed as though she would force her granddaughter into an embrace.

“Oh, what wonderful news!” she breathed, her eyes wide and glassy as her gaze flitted rapidly between the three of them. “How happy you must be, my dearest, darling girl!”

Cecilia didn’t answer immediately, and Ezra felt his heart begin to thump rapidly in his chest. The tension between the Viscount and Cecilia was so thick and so laden with unresolved anger, Ezra had the horrible feeling that Cecilia might openly reject his marriage offer publicly, if only to spite her relatives.

And she’d do it with the whole *ton* watching, consequences be damned. A woman who would risk her reputation just to sell a painting would not be afraid of causing a scandal to punish the grandfather she hated.

“Cecilia?” said the Viscountess, her voice quivering with concern. She looked at Ezra thoughtfully for a moment before turning back to her granddaughter. “Are you happy? For if not, then I am sure I—”

“You are sure of nothing,” scoffed the Viscount. Ezra clasped his hands behind his back to prevent himself from lashing out.

The women, he noticed, were still holding hands. Ezra watched as something passed between them silently, some kind of understanding the men were not to be privy to.

“I am very happy, Grandmother,” said Cecilia, accompanying her words with an affectionate smile. “His Grace was so good as to ask me to marry him, and after considering the matter deeply, I have decided that nothing would suit me better than to be his wife.”

Ezra’s attention snapped to Cecilia, and the world faded away until only the two of them remained.

“Truly?” he asked, his throat tight and sore. “You truly want to marry me?”

She looked over at him and curved her lips into a smile that promised both companionship and sensual pleasure.

“Yes, please,” she replied with teasing eyes.

Ezra swallowed, determined to make her pay for that provocation in the most delicious manner, but for now, he forced himself to remain dignified.

“I trust you have no objections, Chalmers?” he asked. “I was thinking St George’s, should you wish to attend.”

“Oh, course we will attend,” declared Lady Chalmers before her husband could speak, her chin lifted at a defiant angle that only served to highlight how much her granddaughter resembled her.

The expression on the Viscount’s face was not a happy one, and Ezra had the horrid suspicion that the Viscountess would pay for her current insolence. But whatever Chalmers felt about the situation, the fact that his granddaughter would soon have a title seemed to outweigh his anger.

“Nothing would give me greater pride than seeing Cecilia become a duchess,” he said before holding out a hand to his granddaughter. “Come here, child, let me kiss your cheek.”

Cecilia did not move. Nor did her grandfather.

The rest of their party chose that moment to noisily return to the box, Tilly bearing two glasses of red wine as she skipped back into the space.

“You will never guess who I just ran into, Cecy, for—oh!”

Ezra watched his sister take in the scene around her in less time than it took to blink. She met her brother's gaze and then very deliberately poured the glasses of wine all down the front of her favorite dress.

"My lace! I've ruined it!" she whimpered, bursting out tears as anarchy enveloped the box. Miss Fairfax and Cecilia rushed to her aid; Lord Chalmers stood in a bewildered daze; and then Ezra, Lord Fairfax, and Captain Darcy added to the confusion by each shouting out suggestions for removing the wine stains.

"Here, take my shawl to cover it," said Cecilia, throwing the cashmere about Tilly's shoulders, but Ezra's sister was evidently enjoying the theatrics.

"Everyone is looking at me!" she wailed before burying her face in Cecilia's shoulder and continuing to sob.

"It seems this is not the time for our discussion," mumbled Lord Chalmers, his expression hovering somewhere between horror and disgust. "I shall call on you, Marlborough."

"Thank you," Lady Chalmers murmured to Ezra before following her husband out into the corridor. "Make her happy."

"I intend to," he replied.

The Viscountess paused. The look she gave Ezra made him want to step back and jump over the balcony.

“Make her happy, Your Grace, or I shall see to it that you never are again.”



It took the best part of an hour for the party to get out of the theater with all their belongings and make it into their waiting carriages, during which time it was decided that everyone would return together to the Marlborough mansion for an intimate gathering of friends. Cecilia had tried to argue that it would be best if she just returned home, but Tilly was having none of it.

“Not that I in any way wish to make you feel guilty about my ruined dress, Cecy, but I ruined my favorite dress to get you out of that horrid situation with Lord Chalmers, so the least you can do is come play some silly parlor games with us.”

“I have the oddest feeling that you are going to hold this card against me for a considerable time, Tilly,” she’d replied as they climbed into the coach.

“It was spangled lace; what do you think?”

“I think you’re going to hold this card for years.”

It turned out that her future sister-in-law might have had the right idea after all.

Ezra’s indefatigable butler, Anderson, did not blink an eye when told of the impromptu party, and instead led them into the front parlor where flames were dancing merrily in the fireplace. Tilly disappeared briefly to change, and by the time

she appeared in a plain house dress, Ezra's servants had laid out a delicious assortment of sandwiches and cakes coupled with glasses of champagne.

"Whatever you pay our people, dear Brother, it is not enough," said Tilly with a happy sigh. "Plum cake and champagne! Much better than the theater, don't you agree, Cecy?"

"I think I would much rather be here with such good company than on display for the *ton*," Cecilia admitted before helping herself to a fruit tart.

"I say, Tilly, it was awfully sporting of you to pull Cecy here out of that fix with her grandfather," said Lord Fairfax with an appreciative look.

"We explained everything to them while you were changing," said Cecilia, secretly delighted that Lord Fairfax was using a pet name for her.

"Which is a good thing, Lady Tilly, because when I saw you pour that wine down your dress, I was afraid you were jingle-brained, and that I had somehow failed to notice all these years," added the Captain, looking rather impressed. "The way you howled your misery was very believable. Better than anything I ever saw on the stage, at any rate."

"No, that howl *was* real," sighed Tilly. "It seemed such a good idea in the moment, but then once the deed was done and I realised the enormity of the act...well, it helped my dearest Cecy, and that is worth a thousand yards of spangled lace."

Cecilia placed her hand on her heart. “I have not felt so loved since Robert informed me that I can be his housekeeper once he becomes a famous architect.”

“Who is Robert?” asked Emma, and before Cecilia could answer, Tilly was waxing lyrical about a darling little angel of a boy who seemed to bear very little resemblance to her actual brother.

Ezra joined her on the settee, sitting so close, their thighs brushed against each other.

“So, do you truly wish to marry me, my dear?” he asked quietly, his words for her alone. He was trying to sound nonchalant, but for all his original promises that their marriage would be one of convenience, Cecilia was certain there was a hint of hopeful concern underlying his demeanor.

“I would like that very much,” she replied. He reached over and enveloped her free hand in his.

“Then I will sort everything out with your grandfather—I know, I know, but he is your legal guardian until you come of age, even if he has been shamefully remiss in his duties toward you, and with luck, we can be wed at Hanover Square within the fortnight.”

“You have it all arranged, don’t you?” she said, warmed by the knowledge that he had been putting thought into the matter, even before she had agreed to his proposal.

“Can you blame me? I think we’ll rub along together perfectly, my dear, and quite frankly, if you say “please” to me in that manner just one more time, I fear I will not let you out of my bed long enough to do the honorable thing.”

“What secrets and gossip are you two sharing?” Tilly demanded loudly from her chair. “If shenanigans are afoot then I insist I be included in them.”

Cecilia smiled.

“If you must know, we were discussing how to let you know that you will soon be my new sister-in-law.”

Tilly’s screech of delight was loud enough to burst eardrums, and Cecilia quickly found herself being hugged and then kissed by the men and women alike of Ezra’s group. Toasts were made, champagne was drunk, and Ezra’s butler magically appeared with more refreshments whenever things threatened to run low, until Ezra finally ordered the man to go to bed, and to make sure no other servants were waiting up on them. The evening passed in a whirl of laughter and conversation, the likes of which Cecilia had not even known she longed for, and whenever Ezra smiled in her direction, she wondered if she had ever been so happy in all her life.

Eventually, it was time to leave, with Captain Darcy being the first to depart, and the Fairfaxes leaving soon after. Tilly returned the cashmere shawl as they waited for Ezra’s carriage to be prepared, and kissed Cecilia firmly on the cheek.

“I shall not be so gauche as to linger until you depart, for I am sure you would rather have a few moments alone with Ezra.

Oh, you have no idea how happy I am that you are to be my sister, Cecy! And I hope that both you and Robert will never regret being saddled with me.”

“Never,” Cecilia promised, wondering why she wanted to cry as Tilly raced up the stairs.

Only one candle remained burning in the hallway, casting the weakest of light across her and Ezra. The realization that they were alone together, truly alone for the first time since their encounter in the library, made her suddenly feel very shy. She started to pull the shawl tight about her shoulders, but he reached out to stop her.

“Please don’t,” he murmured. “I need to look at you.”

Her breath caught, and she could not bring herself to meet his gaze, but she let the shawl fall loose again, the low-cut bodice of her dress allowing him to trace his fingers gently across her collarbone.

“I did not order the carriage,” he said, his voice hoarse as he stepped in close. “If you want to return home, I will fetch it myself and ensure you get there safe and unmolested, but it is not my preference.”

“What... what would you prefer?” she asked, distracted by how close his lips were to hers. All she needed to do was push up onto her toes and she would be kissing him.

“I want you to stay with me,” he murmured, slowly, ever so slowly, pulling her into his embrace until their bodies were

shaped against each other. “I want to slide you out of this dress—I will be careful this time, and not tear it from you, no matter how much I desire it—and I want to explore you in all your naked glory, with my hands as well as my lips. I want to find out how you taste and discover the best way to make you come apart in my arms. These beautiful breasts of yours need to be worshipped with my mouth, while I stroke and tease you, and I want to hear you cry out my name as the pleasure crashes down. Would you like that, do you think?”

Cecilia could barely breathe as he teased a trail of feather-light kisses along her cheek.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, I think I would like that.”

He chuckled against her ear, the sound almost a growl as his hand cupped her rear and pulled her even tighter against him. She could feel his excited manhood pressing against her through the layers of fabric between them, and she was frustrated that both fashion and climate demanded they wear such barriers.

“I should not. We should not, I know it,” he said, not loosening his grip on her body as he continued to tease her with gossamer-like kisses to her temple and cheek. “I know I should wait until we are wed, for your protection and reputation if nothing else, but then I see you, I touch you, and all I can think of is how much I want you naked before me, so I can kiss my way up the inside of your thighs and taste your desire for myself.”

A shiver of pure pleasure ran through Cecilia at his words, heightened by the sensation of his teeth grazing the sensitive skin of her neck. Damp heat was pooling between her legs,

and the need for Ezra's touch was pushing away any objections or hesitancy that may have remained.

They were to be married, after all, and it was no longer a secret. What harm would there be in allowing themselves this pleasure when they were all but wed already?

Cecilia pressed her hips even tighter against him, writhing slowly as she did so, and this time, he really did growl as she tested the limits of his control. The sound brought her confidence, and she knew with absolute certainty how to push him right to the edge.

"But Ezra, is that all you want to do to me?" she whispered. "Tell me what you really want. Please."

She almost laughed at the curse he growled into her neck, but only almost because he hitched her leg up against his hip and was running his hand across her garter ribbons and onto the bare skin of her leg.

"I want to bury myself inside this sweet puss of yours," he said, his fingers brushing against the delicate curls at the apex of her thighs. "I want to drive you over the edge again and again until the pleasure gets too much and I become undone right with you."

He pulled away from kissing her neck so he could force her to look into his eyes.

"Do you want that as well, my little Nymph? Because if you want to leave, I will honor your choice and release you with

my blessing. But if you stay, I intend to do all those things to you, and far, far more if you let me. Is that what you want, Cecilia? To come to my bed and come undone in my arms?"

"Please," she moaned, her body on fire just at the thought of his touch.

Ezra swept her up into his arms and lifted her as though she were made of paper. He did not exactly run to his chambers, but Cecilia was barely aware that any time had passed before he kicked open the carved doors to his private world and carried her through to the ornate four-poster bed where he slept.



How the hell he regained enough of his senses to get Cecilia to his bedroom instead of ravishing her in the hallway, Ezra had no idea, but by God, was she beautiful. With the little self-control that remained, he left her side long enough to close and lock his bedroom door. By the time he turned back around, she had loosened the ribbons of her dress, and once she knew she had his attention, she let it fall to the ground.

He swallowed. Her shift was almost as sheer as the one worn by the nymph in the painting, clinging suggestively to her hips and breasts in a way that both tempted and teased.

"I want you to touch me, Ezra," she said, touching the hem of the thin fabric where it crossed low along her décolletage. "Please."

He needed no further permission. He crossed the room in three quick strides, took hold of her tightly, and pulled her in for a

deep, hungry kiss. She moaned into his mouth as he slid his hand around to cup her breast, her nipple growing hard as he brushed his fingers across it.

“Please, Ezra,” she whispered against his lips. “I want your mouth on me again.”

He pulled away from her long enough to slide the shift from her body and discard it on the floor beside her dress, before lifting her up onto the soft blankets of the bed. He knelt before her, like a worshipper before his goddess, before pulling her closer so he could take her breast back into his mouth. He felt her breath quicken, her legs lock tight about his body as she made quiet sighs of pleasure at the sensations he was inflicting upon her.

Quiet sighs? He thought with a wicked grin. That would never do.

He slid his hand up her thigh, through her soft curls, parting her intimate lips gently so that he could stroke her, not at her passage, but at that sweet, perfect bud that gave women such pleasure when caressed.

She gasped with shock, her body jerking as though lightning had struck her.

“Do you trust me, Cecilia?” he murmured, his fingers working at her with light, swift strokes. “Do you want me to make you fall apart?”

“I... I... oh, my God, that feels...” she murmured breathlessly, shifting her body to press against his fingers. “Please, Ezra, please don’t stop.”

“I have no intention of stopping,” he replied, entranced by the way she arched her body, her eyes closed, and her lips parted as he made his strokes even swifter. “I have wanted to do this to you since I first met you, Cecilia. I wanted to feel you wet with longing, knowing that I brought you to that point. But what I want most is to taste you, my little Nymph. I want my tongue to take you over the edge as you lose yourself in pleasure. Do you want to know how it feels to be licked and sucked at your most intimate parts, Cecilia? Would you like me to do that to you?”

“Please,” she said, her breath so shallow, he knew she was close to the edge. “Ezra, stop talking and lick me that way, please!”

He needed no further requests. The noise she made as his tongue made its first stroke almost undid him, but the taste of her desire was decadent. She gripped him tight with her thighs, buried her hands into his hair, and then finally cried out his name as pleasure took her over the edge. She fell back onto the bed, shattered and shaking in all her wicked glory.

“You have no idea how beautiful you are,” he murmured, beginning to undo his jacket. Cecilia opened her eyes, and the smile she threw in his direction was one of a woman who was set on bringing him under her control.

The thought was more arousing than he thought possible.

“I want to see you naked,” she said, bringing herself up to her knees on the bed. “Please, Ezra. Remove your clothes.”

“Believe me, woman, I’m trying,” he muttered as his fingers fumbled on the buttons. She moved to help him, but her hungry kisses and that glorious body of hers were a continual, most enjoyable distraction. His coat hit the floor first, followed quickly by his waistcoat, but the removal of his boots and breeches proved difficult and had them both dissolving into fits of giggles more than once. It should have cooled his desire, or at least made him embarrassed for fumbling about like some greenhorn, but for some reason, all it did was make him want her more. Finally, when he pulled his shirt over his head and discarded it, the humor disappeared from her eyes to be replaced by frank appreciation.

And hunger.

He didn’t wait for her to say please this time. She was in his arms, their naked skin pressed against each other, chest to chest, legs to legs. Her mouth was hot and demanding against his, his manhood standing up hard between them. When she brought her hand down to touch him, curious and hesitant in her exploration, she almost drove him insane.

“Careful, little nymph,” he warned her between kisses. “I will lose control if you keep teasing me.”

“Then lose control,” she replied, her voice thick and hoarse. “I want to do to you what you did to me. Lose control, my love. Please.”

She gave a squeak of surprise as he pulled her close and flipped them both to have her lie on top of him. He guided her legs to either side of his body until her sex was right above his own.

Cecilia sat up, giving him the most glorious view a man could wish for, as her disheveled hair fell loose about her shoulders and those perfect breasts. He could feel her wet heat against his hard flesh, and her slim but strong legs about his hips.

“Trust me, little nymph,” he murmured as he used his hand to guide himself into her soaking sex. Her lips parted, and her eyes widened in shock as he first entered her—slowly, inch by inch, as he encouraged her to relax her body and let him slip inside. He growled in appreciation as she instinctively began to rock her body against his, searching out her own pleasure in the process.

“Does that feel good, Ezra?” she asked him, a wicked smile making her all the more desirable. “I want to slide you in and out of me, just like this, until I come apart again. Do you want me to?”

“Please,” he growled, thrusting up his own hips to push even deeper inside her. “Whatever you do, please, Cecilia, do not stop.”

She was slick with desire, and as she rocked her hips, grinding their bodies together, he could feel the shivers of another climax building within her. She cupped her breasts with her hands as she moved, pinching at her nipples as she began to move faster and press harder against him. He reached down to the point where their bodies came together, sliding a finger between them so her point of pleasure rubbed against it. Her rhythm faltered as her climax began to build, and she leaned

forward, her hands pressed to his chest, her eyes closed as she lost herself completely in the sensation.

“That’s it, my little Nymph, think about riding me like this at your command, about using my body, or my mouth, or my fingers to bring you over,” he said, his voice hoarse as he thrust up his hips to match her rhythm.

Cecilia came with a fevered cry, gripping him tight with her legs and digging her fingers into his chest as the waves of pleasure took over. Any control Ezra had left was vanquished as his name left her lips, and he gave in to the demands of his body. Gripping her hard by the hips as he pounded into her again and again, lost in the welcoming heat of her taught slickness, until his climax roared forth in a primal, almost painful wave of need.

She collapsed on top of him, her head on his shoulder as they lay together, silent save for the sound of their labored breathing.

“That was...” Cecilia said eventually. “That was...”

He kissed the tangled strawberry-blonde mess of hair, rather pleased with himself.

“That was just the first act, little Nymph,” he told her.

She lifted her head to stare at him, her eyes wide.

“There’s more?” Her voice split between surprise and hope.
“More right now?”

Ezra chuckled. “There is a lot more for us to do together, but we have a lifetime to discover all the different ways we can pleasure each other, and I’m afraid that, as a man, I need a little longer to recover than you do. Give me half an hour, though, and I’m more than happy to show you how it feels when you are beneath me instead.”

Her smile became practically coy. “I would like that, Ezra. Please.”

He groaned. “You are going to be the death of me, little Nymph. Here, let’s get beneath the blankets at least.”

Once they were warm beneath the covers, Cecilia curled up with her head in the crook of his arm. She melted against him, their legs tangled together, her hand resting on his heart, as though she had belonged there for all existence. Ezra lay still, enjoying the sensation of her hair tickling against his chin, until her breathing deepened and he knew that sleep had claimed her from him.

He did not move, did not want to disturb her from her slumber, in case she pulled away from him. It was suddenly very, very important to Ezra that Cecilia should never sleep anywhere but in his arms, even though a duchess customarily had her own suite of bed chambers, and even Jane, whom he had loved so dearly, had preferred that they sleep apart.

But right here, with his little Nymph so vulnerable, so trusting, and so damned arousing as she lay in the afterglow of their

coupling, Ezra felt a crack forming in the wall that he'd built around his heart. Cecilia had struggled alone for so long, and it was time she had someone in her corner she could rely on.

He stroked her hair tenderly, then lifted himself from the pillow just enough to kiss the top of her head.

“I swear I will do everything in my power to keep you safe, Cecilia. Whatever happens between us, I promise you will never have cause to worry about your safety again.”

Her breathing remained deep and steady. Ezra closed his eyes and soon joined her in contented slumber.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ezra awoke to the sound of a polite but insistent knocking on his bedroom door. The fire had burned down to nothing in the grate, and the curtains remained pulled shut. Cecilia was still asleep, her hair splayed across the pillow and a hand still on his chest. He reluctantly untangled himself from her without disturbing her slumber and tucked the blankets back around her sleeping form. He grabbed his banyan from a chair beside the window, belting it tightly at his waist before finally reaching the door.

The knocking stopped as soon as Ezra unlocked it, but the insistent visitor waited until he stepped out into his private sitting room—quietly closing the door behind him—to explain the nature of his visit.

“My apologies for disturbing you, Your Grace, but it is a little before midday, and I am given to understand that you have a large number of tasks to complete this afternoon,” said Anderson, his face as unreadable as ever. “Your valet seems to have taken a personal affront to find your bedroom door locked this morning, Your Grace, and despite my efforts to placate the man, he is indulging in a fit of melancholy where he has convinced himself that you intend to turn him out without a reference.”

Ezra groaned, dragging his face across his hand as he did so. “Has he been public with these complaints?”

“No, Your Grace. I convinced him it was in his best interests not to air any grievances until he spoke with you directly.”

Ezra glanced at the bedroom door, wishing he could climb back into bed with Cecilia and never worry about the outside world.

“You are a prince among men, Anderson. Remind me to increase your pay.”

“I shall, Your Grace. In the meantime, Lady Tilly has arranged for her maid to tend to the needs of the Duchess this morning.”

Ezra’s head snapped around. “The Duchess?”

Anderson, still stoic, inclined his head. “Indeed, Your Grace. We thought it best to inform the staff that you and Miss Wallace wed in secret yesterday, but that you are yet to announce it to the world because her relatives are being difficult.”

“Was this your idea, or Tilly’s?”

“I believe we hatched the plan together, as it were, to avoid any unpleasantness for Her Grace in the future. Speaking of which, Lord Chalmers called around earlier, and he seems rather insistent about speaking with you. Your head coachman took the opportunity to explain to the Viscount’s staff the

cause of their master's foul temper, so I confidently expect the entire city will soon know of your secret wedding.”

Ezra winced. While it was considerably less scandalous than the truth, marrying without the consent of Cecilia's grandfather would still result in a lot of uncomfortable gossip for them all. His own plan, such as it was, had been to help Cecilia dress and then pretend she had slept in the guest room, although now he thought about it, that was unlikely to pass muster when so many of his staff were awake and working from the crack of dawn.

He should have tried to keep control of his passions, but he did not regret it. Just the briefest memory of how she'd moaned out his name stirred his desire to return to bed and ravish her all over again.

He shifted his banyan and tried not to think about it.

“Is there a particular reason you opted for such an elaborate piece of subterfuge, Anderson? While Cecilia will indeed be the next Duchess of Marlborough, I know full well that you are aware no marriage has yet taken place.”

“Servants gossip as much as the nobility, Your Grace. Lady Tilly and I thought it best to control the nature of such tattle, rather than let them come to sordid conclusions on their own.”

Ezra gripped the butler tight on the shoulder. “You are a gentleman, Anderson. Anything I can do to repay you, let me know immediately.”

“I shall add it to the long list of favors I am yet to call in, Your Grace,” replied the butler, only a hint of mirth lurking in his eyes. “I shall send in your valet directly and have some breakfast laid out for you. Will Her Grace require a maid immediately?”

“No, let her sleep. The next few days will be difficult as it is,” said Ezra with one last, resigned look at his bedroom door. There would be no opportunity to return to Cecilia for the next few hours, so the least he could do was minimize any scandal before she woke up. Tonight, though, his sole aim was to return her to his bed and fulfill his promises to pleasure her.

His valet met him in his dressing room, and once Ezra had assured his faithful servant that he was not about to be turned off without reference, and then apologized profusely for forgetting to consider the man’s feelings due to his spontaneous ‘marriage’, harmony was restored. Dressed in his finest blue coat and fitted buckskin breeches, Ezra made his way down to the breakfast room, pausing only to receive the whispered congratulations of his oldest retainers.

“Brother dearest! How delightful of you to join us!” said Tilly loudly when he finally made it to his destination. “Mrs. Fletcher was very worried about disturbing you at such an hour, but I told her that you would be far more upset if they left.”

Ezra blinked a few times in surprise. Tilly, resplendent in an emerald-green walking dress rather than in her usual morning garb, was sitting at the dining table with a cup of steaming coffee and a plate of pastries. Opposite her, Cecilia’s landlady and a young woman he supposed was Mrs. Fletcher’s daughter Bessie, whose attention seemed to be wholly taken up by the footman standing beside the coffee urn. At Tilly’s side was a

fragile-looking boy of no more than eight or nine, who was merrily tucking into a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon.

“Very true, Tilly! Your servant, Mrs. Fletcher, Miss Fletcher, please do not get up on my account! While you, young sir, must be the young Master Robert I’ve heard so much about.”

The boy chewed and swallowed quickly. He got to his feet and gave a very formal bow to Ezra. “How do you do, Your Grace? I’ve seen you in your curricule when you come to pick up Cecy, and it is tremendous! May I look over it someday, if you please?”

Ezra raised his brows in surprise. Robert looked frail, as though he had only just finished battling a terrible illness, and yet he spoke with a confident air that was advanced for his years.

“I can do one better and take you for a turn about the park if you like.”

“No, thank you, Your Grace, it is the suspension I would like to look at.”

“Master Robert!” scolded Mrs. Fletcher in horrified tones. “His Grace won’t offer a ride to just anyone, you know! You should accept!”

“Nonsense, Mrs. Fletcher!” interjected Tilly before either Robert or Ezra could respond. “Who wants to waste their time going for a boring drive around Hyde Park? Now, if we are going to Gunter’s for ices, that would be different...”

The sudden look of hope in Robert's eyes was so charming, Ezra knew he had no choice. "An excellent point, my dear Sister. Master Robert, I will send word to the stables that you are allowed to look over any vehicle in my possession, and then we shall arrange an excursion for us all to visit Gunter's."

"Huzzah!" cheered Robert as the Fletchers whispered out their thanks. "Tilly, you were quite wrong about him."

"Well, I'm quite wrong about a lot of things. I did warn you that I am not very clever."

"I think you are very clever about lots of things," Robert said, giving her a reassuring pat on the arm, "but you were still wrong about this. I think I shall like having the Duke as my brother very much."

Ezra busied himself selecting some scrambled eggs and sausages from the buffet table, listening closely to the good-natured bickering between his sister and Cecilia's little brother. It was obvious they had met each other more than once, although Ezra had no idea when Tilly had been investing herself so much in the lives of the Wallace siblings.

"Well, if I'd known all it took were sweet ices to buy your affection, I should have dunked you head first into a vat of strawberry cream!" said Tilly, failing spectacularly at her pretense to be upset.

"Ooooh, could you imagine being dropped into an entire vat of strawberry cream?" said Robert wistfully. "You would have to eat your way out of it. How delicious!"

“How messy,” said Mrs. Fletcher with a shudder. “If you had to launder your own clothes, Master Robert, then you would not be so quick to wish them dirtied.”

“And if you actually had Ezra teasing and tricking you all your life, then you would not wish him to be your brother so quickly!” added Tilly.

The boy looked thoughtful as he finished chewing a mouthful of bacon. “But isn’t he my new brother already? You told Mrs. Fletcher that he’s married Cecy, and she’s my sister, so that makes him my brother. Isn’t that right, your Grace?”

Ezra hesitated a moment, not wanting to lie to those innocent blue eyes staring up at him.

“When a sister gets married then that’s right, you do indeed gain a brother,” he replied. “I always wanted to have a brother, which is why I kept trying to marry off Tilly. Alas, I failed.”

“No one wanted to marry Tilly?” asked Robert, his brows knit together in a frown. Tilly practically choked on a mouthful of coffee, while the poor Fletchers didn’t know whether to laugh or be mortified.

“No one I considered suitable to be my brother,” said Ezra solemnly, even as his sister glared daggers at him.

Robert sighed, then patted Tilly on the arm again in a consoling manner. “Well, I suppose if no one suitable turns up

before I am of age, then I can marry you instead,” he said, with all the bravery and stoicism of one facing the guillotine.

“Thank you, Robert, but I’d much rather have you as my brother if you please,” replied Tilly with uncharacteristic diplomacy. “In fact, I’m absolutely certain that I shall prefer *you* being my brother over Ezra.”

The young boy sighed with relief. “I am glad you think so. I don’t think I would like to be married. I remember when Father and Mother were still alive, and they were married. It seemed to involve a lot of kissing.”

The disgust he used to emphasize the last word had both Ezra and Tilly fighting to control their laughter, while James the footman was biting his lip so hard, Ezra was afraid he’d draw blood. Mrs. Fletcher, in contrast, embodied the serenity of a lady who knew she had tried her best but failed to prevent a loved one from doing something shocking.

And she did love Robert, he realized. Both Fletcher women did. And unless he was very much mistaken, Tilly was smitten by the young boy as well.

The door opened to admit Anderson, who politely informed the group that the guest rooms were now ready should they wish to inspect them, and that a toy chariot had been located for Master Robert, but it was in a sad state of disrepair, so perhaps he would not wish to play with it.

“It needs fixing?” asked the boy, looking like he might burst with excitement. “I’m rather good at fixing things, aren’t I,

Bessie? I should love to take a look at it, Mr. Anderson, if that's not too much trouble."

"It's up to His Grace, Robert," said Bessie in a loud whisper across the table. "He's the one you have to ask for permission."

"Pooh, no one asks Ezra's permission for anything," said Tilly cheerfully. "Everyone knows Anderson is the real power in the Marlborough Duchy. Now, if you would all be so good as to follow him up to your rooms, I would like a few moments to catch up with my brother on our discussions of this morning. James, you go with them as well, please, in case Robert requires someone to hold the train while he repairs it."

Everyone recognized the dismissal, and everyone trooped out of the room, leaving Ezra alone with his sister.

"How is Cecy?" asked Tilly once the door was closed. She took a delicate sip from her coffee cup.

"Asleep," he replied. Ezra rubbed at the back of his neck. "I have not behaved well here, have I?"

"It would have been better to have actually made her your duchess before spending the night with her, yes, but it is all in hand. Anderson, no doubt, informed you that the servants believe there was a secret wedding last night, and I have already been to see Emma this morning, so the Fairfaxes are happily preparing to deny their presence at the marriage whenever they are asked about it, thereby convincing half the *ton* they were actually your witnesses. The announcement of your engagement will be in the afternoon papers, but I will

leave the procurement of a marriage license and the arrangement of the wedding itself to you. I suggest sooner rather than later, of course.”

Ezra stared at her in admiration. “It appears I have underestimated you for years, dear Sister. I am impressed.”

“Our family cannot take another scandal,” she replied nonchalantly, but he could tell she was pleased. “I thought it best that Mrs. Fletcher stay here for a few weeks, to establish herself as some kind of paid companion for Cecy. It will not do for people to learn she was living in Spitalfields without a protector, and many of our friends and other lords have already met the Fletchers, so it will just confirm their assumptions to find her here for a while.”

“I had not considered that aspect, but yes, an excellent idea.”

“I also think you should help establish them in a better style of living. Mrs. Fletcher is an exceedingly proud woman, so will not accept your charity, but I think with some diplomacy, she could be convinced to serve as a governess for Robert, if only so that her daughter can pursue her dream of dressing hair for the *ton*.”

Ezra raised a brow. “You have thought of everything, haven’t you?”

“Not in the least. I have studiously avoided speaking to Lord Chalmers and leave you to deal with that mess. Speaking of which,” she paused as she motioned toward a letter on the table between them, “that thing arrived while I was out collecting the Fletchers. I thought it was from the Viscount,

but the writing does not match that on the note he gave to Anderson.”

Ezra put down his fork and picked up the letter instead. “Who delivered it?”

“The man would not give any details, apparently. How very cloak and dagger! Is it something important?”

Ezra, who had been reading through the note as his sister talked, folded it closed again.

“I am afraid to disappoint you, my dear, but it is nothing to do with our current situation, merely a message from a man trying to sell me a horse. Now if you will excuse me, I must go and sort out everything with Lord Chalmers before he drives both you and Anderson to drastic measures.”

He placed a light kiss on the top of Tilly’s head, before striding over to his study. He hated to lie to his sister, especially when she was working so hard to help him prevent a scandal, but he was not about to involve her in anything else that might put her reputation at risk. Once alone, he took out the note and read it again.

I know who and what your future bride truly is.

If you don't pay me for her, then everyone else will know, too.



The sound of curtains being thrown back broke Cecilia from her slumber, but she did not immediately realize where she was. By the time her memory flooded back, and she remembered she was alone and naked in Ezra's sheets, a young servant maid was standing beside the bed, wearing an encouraging smile.

“Sorry to wake you, Your Grace, but Master Robert is keen to show you his new chariot, and I'm afraid he'll come barging in of his own accord if he has to wait much longer. There is some warm water in the pitcher if you'd like my help washing.”

Cecilia blinked. “Your Grace?”

The maid's smile grew even wider. “It must still sound so strange to you, Your Grace! May I wish you happiness in your marriage to the Duke? Mr. Anderson made it clear that none of us are to share your secret outside the house on account of your grandfather, and I promise that not a soul employed here would break such confidence. Oh, I forgot to introduce myself! My name is Annie. I work for Lady Matilda, and she thought I might serve you well as a lady's maid until you employ your own girl.”

Cecilia could think of nothing to say, but since Annie was the type of cheerful soul who always had a great deal to chatter about, this did not lead to any sort of awkward silences. The maid helped her wash, and then dress in a beautiful white muslin that Cecilia presumed could only belong to Tilly, before quickly styling her hair into a plain but pretty style.

“Shall I take you to see Master Robert now, Your Grace?”
Annie asked.

“I would like that very much,” Cecilia murmured in response and followed the maid out of Ezra’s elaborate suite of rooms.

Ezra’s bedchamber! Her cheeks flamed at the very thought. When she had given in to her need and desire the night before, it had not occurred to her that his entire household of staff and his sister would know what she had done. And if her brother was here, then Mrs. Fletcher must know as well! Good Lord, it was enough to make her run away screaming, and whatever nonsense Annie had been spouting about her being married already was not about to be believed by everyone, surely? Tilly, the Fairfaxes, even the butler knew the truth! If only they had waited until they had been wed...

But no. No, she was glad they had not waited. She could still feel Ezra’s touch on her skin, and nothing would make her regret that. Perhaps there might be a little gossip about the nature of their marriage, but once they were married in truth, the *ton* would forget about it quickly enough.

“Here we are, Your Grace,” said the maid as they reached the far end of the corridor. She knocked politely on the door and then opened it.

Cecilia could scarcely breathe for the most extraordinary sight greeted her, causing a huge wave of happiness to crash over her.

The large room was a young boy’s dream, with a child-sized bed shaped like a cart that was drawn by a matching pair of rocking horses. A brightly colored play theater took over one corner of the room, and racks of clothes and props occupied the stage. There were empty boxes strewn about the floor, and

all manner of balls, hoops, bows and arrows, skipping ropes, and shuttlecocks. At the center of it all, Robert sat cross-legged on a small rug, several armies-worth of tin soldiers all about him, and a miniature carriage by his knee. At his side, Ezra lay stretched out on his stomach as he maneuvered some toy canons and a battalion of tin artillerymen into position.

“Cecy! Cecy, come look! I fixed the Duke’s toy carriage for him, and he said we should check if anything else needed fixing, and it doesn’t, but I have never seen so many soldiers, but he couldn’t remember how many he had exactly, but then it seemed a waste to just count them, and now he’s teaching me how to range for a battle, and oh Cecy, he says I can keep them for my very own if I let him still play with them sometimes!”

“How exciting!” Cecilia said the moment her brother paused for breath. Ezra, she noticed, had scrambled up to his feet and looked vaguely embarrassed to have been so obviously enjoying playing with tin soldiers. “May I see the carriage? How clever were you to be able to fix it!”

“Not very clever,” Robert replied with the tiniest of pouts. “It only needed a little oil on the back wheels, and the door to be screwed back on, but it is very splendid, don’t you think?”

“Splendid indeed,” she replied after giving it a solemn inspection. She nodded over at the assortment of balls and bats after she handed the carriage back to him. “Perhaps His Grace will allow you to take some of his toys to the park to play with.”

“They are Robert’s toys now, my dear,” said Ezra, rubbing her brother’s hair affectionately. “I have promised to teach him to

play cricket, and in exchange, he is going to teach me about machines.”

“I think you made a good decision to marry him, Cecy,” said her brother with a confident smile. “Now we can both live in the mansion, and Tilly says we can go to Gunter’s every day if we wish!”

“Speaking of which, why don’t you run along and tell Tilly to get herself ready, and then the four of us can go for some ices?” said Ezra with a kindly smile. Robert was up on his feet like a shot, not even stopping to shout something that might have been thanks before racing away down the corridor.

“Ezra, I—” began Cecilia, but got no further before his passionate kiss took charge of her mouth, and there was nothing to do but surrender to his arms.

“Good morning,” he said when they both came up for air.

She giggled. It would have been mortifying had he not giggled also.

“I’m sorry I did not think through the consequences of my actions last night, but I cannot regret it,” he said. “Do you? Regret it?”

“Never,” she replied, “but it does appear we got married last night, and I am afraid I have no recollection of the event.”

Ezra chuckled. “Ah, that would be my sister’s doing, but it has actually solved some issues for us both. Let us head down to the parlor and I will explain everything.”

His arm did not leave her waist while they walked, and over the next while, he told her about everything Tilly had done on their behalf, and his own actions to ensure they remained relatively scandal-free, considering their situation.

“The wedding will be in a few days—I had to delay as I wanted to ensure it is someone discreet—but once that is done, you need never worry again for either yourself or your brother. I am yet to speak directly with the Viscount despite his insistence on the urgency of the matter. It seems he will only converse on his own terms and objects to being summoned by a Duke.”

“Lord Chalmers has always been rather full of his own self-importance,” said Cecilia as they entered the parlor. “I do not see why you should converse with him at all.”

“Because I will not have him making mischief for you,” said Ezra, his expression turning stubborn and dark. “I offered you my protection, my dear, and I take my obligations seriously.”

Her heart sank a little at his word choice, but she forced the sensation down deep.

“I appreciate that, Ezra. I truly do.”

He drew her to the sofa before the fireplace, never letting go of her hands, not even once they were both sitting down.

“I gave you my word, Cecilia. I need you to know that nothing will change that, no matter what you tell me.”

His expression was solemn, although there were tiny creases of worry about his eyes.

“I understand,” she said carefully.

“So, I want you to be honest with me. About everything. I swear to you that nothing will change between us, you will still become my wife, and I will weather any storm at your side because I have promised to stand your friend.”

“Ezra, you are starting to worry me.”

He squeezed her hands in what Cecilia hoped was reassurance.

“I received an anonymous note today, claiming to know a dark secret about who and what you are. Since I have ample evidence of your identity, my dear, I can only think that perhaps, when you were desperate for money, you may have been forced to do something... distasteful, for your brother’s sake.”

Cecilia glanced up at the painting *Nymph at Sunrise* hanging above the fireplace and felt her heart begin to thunder in her chest. Few people knew her secret, and not one would stoop so low as to try to destroy her future happiness with Ezra.

“I don’t understand, why would anyone send such a note to you?” she asked. “What could they hope to gain?”

“Money. They always look for money.”

Cecilia’s mouth dropped open. “They are trying to blackmail you! But why? To be sure, it might be a little embarrassing for you, but I am hardly the first woman to support herself in such a way; there are several in the *ton* who do so for the sheer thrill of recognition! How am I any different? Wait— Ezra? Are you well? Why are you choking like that?”

Ezra released her hands and turned away for a moment, covering his face as she rubbed his back with concern. When he returned his attention to her, however, she had the sneaking suspicion he was trying very hard not to laugh.

“Cecilia, my dear girl, I think we may be talking at cross-purposes. What is the secret you think the blackmailer is threatening me with?”

She motioned toward the painting. “*Nymph*, of course.”

“Do you mean when you posed as Miss Watson, and your tricks to drum up interest in the sale? I have no concern about those since none of the men in question have recognized you despite meeting you several times. They would not believe it even if there was proof laid out before them.”

“What? No! I mean the painting itself. I mean...” She paused, wincing at the words she was about to say. “I mean that you were right.”

Ezra's brows knitted together. "Not words I hear often in this house. Cecilia, forgive me if I am being stupid, but do you mean to tell me that the terrible secret that the blackmailer is threatening to reveal is that you lied to me about *Nymph* being a genuine Wallace?"

"It *is* a genuine Wallace," she replied hotly, but then slumped as she knew the moment of truth had come. "It's just not a genuine Ambrose Wallace. It is mine."

He blinked slowly. "Yours," he repeated.

Irritation and anger welled up inside of her, and she crossed her arms over her chest. "Yes, mine! When father died, I sold off everything, save for his art supplies, for he always said that I was his best student, and I thought perhaps I could make a living through painting. Only it was much harder than I thought to convince anyone to give me a chance, for they refused to believe any of the work was mine, and accused me of passing off father's practice pieces as my own!"

"And you thought that if everyone was so convinced that your work was that of Ambrose Wallace, you may as well give them what they wanted," he said as he stared up at *Nymph*.

"It worked as well," she said, feeling mulish. "I even convinced you in the end."

"No, you never convinced me," he replied, the corner of his mouth threatening to burst into a smile.

“You still bought her, though,” said Cecilia. “You must have at least thought she might be my father’s.”

“I did not suspect she was painted by you, but I purchased *Nymph* because she is the most exquisite painting I have ever seen.” He paused, his eyes roving over her body as though something had just occurred to him. “My God, it is a self-portrait!”

Cecilia’s cheeks flamed with embarrassment.

“I could not afford a model,” she mumbled. “I was lucky Mrs. Fletcher had a full mirror she let me use.”

Ezra reacted in the way she least expected. He started to laugh, and then pulled her into his arms.

“Good lord, I have a half-naked portrait of my duchess hanging in the parlor!”

“No! I mean, she isn’t actually me, I just needed a reference to work from!”

He kissed the top of her head, his body still shaking with laughter. “Hardly the issue at hand, my dear! Well, that settles it; she shall be removed to my bedchambers, and any future paintings you do of your naked form will be for my private collection only.”

Cecilia lifted her head to look at him. “You are not angry at me for lying to you?”

He snorted. “Dear girl, I knew you were lying to me from the outset, but if the worst thing you have done is commit a little fraud that hurt nothing but my pride, then this would-be blackmailer can go hang for all I care.”

“I did not commit fraud!” She protested, but his raised brow killed any further attempts to play down her actions. “Fine, perhaps it was just a little, but Ezra, what else could I have possibly done? What else would have been so scandalous that... oh, my word!”

Cecilia sat up straight as the implication of his words hit home. At least he had the good grace to look sheepish.

“You would not have been the first young lady who took such a path if you had done so,” he said.

“Well, I did *not* take such a path. In fact, I did everything I could to ensure that I never had to set so much as a toe upon it,” Cecilia shot back, but there was no real anger to her words. She thought of Seth Bragg, and how close she had come to being dragged into that life. She shuddered.

Ezra leaned over and stroked her cheek gently. “Even if you had, Cecilia, it would not have changed anything. I promised to marry and protect you, and as unfashionable as it may be to say this out loud, I will never judge any woman for doing what she must to survive.”

Cecilia felt the tension leave her body, and she submitted to the embrace he wrapped around her.

“Do you know who might have sent the letter to me, my dear?” he asked softly.

“The only people who knew about the painting have no reason to say anything,” she replied, screwing up her face as she tried to think about who would have done such a thing. Other than Mr. Hope, whom she trusted implicitly, everyone else who knew about her deception was currently in the Marlborough mansion with her. And as much as Lord Chalmers had despised her father, she did not believe for a moment that the Viscount would risk his own reputation just to ruin hers.

There had been that moment in the theater, though. Cecilia had felt so sure that someone was watching her, someone with ill intent. There had been thousands of people there, however, and perhaps some of those who had been staring at Ezra’s box were jealous or angry that the only young, available duke on the marriage mart had been captured by a nobody such as herself. Surely, it must have been a coincidence that the letter arrived the morning after that sensation had come over her. After all, none of them knew her secrets.

In all the world, there was only one person she might consider an enemy, and he had been paid off in full. Bragg had wanted to own her. He had intended to use her for his own ends in ways she never wanted to consider. She thought of the women who had fallen into Bragg’s control over the years, thought of the other girls and widows out there who were left to survive in a world that preyed on those without a protector.

“I would like to help some of them,” she murmured into Ezra’s chest. “People like the Fletchers, and me, and even Old Lil. There must be a way I can protect them. I do not wish any of

them to be forced to do things they find distasteful just to survive.”

“You are a duchess now, my dear, or at least, will be one in the very near future,” he told her, then kissed the top of her head again. “It is practically a requirement of the *ton* that you busy yourself with some charitable work. What if we look into setting up some kind of shelter, or school, or whatever you know is most needed?”

“I would like that very much,” she said, glad he could not see the tears of gratitude pricking at her eyes.

“I am very glad you tried to commit fraud,” said Ezra with a lazy sigh. “I had no notion how dull my life had become before you.”

There did not seem to be any words to answer that observation, and so it was lucky that Robert, Tilly, and the Fletchers chose that moment to join them. Together, they made the short excursion to Gunter’s, and for the first time since her parents died, Cecilia dared to hope that everything would work out for the best.

If only she could shake the feeling that someone was watching her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The following day, the garden square, surrounded by its high iron fencing, was full of riotous laughter. Ezra had decided to take advantage of the good weather to show Robert how to play cricket, and before long, several gentlemen and their sons from adjoining houses had come to join them, the unspoken consensus being that the best way to teach a young lad was to play the game properly. Without anyone truly knowing how it happened, an impromptu picnic was in full swing, with servants coming from each of the houses with treats and refreshments as the women of the Square came to join in the fun. A few of the more sporting ladies, such as Tilly, quickly joined in as well, but Cecilia was content to sit on the blankets with Mrs. Fletcher and the other women, drinking chilled wine and cheering whenever it seemed appropriate.

“Do you know, I have not the faintest idea what is going on?” Cecilia whispered to Mrs. Fletcher as Ezra and his companions let out a whoop of celebration. “I thought the man with the bat was supposed to hit the ball, not knock over the stick things?”

“I think knocking over the sticks gives His Grace’s team a point.”

“Wait, there are teams?” asked Cecilia, and promptly gave up all hope of following what was happening. Robert, however, was evidently enjoying himself immensely. The younger boys had long since given up on the cricket match now their elders were getting competitive, and Cecilia had the pleasure of watching him rush around in a game of tag with a group of children the same age as himself.

“He’s looking healthier already,” said Mrs. Fletcher, following Cecilia’s gaze. “I know I was worried that he might not fully recover, but we’ve not been here two days, and he’s practically radiating good health.”

“He’s still very thin,” said Cecilia, unable to help herself from comparing him to the other boys running around the garden.

“Well, he’s not going to put on all the weight he lost in a short period, my girl, but His Grace seems determined to fatten the boy up, if our breakfast was anything to go by. I don’t think you need to worry on that matter.”

“He has taken a shine to Robert, hasn’t he?” she said, a sense of warmth expanding in her chest as she watched Ezra launch a ball in the odd, over-the-head manner that seemed so important to the game.

“To both of you, I’d wager,” replied her former landlady with an arch smile. “No need to blush like that! I am wiser to the world than you are, my dear, and although I was troubled at first about the... well, the ceremony, shall we say, I know a man of honor when I see one, and I know what love looks like too!”

“It is not about love, at least not in the romantic sense,” said Cecilia quickly, suddenly discovering that the grass at the edge of the blanket was the most fascinating plant she had ever seen. “His heart is still with his first wife, you see, but being a duchess offers status and security, and I think we shall become very good friends over time.”

“The human heart is far larger than people realize, and so often underestimated,” said Mrs. Fletcher in a matter-of-fact manner. “I’ve known many a widower who found love again after a terrible loss, and many a widow who found she could love both her old husband and her new one with equal fervor. His Grace might not be ready to examine that part of himself yet, but I know what I can see.”

Cecilia tore at the blades of grass before her, unable to respond with thanks because of the lump that had formed in her throat.

Do not hope, she told herself. Friendship and passion will be enough.

She had spent a second night in Ezra’s bed, even though he had given her the choice to sleep in her own, extensive chambers. Neither of them had wanted that, and so instead, they had given in to desire once again and tangled themselves together beneath his blankets. There was no feeling better in the world than his bare skin warm against hers, and she could not get enough of the encouraging growls he made when her hand stroked and teased his manhood before he slid himself inside her. By the firelight, she knew he wanted her body and could barely contain his need for the passion and intimacy they shared. By the light of the sun, Ezra proved he was fond of her company and displayed affection which, while obviously different from that he showed to Tilly, Robert, or even Anderson, did not feel like the adoration her parents had shared.

She forced herself to swallow despite the pain it caused. Affection and respect would be enough. They had to be. Perhaps her parents had shared a rare, once-in-a-century kind of love, even if it had not helped them or their children in the end. As for her grandparents—the Viscount treated his wife as a doll to display his wealth, and Lady Chalmers was terrified of incurring his wrath. Even Mr. Fletcher, no matter how much love he had shared with his wife, had provided enough for her care following his demise. Love was not enough for a woman who wanted to survive.

But friendship would.

“Your Grace, Your Grace, there’s a man who wishes to speak with you,” said a small voice before her. Cecilia looked up at a young girl, about seven or eight years old, whom she thought had been introduced as a member of the family living on the opposite side of the square from Ezra. The name, both of the family and the child, escaped her.

“A man, you say? Is it one of the gentlemen playing cricket?”

The little girl shook her head, making a multitude of ribbons dance around her bonnet. “No, Your Grace, he’s over by the fence past the oak tree. He fetched my ball back when Oscar threw it away from me, and when he gave it back asked me to tell you that he wants to speak to you. He said he was your friend, which meant I can talk to him because everyone knows duchesses are only friends with good people. Is that right, Your Grace?”

The sense of being watched returned like a crashing wave, drenching Cecilia from head to toe as she did everything in her

power to maintain her outward composure. Mrs. Fletcher, her eyebrows knitted together, was searching in vain to catch a glimpse of this mysterious man. Cecilia leaned forward and tickled the little girl under the chin, who giggled in response.

“You should always listen to your Mama and Papa and only speak to people that they know themselves, little one, even if they say they are friends with the King himself. Now, you run along and make sure you stay where your nurse or parents can see you, please. Thank you very much for delivering the message.”

“He said just you, Your Grace,” said the girl quickly as Mrs. Fletcher went to rise to her feet. “He said it was very important that it only be you because he did not want something bad to happen. He’s over there, just past the oak tree, although you can’t see him. Promise!”

“I believe you, my dear,” Cecilia reassured the child, who then ran off to find her sibling and loudly declare that she was now friends with the Duchess.

“You should tell His Grace immediately, let him deal with whatever this is,” said Mrs. Fletcher firmly. “Nothing good ever comes from men lurking in the shadows demanding that you meet them alone.”

“The child said he is outside of the park, so there are railings between us,” said Cecilia with more confidence than she felt. “I do not want to worry the Duke unnecessarily and, for all we know, it might be a friend of my father’s looking for some work, or help.”

“That does not make the situation safe.”

Cecilia got to her feet, then brushed down her skirts. She thought about the letter Ezra had received and chosen to ignore. “Be that as it may, I want to know who this fellow is and hear what he has to say. I will stand so that you can see me, and if I do disappear from your sight, then you have my blessing to raise a hue-and-cry over it.”

“I do not like this,” her companion repeated but said nothing further on the matter.

Pretending to take a turn about the gardens to refresh herself, Cecilia slowly made her way to the oak, pausing several times to converse with her new neighbors, or to applaud some clever piece of sportsmanship she did not understand in the least. Finally, she reached the tree, careful to remain on the side of the trunk that allowed Mrs. Fletcher to still see her. A gaudily dressed gentleman in a bottle-green coat and blue breeches leaned against the fence, his back to her. In his hand was a small knife that he causally flicked into the air before catching it over and over again. Cecilia felt her hands shake for, even without seeing the man’s face, she knew who he was.

“Hello, Mr. Bragg,” she said calmly. “May I ask why you wish to speak to me?”

The moneylender turned to favor her with a broad grin that would have been at home on a crocodile.

“Miss Wallace—ah, my apologies, it’s Your Grace now, so I have been told. You got your pretty talons into that grieving fool and made him marry you. I confess I did not know you

were capable of such deviousness, my girl, or I would have made use of you much sooner.”

“I am not devious,” she replied through gritted teeth. “Now what do you want, Mr. Bragg? You have been repaid in full and have no hold over me.”

“You did pay me back, I will give you that,” he said with a polite incline of his head, “but I do not remember agreeing to let you out of my employ.”

“I was never in your employment,” she replied with disgust.

Bragg chuckled. “Do you think anyone will believe that, especially when I have proof of how much debt I held over you? Do you think your duke will believe that you did not offer your services at my behest? I have connections in the *ton*, little girl. I’ve procured rarer treasures than you to fill their carnal needs.”

“His Grace would believe me over you,” said Cecilia. Ezra would believe her beyond question, and that knowledge gave her strength.

“It is quite possible you have him so bewitched in bed that he will believe anything you say,” said Bragg with a thoughtful nod. “But will the rest of the *ton* share his faith in your character? Do you think they will stand by you, or the Duke, or any of his family when I give them proof that you are nothing more than a doxy willing to exchange favors for a morsel of food?”

“You would not dare,” she growled at him, anger starting to replace the fear in her chest. “You forget, Mr. Bragg, that I have as many resources as you do now, and I will not allow you to control me any longer. You may do your worst, but I will see the Runners are set upon you immediately and will do my utmost to see you hang if you ever threaten my husband or my family again.”

The moneylender looked surprised. “It appears the kitten has claws,’ he said.

“I have far worse than claws. Our business is concluded, Mr. Bragg, and I ask that you never darken my doorstep again.”

“Your boy has improved,” said Bragg, nodding in the general direction of her brother. “Perhaps he is old enough to be the man of the house now, but he is certainly young enough to appeal to some of my more specialized clients.”

“I would kill you first,” hissed Cecilia, but the moneylender found her reaction amusing.

“Then pay me, dear Cecilia. Pay me what I would have earned from you. A golden guinea for every evening you would have been mine, delivered to my home tomorrow. If you fail me, then there will be disastrous consequences for your loved ones. Perhaps the Duke’s horse will stumble and throw him. Perhaps that sister of his will commit one indiscretion too many for the *Beau Monde* to forgive her. Your brother might fall sick once again, or that old landlady of yours might discover her home swallowed up in flames. Any of them might be your doing, Cecilia, for the wont of a few hundred gold guineas.”

“Get out of my sight, or I shall have you arrested,” she snapped, turning on her heel to stalk back to Mrs. Fletcher. Bragg’s laughter followed her, mingling with the joyous laughter of the impromptu cricket match and picnic.

Bragg was going to do something, she knew it. He was going to find a way to hurt her and destroy her unless she submitted to his demands.

“Was it something important, my dear? You look very flustered,” said Mrs. Fletcher.

“It was Seth Bragg,” she said flatly, doing no more than blink at Mrs. Fletcher’s shocked gasp.

“I just knew he would cause you problems; he never lets anyone go, not even after they have paid all their debts to him,” the woman said, looking to be on the verge of tears. “You have to tell the duke at once, Cecilia. You must get ahead of this thing.”

Cecilia thought of Bragg’s threats to ruin her social standing, and how concerned Ezra had been about the note he’d received the day before.

“No, I have dealt with the matter,” she said firmly. “It must have been Bragg at the theater, and at Gunter’s, who was making me so nervous. I will not let that man cause any more mischief.”

“If you are sure, my dear,” said Mrs. Fletcher, casting a longing look over at Ezra. “But I still think you should tell him

everything.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Twixham's ball was everything Ezra expected it would be. The decorations were contrived, the guests were self-important, the band was insipid, and the champagne was watered down. Despite this, everyone who was anyone was in attendance at his cousin's party, and Sophie was preening because of it. She did not care in the least that the only reason people were there was because of the rumors surrounding his marriage. People wanted to meet Cecilia, and perhaps even witness some gossip-worthy event at her expense. He doubted that Sophie cared; as hostess of the ball, she was right in the thick of it, and loving every second. Usually, it would have annoyed Ezra that his cousin was indulging the wagging tongues of the *ton*, introducing Cecilia with the words, "May I introduce you to Miss Wallace? She is our secret Duchess, you know!" But anything that protected his family from scandal was to be tolerated. He would finally be able to marry her officially in a matter of days, so it was best for everyone involved to believe the lies Tilly had so carefully manufactured to protect them from all from his own misbehavior.

Not that he could bring himself to regret it. Every night Cecilia spent in his arms was to be celebrated.

"Don't let her bully you," he'd managed to whisper to Cecilia before she was whisked away from him. It seemed the crowds

were determined to separate them in a divide-and-conquer strategy that allowed the *Beau Monde* to seek out the juiciest *on dits* as quickly as possible. Ezra was an expert in these games and found it easy to play off his genteel attackers, but Cecilia was not so experienced in the ways of the *ton*.

He need not have worried. She looked every inch the Duchess of Marlborough in her blue silk gown trimmed in silver brocade, while the Fletcher girl, Bessie, had achieved something magical with her hair that was modern and yet fitting for the goddess Athena. Many envious looks were being thrown her way, and he'd overheard at least two ladies begging her to tell them who dressed her hair. Ezra smiled at that. Tilly and Cecilia were working on a plan to establish young Bessie as the premier stylist in London, and he'd also been tipped off by Anderson of the romance blossoming between his footman James and the Fletcher girl. His sister could barely contain her excitement and was practically chewing her fingers off to stop herself from meddling.

Speaking of his sister, Ezra had not caught sight of her since their arrival. It was unusual for her not to be at the center of attention, but he supposed she might be choosing to keep a low profile and allow Cecilia to shine.

A moment's reflection made him realize she was most likely just trying to avoid Cousin Sophie. Still, he had no desire to go searching for his errant sibling, nor any inclination to stray too far from his almost-wife. She was holding her own admirably, but that did not mean she was comfortable in this new role. For a start, he could tell Cecilia was distracted, although he doubted anyone else at the Twixham ball had noticed. At first, he'd thought she was overwhelmed and looking to him for reassurance, but her eyes roamed over the crowd as well, as though she were checking that everyone was who they claimed to be.

Ezra frowned. The threatening note was concerning, and he noticed that she held herself like a person on guard against an attack. Perhaps it was just nerves—the *ton* had a way of striking fear into the coldest of hearts—but some sixth sense was telling him that not all was well with her.

“I hear I am to wish you happy, Your Grace, but in a subtle and convoluted way that only hints at nuptials completed in secret for undisclosed reasons,” came a male voice from behind him. Ezra turned, and then smiled when he recognized the speaker.

“Mr. Hope, how good to see you. I have been receiving many such statements all evening, and Miss Wallace is inexplicably being referred to as Her Grace. It is a puzzle to me, indeed.”

His fellow art collector smiled in appreciation, but raised his glass of wine toward Ezra, nonetheless.

“You are a lucky man, Marlborough. You should remember that.”

“I have no intention of ever forgetting,” he replied. His eyes went back to Cecilia as he watched her laugh at some unheard jest from a woman he barely recognized. “Do you know her well, Hope?”

“Knew her father,” said Hope after taking a mouthful of wine. “He never was quite right after his wife died, and he took to letting Cecilia deal with the business side of things since she was about fourteen. He was an incredible artist. Kind-hearted man. Not strong enough to be a lone parent, truth be told. Even

when he was alive, he was not the best of fathers. Loving, yes. Responsible? Not in the least.”

This frank description stirred up a feeling of protective anger in Ezra’s chest—it rankled him that they had been deprived of such support when they were at their most vulnerable.

“Why did you not look out for her and the boy, then, Hope? You never struck me as the type to leave children destitute.”

The look the older man flashed him was not a friendly one. “Cecilia knows far less of the world than she believes she does, Your Grace. One day it might behoove you to inquire Mrs. Fletcher why she charged so little rent to the Wallaces, or how I was always able to find a buyer for one of Ambrose’s paintings whenever they had the need to sell one. I have no legal obligation to them, and yet I always made sure they had shelter and food, even though they were unaware of my meddling. What else did you expect of me? I was not about to let the world and my wife believe there was anything improper in my relationship with the children now, was I?”

Ezra rubbed at his chin, thinking about how the *ton* would have twisted and corrupted Hope’s intentions toward Cecilia. “My apologies, that was poorly worded of me and, of course, you have done more for them than anyone had the right to expect of you. I fear I simply regret not having known them sooner. I wish I had been able to protect her.”

Hope gave a grunt of laughter. “Not surprised she has that effect on you. A charming girl, and a talented artist to boot. Seems like a good match for a young collector such as yourself.”

“I count myself fortunate to have met her, and I suppose I have you to thank for that,” said Ezra with a sideways glance.

Hope gave the tiniest of shrugs. “I may have suggested your name as a potential buyer of *Nymph at Sunrise*.”

“For which kindness I am forever in your debt, it seems. There is something I would like to know, however.”

“Ask and I shall answer to the best of my ability.”

Ezra looked thoughtfully at his glass of wine. “Is there anyone you can think of who may wish the Wallace siblings harm? A disgruntled student of their father, perhaps? Someone who may have some kind of hold over them both?”

Mr. Hope pursed his lips as he considered the question. “No one I would seriously consider a danger to them. Why do you ask?”

Ezra thought of the anonymous note, and how nervous Cecilia had seemed ever since.

“A threat was made, but I do not know how seriously to take it. I can think of no one who would wish them harm, or who could gain from such an act.”

“Chalmers, I suppose,” mused Hope as he swirled the wine about his glass. “I would never call the old boy malicious, but his hatred for Ambrose poisoned any love he ever held for his daughter. There is also the moneylender.”

“Moneylender?” Ezra repeated.

Hope nodded. “Yes, a crass little mushroom with rooms on Artillery Lane. Ambrose ended up in deep with the man, and he’s not well known for being the patient, kindly sort, not even with women. He’s as likely to slit their throats as take their coin, but Cecilia would not let anyone but herself deal with him. I surmise that whatever you paid her for *Nymph* went toward clearing those debts with the moneylender. Brack, I think his name was. No, Bragg. Like I said, not the type of man I would be comfortable sharing a drink with.”

“Thank you for the information. I shall look into it.”

Hope motioned toward the far side of the room with his glass. “You may not have a choice. It looks like the Viscountess is making her way over to you right now.”



“Of course, Her Grace—my apologies, I mean *Miss Wallace*—is a dear, dear friend of mine, so I am sure I can persuade her to attend your little card party with me. Isn’t that right, Cecilia?” said Lady Twixham, rapping Cecilia’s fingers with her fan just a little bit harder than necessary.

“I would love to attend, Lady Graymouth,” Cecilia replied to the older woman before her. Tilly had given her strict instructions about which people she should court and whom she should try to fob off, and Lady Graymouth was apparently a prime target for friendship. “Lady Matilda has often told me how superior your entertainments are, and I am grateful that you should think to invite me alongside my new sister.”

Lady Twixham—or Cousin Sophie, as Tilly insisted on calling her—gripped Cecilia’s arm tightly, but she was easily ignored while Lady Graymouth made some flattering comments about looking forward to getting to know the Marlboroughs better. Any feelings of gratitude toward Sophie for introducing her to people were quickly dispelled when it became obvious that the only thing Lady Twixham cared about was her own social standing, and that she viewed Cecilia—and even Tilly, come to think of it—as nothing more than tools in her arsenal. As such, Cecilia was taking a perverse enjoyment in subtly annoying Ezra’s cousin by refusing to defer to her.

After all, Cecilia would soon be a duchess, and the majority of people believed they were privy to the secret intelligence that she already held that title. As Her Grace, the Duchess of Marlborough, Cecilia would not be expected to defer to anyone who was not royal, and she would be dashed before she let someone like Sophie Twixham establish authority over her.

Her eyes flitted around the room again, looking for any sign that Bragg or one of his cronies had infiltrated the ball. Sophie was far from discerning in her guest list, as she clearly favored quantity over quality, but so far Cecilia had not seen any trace of the moneylender. She knew he had no control over her, not any longer, but his threats had left her uneasy. Perhaps it was time to tell Ezra everything, although she was loathe to bring yet another problem to the table for him to solve. He had already done so much for her, for Robert, and even the Fletchers. He’d even forgiven her for lying about the painting. Cecilia did not want to cause him any further worry, not when she had given him so little in return for his kindness.

Companionship and passion. That was all he wanted from her. Affection perhaps. Just not love.

“Miss Wallace, a pleasure as always! I believe you are promised to me for the next set,” said Lord Fairfax, appearing from the crowds like a longed-for miracle.

“Oh, yes, I believe I am! Please, excuse me, Sophie,” said Cecilia, hoping her hostess could not hear the relief in her voice.

“Looked like you needed a rescue,” Ezra’s friend murmured in her ear as they made their way to the dance floor. “It’s just a country dance, so if you prefer, we can take a turn on the verandah.”

She patted his arm in appreciation of his diplomacy. “It is fine, my lord; I am capable of country dances! Besides, this way, I only have to talk with you and not worry about Sophie commandeering me once again. Where is Ezra, do you know?”

Lord Fairfax strained to look over the heads of the crowd but to no avail. “He was watching you from the doorway a few moments ago. Hope was with him, but I can’t see either of them now. Damn—I mean, dashed if I know where Lady Tilly has got to as well. The Twixhams always invite too many guests to their balls. We would not have come usually, but we thought it best to lend you our support during your ordeal.”

They joined the set of dancers forming up, and Cecilia found her mood lightening in response to her good-natured companion. “Indeed; everyone is so determined to let everyone else know that they are in on my secret marriage, they are not even attempting to keep anything a secret at all!”

“Sorry about that,” Lord Fairfax replied cheerfully. “My sister and I have faithfully told everyone who asks us that we were most certainly not witnesses to your clandestine marriage, so naturally, they have all assumed we were party to the whole thing.”

“People are very strange,” said Cecilia, but then the dance began, and her attention was taken up with a fast-paced jig that had almost all of the participants laughing as they tried to keep up. Cecilia caught a brief glimpse of Tilly and an unknown man as Lord Fairfax twirled her about, but it was otherwise impossible to think about anything but the placement of her own two feet. By the time the band finished their last note, Cecilia could feel herself grinning broadly, even as she struggled to catch her breath.

“I have not enjoyed myself so much for an age!” she told Lord Fairfax as he offered her his arm. “However, if I do not get some refreshments in me, I fear I shall faint dead away.”

“Marlborough would have my head if I allowed anything so scandalous to happen to you, so lemonade it is!” he replied, steering her away from the men trying to capture her hand and attention for the next set of dances.

“What do you mean by that?” Cecilia asked him, her heart still pounding from the energetic dance. “That Ezra would have your head, I mean.”

Lord Fairfax favored her with a kind but condescending smile. “My friend is constitutionally incapable of disguising his feelings for others. That’s why we’ve all been so dashed worried about him the last few years; nothing made him happy, or sad, or even angry, except for art. Then he met you, and all of a sudden, we have Ezra back. Why do you think

Tilly, Emily, me, and even that crotchety old butler of his have decided that we will love you, too?”

She swallowed the painful lump in her throat. “If you keep saying such lovely things to me, Lord Fairfax, then you shall make me bawl my eyes out like a baby.”

“Please, God, no!” he replied, looking horrified at the suggestion. “Let’s fetch that lemonade and get you back to Marlborough before you open the waterworks. That way, he can’t hold me responsible!”

Cecilia managed to keep her composure by allowing Lord Fairfax to share light-hearted gossip about the people they passed by, and while the lemonade was in desperate need of sugar, it did at least quench her thirst. By the time they had circled the ballroom twice, however, it became obvious that Ezra was not to be found.

The memory of the encounter with Seth Bragg loomed large in her mind. The moneylender could not have stolen Ezra away from the ball, could he? It seemed a ridiculously foolish thought, but when she remembered she had not seen Tilly since the country dance either, she began to feel panic well up inside her chest.

“They will not have gone far, Cecy. Lady Twixham has probably accosted them and is forcing them to say nice things to her guests.”

“No, Cousin Sophie is by the French windows talking with your sister,” said Cecilia, her eyes flitting from face to face to face as they pushed their way through the crowd. “Oh, how am

I ever to find anyone in this dreadful squeeze! They would not have left without me, would they?"

"Never," replied Lord Fairfax without hesitation, "but we can go to the entry hall to ask if Tilly decided to fetch her shawl and venture outside."

"An excellent idea," she replied and allowed him to lead the way through the crush of people.

It was a little less crowded away from the ballroom, but there were still so many faces, she was hard-pressed to know whom she was acquainted with and who was a stranger. There was so much chatter and noise coming from the various entertaining spaces the Twixhams had opened up for their guests, she could not pick out a familiar voice either. Her hosts were notorious for inviting all and sundry to their balls, and it was painfully obvious that anyone in a well-cut suit could gain entrance to their home. Even someone like Seth Bragg, if he put on his charm and manners. It was not a comforting thought.

"Here, stay put while I go and ask the servants if they have seen Lady Tilly," Fairfax commanded as he maneuvered her to stand beside a Grecian pillar. "Do not go anywhere, or I fear I will not find you again, and I hope I've already established that Marlborough would have my guts for garters if he knew!"

She nodded, impatient for him to go and find her answers, and watched until the crowd swallowed him up.

Balls, Cecilia decided, were the most ridiculous, pretentious things! Now she was alone and away from Sophie's influence, none of her fellow guests had the slightest idea of her identity,

and thus did not trouble to so much as glance in her direction. She tapped her foot rapidly on the tiled floor, but the silk slippers did not even make a satisfying sound.

“Ezra, where are you?” she muttered to no one in particular.

“Cecilia! Miss! Miss, I’ve been looking for you!”

A familiar voice sliced through the surrounding cacophony, and even if no one else heard it, the panicked tones of the usually silent Bessie struck Cecilia like a church bell. The girl looked horribly out of place in a serviceable black cape and plain black bonnet, but the handsome footman James followed in her wake, causing people to step aside as though she were Princess Charlotte herself.

“Bessie, what is it? What has happened?” she asked, gripping the girl’s wrists as soon as Bessie reached her.

“It’s Robert! Oh, I swear to you he was only out of my sight for a second! He said he dropped one of His Grace’s tin soldiers at the park and was distraught at the idea of losing it, so we went back to search, and then, when I turned around, he was gone!”

“Robert is gone?” repeated Cecilia. Bessie kept on talking, but all the sound was sucked out of the world in a rush of air, and Cecilia knew what it was to drown right there on dry land.

Bragg has taken my brother. He warned me to pay up, but I did not, and so now, he has taken my brother. Imagine what he will do to Ezra given half a chance.

The world rushed back in.

“—and so, Mr. Anderson sent James and me to find you and the Duke, but we have the money that was demanded in the note, so we can set out as soon as you are both ready.”

“A ransom? Yes, of course, he would do such a thing. Listen, this whole thing is a terrible squeeze, and I will not leave my brother in Seth Bragg’s hands for an instant longer than necessary. James, go and flag down a hansom cab. You will be our escort to Artillery Lane. Bessie, you must wait here for Lord Fairfax to return, and then inform him that I had a headache, so decided to return home and wait for His Grace there.”

“But shouldn’t I tell him about Robert?”

“That is the last thing I want you to do,” Cecilia said firmly. “Bessie, you know what kind of man Seth Bragg is. I refuse to drag Ezra into that his clutches, not after everything he has done for me—for us. Pass on my message to Lord Fairfax, and then take a hackney or a chair back to the mansion. Do not fight me on this, Bessie! James will protect me, and I shall ensure that your beau returns in one piece. Do you understand?”

Bessie lapsed back into silence but nodded her head. Cecilia impulsively kissed her on the cheek, and then rushed out after the footman to save her brother.



The Viscountess did not utter a word until they were out in the gardens, and even then, she waited until they were as far from the other guests as propriety allowed before she deigned to speak.

“I know you are not married to my granddaughter, Your Grace. At least not officially,” she said.

“I have been truthful about the matter,” Ezra replied carefully. Lady Chalmers was not an imposing woman, nor did she have any hint of a temper hanging about her, but she moved along the garden paths with such regal bearing that he could almost believe her capable of ordering his head lopped from his shoulders.

“And the *ton* simply believed what it wanted to,” said the Viscountess, the smallest hint of grim humor underscoring her words. “Let me speak plainly. Have you compromised Cecilia?”

“Plain speaking, indeed,” said Ezra, genuinely surprised at her words. “May I ask what concern it is of yours?”

“She is my granddaughter,” snapped Lady Chalmers, whipping around to face him like an angered snake. “Her well-being is very much my concern.”

“Forgive my insolence, but did you not forsake any responsibility for Cecilia before she was even born?”

Lady Chalmers flinched. Her shoulders dropped, and she turned her face away from him.

“I deserve that comment, even as I deny its truth. I made sure my daughter had some little income, and that it passed to Cecilia on her mother’s death. It was not much, but it was enough to keep a roof over their heads. I thought Ambrose clever enough to keep some money aside for their future, but it was not until recently that I learned of the debts he had incurred.”

“You did something, it seems, and I will grant you that much, Lady Chalmers, but what Cecilia and Robert needed more than money was support. God knows how lost I was after my wife died; it was only my family who prevented me from following her.”

“Do you not think I needed them, too?” she asked, her eyes wet with tears as she turned her gaze back upon him. “I have mourned my daughter every moment since she left my home, and I have hated Lord Chalmers ever since for forcing us apart. You do not know what he is like, what power he wields over me because of the children.”

There was such anger, such bitterness in her voice, he could not help pitying her, just a little, for the marriage she was trapped inside. He knew more than one affable lord who was a tyrant in their own home; it was part of why he was in no rush to see Tilly married off.

“I am sorry you lost your daughter, my lady, but I fail to see why the Viscount is so keen to see his grandchildren put in harm’s way.”

Her bark of laughter shrouded a sob. “Good God, man, are all of you so blind? My husband could not care less about Cecilia

and Robert, but he uses them as a threat against me. He has never forgiven me for helping my daughter marry dear Ambrose, and while they lived, his only power was to deny me access to them.”

Ezra felt a cold sense of dread at the implication of her words.

“But after their deaths and no wills made, he became their legal guardian by default.”

“Do you know what he threatened to do?” she whispered. “Boarding school for Robert, far away, with no way to write to his sister, for she would have been locked away in the asylum the moment she showed even a hint of her mother’s stubborn nature.”

“What kind of man would do such a thing?”

“A vindictive one,” she replied. “The only reason he has not done the same to me is because I am well-connected enough to have people ask uncomfortable questions should I disappear.”

“So, you had to make it seem as if you did not care for your grandchildren,” said Ezra, part of him wanting to pull her into his arms and let her cry out all of her pain.

“Indifference,” she sighed. “I made it seem that I was only interested in them should they come to live with us, but that I was indifferent to their fate should they be left to fend for themselves.”

“And you let the rest of the world, including Cecilia and Robert themselves, think the same.”

Her eyes darkened, her jaw set, and she straightened up before him. “Yes, but I care about them very much, and I will not let you nor anyone else force Cecilia into a future she does not wish for. If you have ravished my granddaughter, Marlborough, understand that I do not care. If she does not wish to marry you for her own heart, I will steal her away and disappear to Europe before I let you touch her again.”

Ezra fought the urge not to step back in the face of her determined anger. “I swear to you, Lady Chalmers, that to the best of my knowledge, Cecilia is as happy to marry me as I am to have her as my wife.”

“Do you love her?” asked the Viscountess.

Ezra swallowed hard. “I am inordinately fond of her, my lady, and have deep respect for her character. I think those things are worth more than love and will last longer to boot.”

She stared at him in silence. It dragged on for what felt like hours until Ezra was sorely tempted to stare at his feet like an errant schoolboy.

“I will speak with her myself, then,” she said finally. “She may not appreciate my meddling, but I must be certain that she is happy with her fate and not marrying you with the false belief that a title will protect her from the tyranny of a bad husband.”

“I would never be a bad husband to her,” he protested, but the way the Viscountess scoffed made her opinion on all husbands perfectly clear.

“Ezra! Ezra, where on earth have you been, I’ve been looking for you!” shouted Tilly as she came running down the garden path, Lord Fairfax hot on her heels.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, able to see the worry on his sister’s face even at a distance. He walked quickly toward her, his arms outstretched to catch her as she raced toward him.

“Robert has been taken, and Cecy has gone as well!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*A*fter paying the jarvey for conveying them to their destination, Cecilia and James made their way down the dimly lit cobbles of Artillery Lane until they reached the premises of Seth Bragg. The Bruiser was outside, leaning against the door with studied nonchalance, but his eyes were firmly fixed on James. Cecilia started to consider the foolishness of her plan; while the two men were certainly of a height, the footman was lean and wiry, whereas the Bruiser was the size of a bull. She swallowed, hoping that violence would not be necessary.

“I am Cecilia Wallace, and I am here to see Mr. Bragg,” she said loudly, although there was no one else in the street to hear her declaration.

The Bruiser didn’t move, although his eyes shifted focus from James to Cecilia. He chewed, open-mouthed, on a piece of tobacco, but did not say a word.

“I said I am here to see Mr. Bragg,” she repeated. “It is an important business matter, and I would wager he will be deeply disappointed if you end up costing him financially with your insolence.”

The Bruiser grinned at that, showing off his stained teeth.

James stepped forward. “Now, see here, my fellow,” he began, but his action caused the Bruiser to straighten up, and the grin disappeared from his face.

Good grief, he’s even taller than James, thought Cecilia, alarmed, fighting the urge to laugh hysterically at her stupidity. Of course, Bragg was not going to make this easy on her. He had kidnapped her brother, for God’s sake! If she had any sense at all, then she would have brought an army with her.

“Stand down, James,” she said quietly.

“I’ll not have you treated with disrespect, Your Grace.”

“I will not see you pummelled to an inch of your life; do you think Bessie would ever forgive me? Please, James, stand down. I am ordering it.”

The footman wavered between his perceived duty and her command but, eventually, took a step back. The Bruiser did not move his body, but the grin returned with enough insolence that Cecilia knew it was designed to provoke James further.

The bell inside Mr. Bragg’s establishment jangled as the narrow-faced secretary opened the door just a crack.

“Let her in, will you, he says he’s been expecting her. Might as well let her pet lapdog in as well; he’ll be no more of a threat

in here than he was out there,” sneered the horrid little man.

“Thank you,” said Cecilia with all the calm dignity she could muster, while she hoped James would be able to keep his temper in light of the other men’s provocation.

They stepped inside the shop, the Bruiser following them. The bell once again jangled merrily as the door was closed, but it was the faint click of the key being turned in the lock that made Cecilia spin around in panic.

“I think it’s time for a little nap, miss, don’t you?” said the clerk with a nasty smile.

Someone grabbed her from behind, pressing a white rag to her mouth and nose as the Bruiser brought his fist down hard onto the head of her footman. The world began to twist backward, and Cecilia reached out to James for assistance but before she could finish the thought, she faded to blackness.



Bessie, still waiting in the vestibule of the Twixham’s home, had told Ezra everything, even the part where Cecilia had told her to lie to him to protect him.

“Foolish, courageous girl,” he muttered, picturing Cecilia’s face when she’d ordered poor Bessie to cover for her. “What did you think it would achieve?”

“I rather think she was trying to solve her problems on her own,” said Lady Chalmers from the other side of the carriage.

“It seems I have underestimated her affection for you. Whether you deserve it remains to be seen.”

Ezra grunted in response, not in the mood to deal with the hostility of the Viscountess, especially not when he was currently riding in her landau. It had taken more effort than he'd appreciated convincing Tilly that she must take Bessie home in their carriage, and she'd argued vociferously with him until Fairfax—that greatest of friends—had somehow impressed upon her the importance of having someone at home should Robert have managed to escape by himself. With that problem taken care of, Lady Chalmers had offered the use of her vehicle to take them to Artillery Lane, pausing only briefly at Fairfax's lodgings so he could fetch his pistols for them.

“Better safe than sorry,” he'd said as he placed the box into Ezra's hands.

“I would prefer the coachman to remain with me, but my two footmen will accompany you to recover my granddaughter,” continued Lady Chalmers, as though they had been conversing pleasantly for the whole drive. “You will find them capable with their hands, should it come to that.”

“Will your husband not object when he learns of this?” asked Ezra, not yet in charity with the older woman.

“What makes you think he will learn of it? These are *my* men, Your Grace. They are loyal to me.”

The certainty with which she spoke was oddly soothing. He had never given her any consideration at all before meeting

Cecilia and, from what little he knew of her, he had formed an opinion of her as a weak and feeble lady, utterly dominated by a tyrant of a husband. After this evening, he was going to have to revise that opinion. Ezra did not agree with how the Viscountess had handled family matters, and it was up to Cecilia and Robert to decide whether they wanted to forgive her, but he would be lying if he claimed there was not a grudging respect for Lady Chalmers growing inside him. There was an odd kind of strength there, or at least a conviction that she was not about to let all the sacrifices she had made for her grandchildren be in vain.

“We’re here,” said Fairfax a moment before the landau drew to a halt. “The lane’s too narrow for the carriage to go any further, but I’d bet my life that Bragg’s place is the one with the candle in the upper window.”

“He knows we are coming,” said Ezra.

“Of course, he does; he invited you,” replied the Viscountess. “Bring me my grandchildren, Your Grace. Alive and unharmed. Retribution can wait for another day, if necessary, but Cecilia and Robert are the priority.”

“It would be a great honor, my lady, if you cared to remember that I have done a great deal more than you to protect them both,” he snapped, before climbing out of the carriage.

“Not the most diplomatic of comments, old boy,” Fairfax told him as they walked swiftly down Artillery Lane, the two Chalmers footmen close behind.

“Perhaps not, but if Lord and Lady Chalmers had done their duty by their grandchildren, then Robert and Cecilia would not be in the hands of a man like Bragg. Forgive my irritation with her, if you can; perhaps I will be in a better mood when I know my wife is safe.”

Fairfax just nodded.

They reached the premises of Seth Bragg.



Cecilia first became aware of the pounding inside of her skull, followed by the realization that she was laying gagged and bound on a dirty wooden floor. She opened her eyes slowly, wincing at the candlelight, and tried to bring her eyes into focus. Her ears felt like they were full of water, and it took time for her to fully make sense of what was happening.

Bragg's office. She was lying on the floor of Seth Bragg's office, while the moneylender and his two cronies were arguing at his desk. On the far side of the room was the unconscious body of James, slumped against the wall, blood streaming down his handsome face. Cecilia moved her head slowly, careful not to draw attention to the fact she was awake until her eyes fell upon the tiny shape of her brother, similarly gagged and bound, but with open, frightened eyes, hunched beneath the window behind the three men.

Robert widened his eyes when he saw she was awake, but the clever child was smart enough not to draw any attention to it. He sent a desperate glance at the footman as if trying to ask her whether James was alive, but all she could do was give a tiny, helpless shrug in response.

“Isn’t it dangerous to keep them both, though, Boss? There’s a rumor she’s a duchess now,” the clerk was saying, his words catching Cecilia’s attention.

Seth Bragg barked out a laugh. “The Duke’s lightskirt, perhaps, but she’s no more his wife than you are. Whatever game she was playing trying to force his hand in marriage I put a stop to, at any rate; you don’t see Marlborough rushing here, now do you?”

“Well, that *is* one of his footmen, if the livery is anything to go by,” said the clerk, looking over at James with a dubious air.

“She’s probably lifted her skirts for the idiot, or paid him with his master’s own coin,” said the moneylender with a casual shrug. Cecilia bit down hard on the gag to stop herself from screaming in rage. Instead, she tested the strength of the rags binding her wrists and was pleased to find the knots were poorly tied. She caught Robert’s eye again, making the tiniest motion with her hands. He caught her meaning immediately, and she watched him start to shift his wrists back and forth against the thin fabric.

First, we get loose. I don’t know what we will do after that, but there will be more options open if my hands are free.

“But how can you be sure he won’t come looking for her? Say you’re right, and she isn’t any more than a bit of muslin to him; he’s letting the *ton* think they got married, ain’t he? Won’t that cause him some scandal?”

Good point, you horrid creature. Why would he do that if he did not intend to marry me?

“He’s a toff, that’s why he’s acting like he’s off his rocker. Even the richest of toffs get bored from time to time, and then they go out of their way to cause a scandal just for the sheer hell of it. Or maybe he did think of marrying her at first; it’s not like our Miss Wallace isn’t a striking beauty. It wouldn’t have taken him long to reject such a notion—she’s hardly well-bred enough to be a duchess now, is she? I won’t be surprised if he greets her disappearance with relief, or perhaps even drops some guineas my way as thanks for ridding him of his little problem.”

Robert narrowed his eyes and gave his head a tiny shake. Cecilia tried to smile around the gag, but she would be lying if she claimed that Bragg’s words had not struck a chord within her. She knew Ezra had only offered marriage after they were caught by Lady Twixham in his study, and while she believed he enjoyed her company, there was a nagging worry that he would come to regret their match, especially if he ever fell in love with someone else.

Stop it! Concentrate on getting your hands free!

“Say you’re right; what are you going to do with them?” continued the clerk, the note of doubt still in his voice, although his boss appeared oblivious to it.

“The footman can go in the Thames unless His Grace pays a recovery fee for him, I suppose, but Miss Cecilia is going to earn me a pretty penny indeed. There’s more than one man on my books who’ll pay handsomely for a turn while there’s still some fight in her, and once she’s broken, I’ll send her to one of my brothels up north.”

“And the boy?”

“There’s plenty who will pay for a turn with him as well.”

Cecilia held onto the rage those words created in her chest, hoarding it for the moment she could use it to escape with Robert and James. She continued to listen to their disgusting comments, slowly but steadily working at the bindings on her wrists.

There was a loud crash from the floor below, intermingled with the jangling of an iron bell. A loud voice boomed throughout the building, demanding that Bragg show himself immediately.

Cecilia forgot about her ruse, her head shooting up as she heard people calling out her name.

Ezra had come to her rescue!

Despite the gag, she did her best to scream.



“Damn you, Bragg! Where is my wife?” Ezra bellowed, pistol outstretched before him as he barged into the sparsely furnished office of the moneylender. Fairfax followed suit with the Chalmers footmen right behind.

There was a faint scream in the distance, followed by a loud crack, and then a solid thud, and all Ezra could picture was his beautiful, darling Cecilia being slapped to the ground. His vision went red as anger flooded every part of his body, and he took off in the direction of the sound.

“Cecilia! Cecilia, I’m coming, my love!” he shouted, so blinded by fear, he barrelled headfirst into a solid wall of meat and muscle.

He stepped back, stunned, only to realize that it was no wall standing between him and Cecilia, but the largest, ugliest, and broadest brute he had ever seen.

“Get the hell out of my way,” Ezra snarled, but the giant just flashed him an ugly grin.

Fairfax appeared at his side. “Just like at Eton?”

Ezra grinned. “Just like at Eton,” he agreed.

The giant had one brief moment of confusion before the two peers of the realm rushed at him, screaming like all hell was at their heels.



Cecilia’s head hit the floor hard, and for a moment all she could see were white flares of pain before her eyes.

“Stupid bitch,” muttered Bragg, before stomping back to his desk.

There was an unholy screech from outside the room, and then the Bruiser came crashing backward through the door, hitting the floorboards with a hard, sickening thud, with Ezra and Fairfax landing on top of him.

The clerk grabbed a pistol laying on the desk, fumbling as he tried to get a proper grip. Cecilia tried to shout a warning, but the gag muffled her cry. Somehow, though, Ezra must have heard her, for while Fairfax paused to land a flush hit on the Bruiser's face, the Duke launched himself at the clerk, catching him in a rugby tackle that caused the small man to scream as he fell. Two footmen in her grandfather's livery barrelled in next, one pausing to help Lord Fairfax, and the other rushing over to James.

“THAT IS QUITE ENOUGH!” bellowed Seth Bragg, causing everyone in the skirmish to pause, such was the command in his voice. The moneylender, his gun pointed directly at the head of Robert, flashed an evil smile around the room. “Now that I have your attention, Your Grace, it is time for you to take your men and leave.”

Ezra, a smear of blood coming from his nose, began to get slowly to his feet.

“Ah ah ah, Your Grace! Put down your gun if you please, your friend too. I would hate it if I was spooked into discharging my own weapon into young Master Wallace, am I right?”

Robert whimpered, his eyes fixed on the barrel of Mr. Bragg's pistol. Cecilia had never hated anyone as much as she hated the moneylender in that moment, but there was nothing she could do to intervene, nothing she could do to help any of the

people she loved, except keep trying furiously to free her hands.

“I’ve put down my gun, Bragg. Now put down yours. There’s no need to threaten the lad,” said Ezra, raising his hands above him. The horrid little clerk scrambled up, grabbing both his own pistol and Ezra’s before backing up behind the desk.

No one is watching me anymore. Cecilia pulled hard on her bindings and was finally able to work her hands free.

“I disagree with you on that point, Your Grace; I think there is every need to threaten the boy. I’m just a lowly businessman, you see, and my life is being threatened by an honest-to-God peer of the realm. You’ve come to steal my property from me, and all that prevents you from taking it is this little gun.”

Ezra’s composure slipped. “Cecilia and Robert are not your property.”

Bragg shrugged. “On that we must agree to differ. I own her because I own all the pretty whores in Spitalfields. But I am not a selfish man, Your Grace. She can be your exclusive mistress if you are willing to pay my price.”

“Don’t let him rile you,” said Lord Fairfax. The Bruiser remained out cold by his feet, a small consolation amidst the chaos. Bragg and his clerk might hold the guns, but Ezra had the numbers.

“Cecilia is my wife,” said Ezra with a calm that gave lie to the rage in his eyes. “You have no claim upon her, but I will be

damned if I let you have a claim on any other woman in London either.”

Bragg had the nerve to chuckle. He stepped backwards from his desk until he was a mere pace from Cecilia, and then he grabbed her by the hair, yanking her up toward his chest. She choked out a cry of pain, smothered as it was by the gag, and saw Ezra reach for her until the clerk, very pointedly, jabbed at him with his pistol.

“I am being a reasonable man here, Your Grace. A businessman has to do business to make ends meet. Now, I suppose I could let the lovely Miss Wallace return to your arms, but then her brother here would have to make up for her losses. Is that agreeable?”

“Never,” said Ezra without hesitation, and despite the situation they found themselves in, Cecilia loved him for it. “The boy is under my protection as well, Bragg, and I swear that if you do not hand them back to me right now, I will have this place swarming with every Runner and militiaman I can summon within the hour.”

“But they would be dead, and I would be gone,” sighed the moneylender. “Well, one of them would be dead. The other would come with me to help fund my travels in Europe. Who would be the most valuable to me, do you think?”

The bindings were loose enough for her to move her hands, but Cecilia did not do anything so foolish as attempt to free herself from Bragg’s painful grasp. Instead, she pretended to cover her face and cry, just so she could hook her fingers into the fabric of the gag, ready to pull it free at the first opportunity.

“I think you are a filthy bastard, and that it will be a pleasure to watch you hang,” replied Ezra with the bored air of a man suffering acute ennui. Cecilia saw him glance in her direction, however. She saw how both he and Fairfax were trying to find an opening.

Robert whimpered again, and Cecilia knew what she had to do.

“You are testing my patience, Your Grace. If you want your precious Cecilia and Robert to live, you should probably leave now. Who knows, once they have served their purpose for a year, perhaps I shall return them to you for no extra charge. A win all around, wouldn't you say? But it might be for the best if I put a bullet into either you or your friend here, just as a reminder of what I am capable of. What would be your preference, Your Grace? You, or Lord Fairfax?”

In whichever way Ezra intended to respond, there was no opportunity for him to reply. Bragg, indulging his flair for the dramatic, turned his pistol away from Robert with the intent of pointing it toward the two lords. Cecilia, seeing this as an opportunity, launched her attack. She yanked the gag from her mouth, and without waiting for Bragg to loosen his grip on her hair, she threw herself forward and sank her teeth deep into the tender skin of the moneylender's thigh.

He screamed in agony. A gun discharged. Everyone started shouting and screaming, and there was another blinding pain on the top of her skull, but Cecilia bit down even harder, determined to rip a pound of flesh from the disgusting, hateful man.

More shots, more shouts came. Cecilia felt it when a fistful of hair was ripped from her scalp, and then something hard connected with her cheek, just below the eye socket. She sprawled back across the floor, the taste of fabric and blood in her mouth as the room began to swirl into a sea of black.

“Robert!” she tried to call, but the sound came out jumbled, and she was afraid she was about to vomit. “Ezra!”

She fell back to the floor as the darkness enveloped her, the sound of people shouting her name chasing her all the way down.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cecilia drifted in and out of consciousness, leaving only the vaguest memories that she could not always differentiate from dreams.

Ezra, pulling her into his arms, screamed out her name like a man whose heart had shattered.

Robert cuddled against her as a carriage—or possibly a ship—rocked them back and forth.

Her mother, old now, but still beautiful, her eyes wet with tears was singing Cecilia to sleep.

*“The water is wide, I cannot get over
And neither have I wings to fly.
O go and get me some little boat,
To carry o’er my true love and I.
A-down in the meadows the other day,
A-gathering flowers both red and blue,
A-gathering flowers so fine and gay,
I little thought what love could do.”*

The memory of the doctor was clear; the sharp bite of his blade on her arm had hurt enough to shock her awake, if only for a minute or two. He was trying to tell Ezra that he was bleeding the ill humors from her body, but the Duke had shouted some curse or other at the man, and thrown him out of the room.

“Stay with me, my love,” Ezra had whispered, stroking her hair as she drifted back to sleep. “The bullet only grazed you. Everything will be fine, so long as you stay with me.”

The last bit must have been a dream.

Robert and Tilly came in to read stories and tell her what games they had been playing. Sometimes she remembered, other times she would close her eyes for just a second, only to find them gone when she opened them again.

“You are growing feverish, my love,” Ezra said, the back of his hand pressed against her forehead. “We will take care of you, but you must fight it. Please, stay.”

“I’m right here,” she replied, wondering where he thought she was going to disappear to.

Then, she saw Ezra chasing the Nymph through the forest, the teasing laugh of the ethereal creature luring him away from Cecilia like a siren song. She tried to follow, but a riot of vines and ivy tied her firmly to the ground.

“Ezra!” she shouted. “Ezra, that’s not me! She’s not real! I’m right here! *I’m right here!*”

But he never seemed to hear her, and nothing she said could bring him back.

“He doesn’t want me,” she whispered, trying to break free of the vines that covered her like a heavy blanket. “He wants the Nymph, not me.”

Her mother was there to pat her brow with damp cloths and whisper soothing nothings, and her song weaved in and out of both dreams and reality.

*“Where love is planted, O there it grows,
It buds and blossoms like some rose;
It has a sweet and pleasant smell,
No flow’r on earth can it excel.
Must I be bound, O and he go free!
Must I love one thing that does not love me!
Why should I act such a childish part,
And love a boy that will break my heart.”*

“Why doesn’t he love me?” Cecilia murmured, and a feminine kiss was placed upon her cheek.

“He does, my darling granddaughter. I have watched him take care of you, so believe me, he does.”

“Grandmother?” she whispered, but then the world fell away again, leaving her alone outside the Marlborough mansion. The street was deserted, and even the gas lamps failed to provide any comfort. She could hear voices coming from

inside Ezra's home, but she could not make out the words. She rushed forward, climbing the steps until she reached the large oak front door, but then she hesitated.

What if her grandmother was wrong and Ezra did not love her? What if he never loved her? Could she be happy if he never thought of her as anything more than a friend?

"You're asking the wrong questions," whispered a voice in the air. Cecilia spun around, but there was no one there.

"So, what's the right question?" she shouted, but no sound came to answer her, not even her own echo.

She returned her attention to the door, raising her hand to grasp the iron bell pull but pausing before ringing it to summon a staff member.

"It's not about if he loves me, is it?" she asked the door. "That is not my choice, but his."

The door remained impassive. She very carefully let go of the bell pull, making sure it did not let loose a single note.

Cecilia could hear Ezra's voice from inside the house. His words were too muffled to make out clearly, but he sounded as if he was searching for something, pleading for it to come out of hiding.

"What matters is that I am choosing to love him," Cecilia told the door. "I believe he is a good man who will never put me in

harm's way, and will always do his best to be a good husband. So, I choose him. I choose to love him on purpose, for his good points and his bad ones in equal measure. I choose Ezra."

The door melted into nothingness, and Cecilia stepped through into the heat and light beyond.

"I choose you too, my love," she heard Ezra say softly.

"Her fever's broken, Your Grace! I think she's going to make it. Thank the Lord, she is going to make it!"

She opened her eyes long enough to see both her grandmother and Ezra hovering above her.

"You both look awful," she murmured and then drifted to a dreamless sleep carried by the warm laughter of people who loved her.



It took three days for Cecilia to regain enough strength to break out of the fever, and another full night of rest before she was strong enough to be told of what had occurred while she was ill.

Ezra had held her tight when explaining that Bragg and his men were now awaiting trial for their crimes, while Ezra had set about making sure that all of his victims were now freed from the terror he had inflicted on them. The moneylender would hang, that was a certainty, and Spitalfields, if not the whole of London, would be better for it.

James was recovering well—Bessie Fletcher insisted on nursing him with her own two hands—and while Robert was understandably shaken by his whole ordeal, there was no sign of ill health plaguing him. His nightmares were starting to recede, and now Cecilia’s fever had broken.

“Thank you for coming to rescue me,” she said weakly, and then put her head onto Ezra’s chest before drifting back to sleep.

“Thank you for saving all of us,” he murmured in response.

There was no lasting damage from the bullet wound to her shoulder, but the fever left her too drained to face the ordeal of the *Beau Monde*. Elaborate bouquets addressed to her poured into the house daily, and even Lord Tooley sent a ripe pineapple from his hothouses as an extravagant gift, although it was quickly acquired as an object of fascination and inspiration by Robert.

The boy spent hours each day in Cecilia’s rooms, reluctant to leave her side, and would do everything from sketching to playing cards, so long as it amused his sister. It was an effort to get him to leave the mansion at all, and even then, the child was not comfortable unless Ezra was at his side.

It will come with time. Ezra kept telling himself that. *Once Robert knows you will never let anything happen to him again, he will grow confident again.*

Every night, Ezra slept on the truckle-bed in the Duchess’s rooms, despite Cecilia’s complaints that she much preferred

his chambers to her own and wished that he would cuddle beneath the blankets with her. He happened to agree on both points, but everyone from the doctors to Lady Chalmers had stressed the need for Cecilia to rest, and the truth was, he had no faith in his ability to keep from ravishing her given half a chance.

Because God, it was killing him to have her so close, to know she had been in such danger, and not be able to reassure himself of her passion and vitality. He needed to be inside her with a longing that shocked him—a longing that increased with every passing hour.

But she was growing stronger, and even on this very day, she looked far healthier than she had since the damned Twixham ball, with color back in her cheeks and an amused glint in her eyes as she listened to the good-natured bickering of Tilly and Robert.

Ezra leaned against the doorframe of her bedroom, happy to silently take in the scene of family harmony unfolding before him. Cecilia, still in bed but wearing a fetching pink housecoat and propped up by a multitude of feather pillows, sipped at a cup of hot chocolate. Tilly and Robert sat on the bed before her, the former attempting to teach the boy a clapping game, but getting it so wrong herself, it was impossible to tell who was the student and who the teacher. Two chairs had been pulled up to the bedside, where the Viscountess and Mrs. Fletcher were each occupying their hands with embroidery work, but both watching Cecilia for the slightest sign of distress.

God, he wished there was a way to capture the moment forever. Ezra might appreciate artistic talent in others, but never had he been so frustrated in his own inability to paint and draw. Despite her ordeal, Cecilia looked content

surrounded by people who cared for her and had never looked so beautiful. Her hair flowed unbound about her shoulders, and she had regained a healthy glow to her skin. She had been striking as the Nymph, but here she was radiant.

Cecilia looked up, and the smile that spread across her lips when she saw him felt like home. She placed her cup on the side table as he walked over to her, and then outstretched her arms to him in welcome.

“Have you finished your work for the day?” she asked, no admonishments for his leaving her side.

He leaned in to kiss her lightly on the forehead, pointedly ignoring the retching sound made by his sister and Robert’s accompanying giggles, before sitting on the bed beside her.

“Indeed, I have, and if you are strong enough, our wedding can finally take place tomorrow.”

“About time,” muttered the Viscountess, but her expression was tender when it rested on Cecilia.

“I am in agreement with my grandmother on this point—nothing could stop me from finally making this official.”

“Excellent! And I have some good news for you as well, little Brother,” he said, leaning forward to ruffle Robert’s hair.

“You are taking me to the British Museum?” asked the boy, expectant hope filling his small face.

Ezra couldn't help laughing. "You have already extracted that promise from me, and it is set for next week, as arranged."

"I can't think of anything that could be better than that," said Robert, looking thoughtful, or at least, he did until Tilly let out a harumphing noise in response.

"Well, that's a fine thing to say in front of me after I went to all that trouble of arranging to meet John Nash with you!" she said with exaggerated upset. Robert grinned, but still pretended to rub her arm in sympathy.

"And it's awfully good of you, but Ezra is a duke, so I have to make him feel special. He expects it."

"You are in incorrigible scamp," said Ezra as everyone dissolved into laughter at Robert's words. "I have no idea why I have agreed to be your legal guardian."

Cecilia gasped. "Oh Ezra, have you truly done so?"

He smiled at her, then at the stunned Lady Chalmers.

"I swear to it. When faced with the threat of a prolonged and extremely expensive legal battle that would see his reputation tarnished beyond repair, Lord Chalmers has relinquished all claims on Robert and signed over guardianship to me." He paused, turning to Robert with what he hoped was a kind smile. "That is if you would like to stay living here with Cecilia, Tilly, and me."

“Would I ever!” breathed the boy, and then launched himself across the bed and into Ezra’s arms for a hug.

“The Viscount has no control over me,” said Lady Chalmers faintly. “Your Grace, I can never repay you for keeping my grandchildren safe.”

“Nonsense,” said Tilly. “He is doing it for entirely selfish reasons, and I approve of them whole-heartedly.”

“You are welcome to stay with us as much or as little as suits you, Lady Chalmers,” said Ezra, glancing at Cecilia and Robert to judge their reactions to this news. He had told them everything their grandmother had confided in them the night of the abduction, and while it had not erased their suffering, bridges were being built between them.

“I should like to get to know you better,” Cecilia told the Viscountess, holding out her hand. “Robert and I have already discussed it, and we think it is what our parents would have wanted.”

Lady Chalmers swallowed, but she took Cecilia’s proffered hand and patted it several times.

“I think that would be rather splendid, my dear. Now, I think it is high time that you have a rest, child, for although you are greatly improved, we cannot take your strength for granted. Come, Robert! Lady Matilda tells me you have a particular fondness for the lavender ices, so I propose that we make up a party with dear Mrs. Fletcher here, and head to Gunter’s.”

“An excellent plan!” declared Tilly, only a touch less enthusiastic about the plan than Mrs. Fletcher and Robert himself. They each kissed Cecilia on the forehead—Robert pausing only to promise to bring back a treat for her so she did not miss out—and then vacated the room, leaving only Ezra and his almost-duchess behind.

“I don’t think I can thank you enough for all you have done for me,” began Cecilia, but he laid a finger to her lips to silence her.

“Do not thank me, little Nymph; never thank me for performing the minimum level of duty a man should show to his wife.”

He saw her flinch at the word duty, but she attempted to cover it quickly. He caught her chin with his fingers, guiding her gently to meet his gaze.

“What is it, my love? Why does that hurt you?”

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath before answering him. “Because I want to be more than a duty to you, Ezra. A duty can very quickly become a burden, and burdens become resentments. I never want to be that, not to you.”

He leaned forward, kissing her softly on the lips.

“You have it wrong, little Nymph,” he murmured. “A duty can also be a calling; a higher, sacred bond that gives a man reason to live. My duty is to protect you, to honor you, and to love

you, because I can think of no higher purpose in life than to spend the rest of my days making you happy.”

Cecilia’s eyes flew open. “You love me?”

Ezra winced at the surprise in her tone. “Yes, I do. I understand that you don’t love me yet, and perhaps you never will, because I promised you friendship rather than romance, but—*oomph!*”

Cecilia launched herself at him, knocking him back into the pillows as she showered his face and neck in ferocious, angry kisses.

“I... love... you... too... you... silly... idiotic... man...” she said in the gaps between her lips setting his senses on fire. He let the insult slide but captured Cecilia in his arms and indulged in a slow, deep, sensual kiss that promised a lifetime of passion and desire. His manhood stirred at the thought of making love to her, and it was with great reluctance that he pulled away.



Cecilia sat up, confused at the pained expression on Ezra’s face. She had felt his arousal through the thin layer of clothes that separated them and believed it with all her heart when he said he loved her, but his insistence on sleeping in a different bed, and his determination to behave like a Catholic priest when they were alone was getting to be too much.

“Ezra, why won’t you touch me?” she asked. “I would very much like it if you touched me.”

“I know, my love, but in case you have forgotten, you almost died a few nights ago.”

The look on his face explained everything.

“Oh, Ezra,” she whispered, before leaning forward to wrap her arms around him. “I am fine, Ezra. I am recovered, I am safe, and I am not going anywhere.”

She kissed him, gently at first, his lips warm and tender. He pulled her in close, his hands gliding across the thin silk of her dressing gown as he returned the kiss.

“You know it would be wrong for me to take advantage of you,” he murmured as he slowly peeled away her clothing.

“It would be far worse for you to neglect my needs.”

“An excellent argument,” he replied, leaning down to capture the rosy peak of her breast with his mouth. Cecilia gave an appreciative sigh, burying her hands in his hair as the heat of his tongue sent waves of pleasure throughout her body. Her legs parted in anticipation, and she shifted to press her core against him with unspoken need.

“I want you, Ezra. Please, I need you,” she said, not able to articulate the specifics, just knowing that it involved his touching and filling her in every conceivable way.

“I know, my love. Be patient,” he whispered, then returned to sucking and kissing her breasts while his fingers caressed their way up her thighs until they reached her core. He parted her folds gently and began to tease and caress her bud with fast, clever strokes.

“Oh, yes, there, please,” she begged before his lips covered her mouth once more and swallowed her cries of pleasure. Cecilia closed her eyes, giving herself over to the sensation of sweet, delicious heat that built higher and higher at her core, a raging fire that exploded all at once, making her cry out his name before shuddering against him.

“You’ll drive me mad, my love,” he groaned against her cheek, then pulled away from her so he could undress.

“You’re taking too long,” Cecilia complained as he divested himself of his clothing, but the smile on his face made it clear he was just trying to torture her.

“These are expensive items, my love. My valet will never speak to me again if I ruin yet another pair of buckskins because I could not wait to have my way with you.”

He was even slowing down, damn him! But Cecilia already knew Ezra well enough to tease just as much as he could. She reclined along the bed, sweeping appreciative glances over his body as she slid her own hand down between her legs to explore the slick heat of her core. His eyes dilated, and his mouth dropped open just a little as he watched her hand like a starving man.

“I wish this was you,” said Cecilia. Ezra stopped pretending it would take forever to undress, instead discarding his shirt and stockings in the blink of an eye until he stood before her like her personal Adonis. He ran his hand across his erect manhood, still gazing at her appreciatively, but the sight of him pleasuring himself beside her did something to the fire inside her, and she felt another bank of heat building and building until it crashed over her a second time in hot, shuddering waves.

Ezra was above her before they ended, easing her legs apart before sliding his member into her sex. She exhaled in appreciation as her body welcomed him inside, her hips rising to meet his as he slowly, achingly slowly, pushed deep inside. Her hand was trapped between their bodies, her fingers on either side of her bud as the maddening, addictive ache of pleasure began building once again.

“My God, you feel like heaven, Cecilia,” he whispered. “Tease yourself for me. Please.”

He looked into her eyes with an intensity that enveloped her, then began to thrust inside her in long, smooth strokes that matched the movements of her own fingers. She lost herself in the sensation, wrapping her legs around him so that she could pull him in closer and deeper. Nothing mattered but Ezra, his mouth on hers, the warmth of his skin pressed against her body, the burning ache at her core, the delicious friction as he slid himself in and out, in and out, his movements becoming faster and more frenzied until he found his climax, calling out her name as his hot seed spilled inside her. The sound was enough to push her over the edge once again, and she clamped her legs tight about him as the heat once again flooded her body, all the sweeter for the knowledge that she was well and truly his.

They lay tangled up against each other, Ezra's arms around her, her head nestled against his shoulder. They were both quiet for some time, indulging in the exhausted pleasure that so often found them after making love.

"Cecilia, there's something I want to ask you," said Ezra, talking into the crown of her hair.

"Mmm hmm?"

He batted her arm playfully. "This is important, little Nymph."

"Fine! I'm listening!" she said, raising up onto her forearms so she could see him better, but stealing a kiss before he could say anything else.

He chuckled, then stroked her hair as though it had not been messed into a tangle of knots by their passion.

"Do you remember our meeting by the Serpentine? God, it feels like a lifetime ago. But do you remember what you asked of me?"

She smiled at the memory. "I asked you to find me in the painting. You certainly succeeded there."

"That's the thing, my love; it's the other way around. You are the one who found me. I knew from the outset that I enjoyed your company, and I was far from upset at the idea of our marriage, but it was not until that damned moneylender stole you, when I almost lost you completely, that I realized how

much I needed you in my heart. I am a better man for being with you, not because you change me, but because I want to be worthy of you. I've been asleep for so long, Cecilia. I want to experience life again, with you right here at my side."

"Always, Ezra. I'm not going anywhere."

"Good, because neither am I. When I first proposed a marriage between us, I laid out terms and expectations that seemed sensible at the time. It turns out that the proposal was made by a complete and utter fool. You see... I love you. I love everything about you, from your artistic soul to the stubborn determination you bring to every part of your life. I love the way you tease me, and that you have never once been afraid to argue with me. I would prefer it if you came to me when you need someone to help or support you, and I hope that, with time, I will earn your trust in that regard. If you marry me, Cecilia, then you must know that I will love you with every fiber of my being for the rest of our lives, and I intend to keep on falling in love with you over and over again."

"So, not just companionship, then?" she asked as innocently as she could manage.

"Why do I get the feeling you are never going to let me forget my idiocy?"

"Because I am going to use it to my advantage for the rest of our lives," she told him cheerfully. "Ezra, you might be an idiot at times, but you are *my* idiot, and I have no intention of ever letting you go."

He smiled at her. “Does that mean you love me, then? I just want to be very sure on this point because you were the one who agreed to a marriage of affection and friendship, so it is possible you’re only after my title, so I—*ow!* Stop that!”

Ezra barely raised his hands to defend himself from the pillow she hit him with, as he was laughing too hard to put up a defense. Once he regained enough composure, however, he grabbed Cecilia up into his arms and threw her to the bed beneath him, from which position she decided to spend the next hour or so convincing her handsome, sometimes idiotic Duke that his nymph did in fact love him, very, very much.

EPILOGUE

*O*ne Month Later

The small convoy of coaches trundled along down the country roads to the southeast of London, and for Cecilia and Robert, who had never before left the city, the lush green landscape may as well have been from a different world. While her little brother marveled at the sheer size of the fields they passed by, Cecilia was shocked at how quiet the world seemed without the usual hubbub of street sellers, tradespeople, and carriages of all different types. Even the air had a different smell, and when she had mentioned as much to Ezra, he'd laughed and told her that the lack of sewers naturally resulted in the air smelling sweeter.

“Robert’s health will benefit greatly from our time in the country, I promise you,” he said, smiling at them both. “Marlborough Court even has an excellent lake for swimming and boating, if you are so inclined.”

“Will you teach me to swim?” Robert said eagerly, bouncing up and down on the carriage seat opposite them.

There was a brief flash of surprise on Ezra’s face, but he covered it quickly. “It will be my most important duty this

summer.”

“Alongside teaching me to swim as well, I hope,” said Cecilia, oddly energized by the idea. Ezra planted a kiss on her knuckles.

“Your wish is my command, little Nymph.”

The sound of the horse’s hooves changed pitch as dirt gave way to cobblestones. Cecilia looked out the window to see they had turned into a charming little village of grey stone and thatched houses. She was surprised as they drew to a standstill before the little Norman church opposite a well-maintained Green, and even more so as the coachman himself hopped down to open the door for her.

“What is this?” she asked Ezra. “Is this village part of your estates?”

“Not at all, my love, but my cousin is the vicar here, and I am very fond of the place.”

They emerged into the sunlight, and while Cecilia had expected to see the Fletchers, her grandmother, and Tilly leave the other traveling carriage, the other figures caught her off guard.

“Fairfax! Emily! Captain Darcy!” she exclaimed at her smiling friends. “What are you doing here?”

“Is it not obvious, dearest?” said Tilly, bounding over to her before anyone else could speak. “We were all supposed to be present at your rumored wedding, so we decided we should be at your real one.”

“My wedding?” she turned to Ezra. “We are getting married, in truth?”

“If you still wish it, my love,” he said, capturing her hands in his. “I would have liked to marry you much sooner, but I did not want to risk your recovery while in London. And then it seemed unlikely that we *could* marry in London without rumors reaching the *ton*. I have a license for our wedding, and my cousin can be trusted, so if it pleases you, Cecilia, would you do me the honor of finally becoming my wife?”

“It would please me very much, Ezra. Very, very much indeed.”

Robert walked her down the aisle, and while the church was almost empty, Cecilia felt as if her world had never been so full of friends and well-wishers. Tilly practically bounced with excitement throughout the short service, and the Viscountess actually dabbed away tears from the corners of her eyes. Most importantly, Ezra, whose gaze never left her own, radiated love with every vow he recited.

And then it was done. They thanked the vicar, embraced their small group of cheering guests, and raced back to their carriage, with Robert conspicuous in his choice to ride with Tilly on the final leg of their journey.

“Are you happy, little Nymph?” asked Ezra as their carriage began to trundle along once again.

Cecilia laid back in his arms, loving the feel of him holding her close. “Extremely.”

“Different, now we are legally wed?”

She turned her head to look up at him, unable to prevent herself from giving him a sheepish smile. “Is it terrible if I tell you that I do not? I have been referred to as the Duchess for weeks already, and I already know how much you love me.”

Ezra kissed the top of her head. “Very true, my love, but now you legally have the protection of both my name and my rank, so I confess, I feel much happier than I did even this morning.”

Cecilia snuggled further into his chest. “Ezra, my love, I have something to tell you that I hope will make you even happier again.”

“That you truly are a Nymph, and by marrying you I just became King of the Fairies?”

She punched him lightly on the arm.

“Not at all! But I think... well, it is very early on, but both Mrs. Fletcher and my grandmother believe I am showing all the signs...”

Ezra sat bolt upright, his eyes wide as they roved her body, down to her stomach, and then back up to her face.

“Cecilia, are you really... do you really think...”

“It is very early,” she repeated, “but yes. I think I am with child.”

“My God,” said Ezra. He blinked a few times, his expression a perfect picture of shock, but then a smile slowly took over his face.

“A child!” he said, half-laughing. “I never thought or even hoped for a family, not after my loss.”

“So, you are truly happy?” she asked again, searching his face for clues to his feelings. “Tilly told me you might be panicked by my being with child and worry yourself sick, but I promise to do everything the midwives tell me to!”

“Hang Tilly,” he said cheerfully as he pulled Cecilia into his arms. “I love you, my little Nymph, and I will love our children, and Robert, and the Fletchers, and your grandmother, although I hope you forgive me for not loving the Viscount, considering how he treated you. We will be happy, and life will be good to us.”

“Because you decree it?” she teased.

“Because I have you, my new duchess,” he replied. “How could I be anything but happy with you as my wife?”

There were probably very good arguments to Ezra's logic on the matter, but as he chose that moment to kiss her thoroughly, Cecilia decided they were not worth considering and resigned herself to enjoying his attentions for as long as they both should live.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Eager to learn what the future holds for **Cecilia and Ezra**?

Then you may enjoy this **extended epilogue**.

Simply [tap here](#) and you can read it for **FREE**, or use this **link**:

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AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading my novel, **A Lady's Brush with Romance**. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind to [write a review HERE?](#)

It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book to further improve my writing.

Please use the link below:

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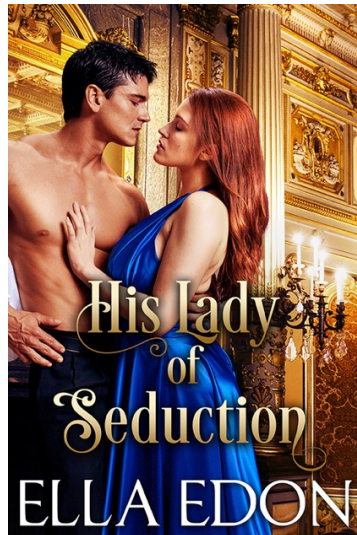
DO YOU WANT MORE ROMANCE?

Turn on the next page to read the first chapters of my previous best-selling novel: **His Lady of Seduction**

With a family curse hanging over her, Lady Charity Bagdale is determined to live life to the fullest before it is too late. When she, once again, crosses paths with the enigmatic Stephen Huntington, the heir to the Marquess of Hertford, she steps into a world of seduction and danger. But as their love grows, outside forces conspire against them and a dark secret threatens to tear them apart. Will they be able to satisfy their burning desire for each other, or will Charity's curse prove too powerful?



HIS LADY OF SEDUCTION



...
■
...

Dearest Love Lady,

I can hardly believe that I am writing you a letter. I suppose I could have spoken to a trusted friend instead, but friends tend to be awfully biased. Thus, I am writing to you in the hopes that you have some advice for the dilemma I am currently facing.

I am what you would call a free spirit. I believe that life is meant to be enjoyed and lived, not suffered through in an unimaginative existence.

Fortune favors the bold, but I fear that, in my case, fortune has played a cruel trick. The gentleman who may have a chance to steal my heart is everything but bold. He is impossibly proper, reserved, and shy.

It does not seem as though we would be a good match at all, and yet I find myself inexplicably drawn to him. Are we doomed from the start?

Sincerely,

Wildflower

Dear Wildflower,

I often find that the differences in our personalities make for the most exciting relationships. It is, however, of vital importance that you do not allow these differences to cause sacrifice.

The best advice I can give is this: make sure that you always meet each other halfway—in doing so, you shall ensure that

the love you have for each other will endure. When love is true, it works out in the end, but remember that there is an enormous difference between sacrifice and compromise. Do not lose your spark because of a man.

All my best,

Love Lady

CHAPTER ONE

Stephen Huntington hated the change of season, especially the start of spring. The constant sneezing and sniffing as blossoms opened around him was incredibly bothersome. Then again, perhaps it was more than the change of season he hated. If he were honest with himself—and he counted himself an honest man, indeed—he hated all change.

A sudden whistle from above yanked him out of his mundane thoughts, and he stared in awe at a lady—no, a woman who was certainly not fit to be called a lady—with messy red hair, leaning out of a window.

“What on earth?”

Stephen barely had time to formulate a proper thought before the girl dangled a bag out of the window.

“Catch this!”

The bag landed in Stephen’s hands. And before he had time to recover, the girl jumped from the window too, and he took a large stride forward to catch her in his arms.

“What in the heavens?”

Her face was close to his—quite improper. Yet, he could not help but admire the tiny freckles on her nose or the mischievous glint in her eyes. She was indeed quite beautiful.

“Wait a second...”

He’d seen those piercing green eyes before, of that he was certain, yet a name evaded him. “You’re Emma’s friend, aren’t you? Cassidy?” He shook his head quickly, searching his mind for the name. “Chastity?”

The green eyes twinkled with mischief, and the girl pressed her hands on his shoulders, letting herself out of his grip easily.

“Charity. Thank you for catching me, and...” She reached quickly to grab the bag out of his hands. “I’ll just take this.”

“Wait a second!” Stephen grabbed onto the dainty wrist quickly, his eyes narrowing. A lot could be said about the Huntington family, but he would in no way be accessory to theft.

“Did you steal this?”

“Well...” Charity gave a rather uncomfortable laugh and shrugged. “‘Steal’ is such a technical term, you know.”

Stephen looked at her, aghast. How could this woman possibly be Emma's best friend? His brother's wife was demure and classy, a proper lady. How could she be friends with a common thief? Albeit she was a stunningly beautiful one with fair skin and emerald eyes.

Charity's upbeat voice interrupted his wandering thoughts. "It's my father's house, so technically I wasn't stealing... not really."

Stephen leered, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever was inside the bag. Charity, on the other hand, was swift, and she promptly hid it behind her back. Whatever was inside the bag clanked together—silver, he assumed.

"So, if it's your father's house, why don't you just ask for what it is you want? And why jump through the window, rather than use the front door?"

Charity sighed and slowed her voice as though she had to explain a difficult concept to a child.

"My dear stepbrother was supposed to open the door for me and tell my father I was here, but he is probably out with one of his various companions. As for asking..."

She hesitated, and Stephen lifted a brow, curious as to her explanation. What explanation could she possibly have that made any sense at all?

"Well, if I must be honest... I enjoy the thrill. Have you never wanted to do something a little improper, something... out of

the ordinary?”

Stephen could only look at her blankly. Doing something out of the ordinary was unheard of in the circles he moved in. She was looking at him defiantly, and his heart skipped a beat.

“So... what are you going to do with your treasure?”

As improper as it was, Stephen could not help but play along. The girl fascinated him. She was like a breath of fresh air, everything but proper and conventionally ladylike. Stephen wondered how Charity’s father managed to raise her to be so fiercely wild.

“Well...” Charity gestured around daintily. “I’d hand it out to the poor, of course...”

“Ah...” Stephen grinned. “Charity indeed, an apt name.”

Charity grinned at this, and Stephen took a step back, suddenly uncomfortable. She was rather radiant when she smiled, and he could feel his heart starting to gallop.

“So... what else do you do for a thrill?”

She took a step forward at this, her lips almost brushing against his ear.

“Nothing the future Marquess of Hertford would concern himself with. Perhaps I am a tad too wild for you, sir.”

Stephen swallowed. She had always been impossible not to notice, of course, but now even more so. Perhaps it was the close proximity they suddenly shared, but all he could think of was her floral scent oozing off her—deliciously intoxicating.

“I implore you, tell me what else it is you have planned.”

“Well...” Charity thought for a minute, then a wide grin crossed her face. “Perhaps, one day you will know. However, I’m afraid today will not be said day.”

She skipped off rather merrily, leaving Stephen confused and alone.

“Wait!” He could hardly believe that he was calling out after her. It was very unbecoming of a man in his position to raise his voice at all, and yet... something about the fiery redhead made it seem impossible to let her go.

“When will I see you again?”

Charity paused at this, her subtly provocative eyes rendering him uncomfortable.

“If you’re meant to see me again... you will.”



The promise of seeing Stephen again remained in Charity’s mind for days, leaving her restless and far more irritable than

usual. Of course, she remembered him from Martin and Emma's wedding and even the house party where they all met for the first time. He'd made an impressive figure back then: tall, dark, and stoic.

Yet, when he caught her so easily as she jumped from a window a few days earlier, she saw another side of him. There was something almost playful in his eyes, something she would love to explore. Had her list not already been quite extensive, she might have added him to it.

The sun was setting, and she gasped—she did not have much time to get ready for her evening plans. A thick fur coat covered the far too revealing dress she was wearing, and a black wig concealed her signature red locks. She was not foolish; she knew this was a rather dangerous game. But she couldn't stop herself. She had to...

Charity stopped herself before the thoughts could get too intrusive. Tonight was about fun, about living, not... reality.

Thankfully, the house was empty. She'd successfully lied about a stomach bug to avoid a family gathering with Lord and Lady Blandford. If only life could be as simple as fooling her family. It was not, however, and dark thoughts plagued her as she made her way to the seedier part of London, the part women like her ought to avoid. There, she quickly hid the fur coat to reveal a shockingly tight scarlet dress. It took but a second for the men in the club to notice her, and before long, she was surrounded by them.

Though this was her first time pretending to be a worldly seductress, Charity could not help but be flattered by the attention bestowed upon her. Only when a rather old, bawdy man grabbed ahold of her wrist did she become concerned. His

grip was tight and she could smell the liquor on his breath, proving how difficult it would be for her to escape such a predicament. She was about to call out when—

“Excuse me!” The voice came out of nowhere, and Charity spun round, her eyes wide when she recognized him. “I believe the lady is meant to be my escort for the evening.”

The older gentleman let go of her with a grunt, and Charity slowly lifted her eyes to look at her savior. Lo and behold, Stephen Huntington wearing a self-satisfied smirk.

“That’s twice I have saved you in two weeks, my lady. Would you mind accompanying me to a more... secluded place?”

There was nothing Charity could do but nod. Whether she liked it or not, the devilishly handsome man suddenly had a strange effect on her.

She followed him into the private room hesitantly and paused. It was not the sort of place a duke’s daughter such as her would ever think to visit. Stephen seemed awfully uncomfortable there as well, and Charity made the instant decision to use his discomfort to her advantage.

“So, sir...” She batted her lashes flirtatiously. “I didn’t expect you to be the type to visit a place like this.”

Stephen didn’t respond; he merely patted on the couch next to him, gesturing for her to join him.

“I’m afraid your only choices are wine or ale... and I doubt you’d enjoy the ale.”

Charity locked eyes with him before moving to sit on the couch next to him. “I’ll have the ale.”

It tasted bitter, unlike the sweet, honeyed wine she was used to, but she refused to show it and give him the upper hand. So there was really only one viable option—moving quickly, she straddled Stephen and pressed her lips against his ear.

“So... what is it you meant to do with me in a private room, sir?”

His hands automatically moved to her hips, clenching slightly before releasing. His voice had a hoarse quality to it, and Charity basked in the realization that she was responsible for it.

“I... you seem to be the expert here, my lady. What is it you suggest?”

He had redirected the focus on her and she was unsure how to proceed. She was attracted to him, that much was certain. To be honest, she hadn’t thought of anything or anyone else in the previous few days. She lowered her voice, almost purring into his ear.

“What is it that gentlemen want?”

“Nothing a lady like you should have any knowledge of.”

Stephen licked his lips nervously, and she could hardly blame him. Her bosom was practically in his face; there was no way he could miss the milky white skin of her pert breasts.

But Charity was not done with him. She pressed against him closer, allowing him to inhale her scent—a new, flowery eau de cologne she had just received from Paris.

“Oh, live a little. Have some fun. And tell me what it is you desire.”

“I suppose...” Stephen tore his eyes away from her curves to search her eyes. “Redheads with a certain zest for life is a start.”



She leaned closer, her lips almost touching his. Stephen only needed to lean in half an inch, and their lips would meet. He wanted nothing more than to kiss her. No, he really wanted nothing more than to yank off the too-revealing dress that no duke’s daughter should own and make her his right there on the couch.

“So, my wig did nothing to conceal my identity, did it?” Charity pretended to be disappointed as she took it off. Her red locks cascaded down her back, and Stephen suddenly decided red was his new favorite color.

“I’m afraid not, my lady.” He tried to focus, but his eyes slipped to her lips once more. “I knew it was you the moment I stepped into the club.”

They were still merely an inch apart, her weight pressing softly against his body, making him awfully aware of their proximity. If he just leaned in a little closer...

“So, tell me...” He eventually made the safe, albeit boring choice, of talking instead of kissing, his hands still resting casually on her hips. He had meant to ask why she was so intent on attracting danger. To be fair, she could attract anything and anyone she wanted, not that he would admit that part—not in words, at least.

Charity did not allow him to take the lead though. Pressing her hands on his chest, she sat up a little and cornered him with a question of her own first, his heart racing at her slightest movement. “Do you visit clubs like this often, good sir?”

Stephen smirked. It seemed to be her first visit here. The poor girl had no idea that most men frequented the club for a drink and a game of checkers. The few women that visited the establishment were well-known for their services indeed, but few gentlemen made use of said services. At least, *he* didn't. Stephen caught a loose curl and placed it behind her ear, looking at the wig she had thrown on the floor. His hand remained behind her neck, drawing small circles there.

“The better question, my lady,” Stephen whispered in her ear as he pulled her closer, “is what would *you*, a duke's daughter, be doing in a place like this?”

Blood rushed to her cheeks, and she leapt up. There was nothing they could say to alleviate the gravity of his question—she was a duke's daughter, and her father would go mad if he found out she was here.

“I suggest you be more careful, my lady.” Stephen continued, staring at her blushing, his mind racing with words or images that would bring this pink upon her cheeks again. “After all, you can’t be sure I will always come to your rescue.”

At that, she shot him a challenging look. “I do not believe anyone asked you to, good sir.”

Ah, the boldness has returned.

Charity collected her wig off the floor with a knowing smirk and ran off without another word, leaving a confused and intrigued Stephen behind. He called after her, but she never turned back. Only minutes after she had disappeared did he notice the piece of parchment on the floor lying next to the couch. Picking it up, he could smell the flowers of her perfume. He unfolded it and started reading. It seemed to be a list of some sort. Stephen looked at it with a small frown.

“Twenty-four things to do before you turn twenty-four.” Only two items on the list were crossed off: item one, do something that feels illegal, and item two, find out what gentlemen really want.

Stephen sighed and poured the rest of Charity’s untouched ale down his throat as he sat down. According to his father, all gentlemen wanted a good wife and a happy family. As for him... well, despite the stoicism of his appearance, he wanted adventure. He desired a life worth remembering, and he sought to do something meaningful rather than live a mundane life of duty and passionless endeavors. Not that it was in the cards, at least not for him.

He glanced at the list again. It was rather bizarre for a lady of her stature to even be creating lists like this—she, much like him, was expected to lead a life of marriage and children, nothing more, nothing less. A mundane life, pre-planned, totally expected and calculated.

But perhaps, as it turns out, some ladies and gentlemen were different than the majority of them. Perhaps for some, adventure took precedence over duty. And perhaps he wanted to explore this option along with a fiery redhead.



It was one of those days. The corset strings would not sit right, breakfast was a bowl of bitter fruit, and, most importantly, she had lost her list. She had lost her list. *No! This is a catastrophe, a total, utter disaster of epic proportions! Where is it?* She opened drawers, she searched the pockets of her dress, under her bed, she even retraced her steps from the night before. *What am I to do? If this list falls into the wrong hands, I am finished!* Exasperated, she ran her hand through her hair when the loud gong from the clock in the sitting room reminded her of a long-overdue appointment with Emma.

Oh blast it, there is no time to look for it now. Now she'd have a cup of tea with Emma and perhaps make some indirect, nonchalant inquiries about her mysterious brother-in-law. *Stephen.* The mere thought of him flooded her cheeks with heat, the sheer remembrance of how it felt to be held by him was intoxicating. What was it about him that set her entire body aflame?

“Oh, Charity, darling...” The perfectly sweet voice could only belong to one person: Priscilla. “Would you like a spot of tea,

love?”

Of course, even the way Priscilla presented the tea was perfectly proper, from the silver carrying tray to the snowy tea set—even the small yellow flower floating in the mug.

Charity barely glanced at her stepmother—she did not have the time or patience for tea. “I’d love to, but unfortunately I am late for an appointment with Emma.”

The tray landed on her vanity chest with a soft clang.

“I’m sure you could spare five minutes to enjoy the tea and biscuits I brought you out of the goodness of my heart.”

Charity hesitated. In truth, Priscilla *was* a good stepmother, and the two had always been able to share secrets. Today, however, her need to delve into the mystery that is Stephen Huntington was far more pressing than tea and biscuits.

Charity pressed a quick kiss against Priscilla’s greying hair. “I will make it up to you, I promise. But I can’t be late for this appointment.”

Priscilla seemed to understand, though her nod was a little sad and forlorn. Charity did not waste too much time reading it; she was far too curious. However, now that Priscilla had left, her concern for her list had returned.

She was certain she’d forgotten it in her stockings. How could it have vanished? If Priscilla saw the items on the list, let alone

Father, she would be absolutely hysterical. The only thing she could hope for was that the list would turn up without anyone discovering it, or at the very least without anyone linking it to her.

CHAPTER TWO

The list plagued Stephen all the way home. It was not what you'd expect from any nobleman, much less a noblewoman.

Swim in a lake in the nude. Let a beau touch me in public.

Thoughts of swimming with her in the nude or touching her in public coursed through his mind: what it would feel like to see her naked under the moon, what she would sound like if he reached his hand to touch her. All such images were violently interrupted the second he entered his estate. He could hear voices from his father's study which meant they had a guest. Sighing, he opened the door and joined them. Next to his father stood a tall gentleman with a thin moustache. Marquess Huntington looked at his eldest son with pride.

“Stephen! I'd like you to meet the Duke of—”

The stranger interrupted Stephen's father with a small smile. “Please, call me William. Titles are so formal, and we are about to be family, aren't we?”

Stephen ignored the offered hand quite rudely and looked at his father, his eyes narrowed. "Family?"

"Now, Stephen..." Marquess Huntington sounded placating. He knew his son's stubborn nature far too well, despite him successfully hiding it from the rest of the world. "The Duke here has agreed to allow you to marry his only daughter. As you know, your brother married the daughter of a duke, and I cannot have my eldest marry anyone of a lower rank."

"Do I have a choice?" Stephen's voice was clipped, almost angry. Perhaps he would have been more open to this arrangement if he hadn't run into a certain redhead earlier in the day. As it was, he was suddenly most dissatisfied with his duties.

"You will meet your bride tomorrow. That is all."

The Marquess waved Stephen away without saying anything else. Stephen remained silent. He greeted the Duke with a firm handshake and walked quietly to his chamber.

In a desperate attempt to distract himself, he took the now crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and looked at it. He shook his head.

As if she had left his mind even for a minute.

Charity.

Gods, she was pure perfection. He could still feel the press of her soft bosom against his chest, see the milky white skin and those blazing emerald eyes.

He wondered what would have happened had he decided to kiss her. What would her lips taste like? He imagined they'd be sweet like honeysuckle or sugar.

Stephen closed his eyes as he lay back on his bed, thoughts of Charity taking over his mind. Her lips would open under his, hesitantly at first, but then she'd kiss him with fervor. She'd wrap her dainty hands around his neck and he would explore her petite form with his own hands, from the curve of her hips, up to her soft breasts.

He'd be a gentleman, of course, and only lightly let his hands explore the material of her corset, perhaps accidentally graze the soft skin.

Charity, on the other hand, would behave like no lady. He's seen the wildness in her, and he would see it again. She'd press that deliciously seductive body against him, make him grow hard for her. She'd kiss his neck, nibble at his earlobe. He'd take it an inch further, taste the soft skin of her neck, and...

No. He was a gentleman, and no gentleman could allow his thoughts to travel in this direction. It did not matter how easy the lady made it to fantasize about her. He would not go there, especially now that he was apparently betrothed.

Stephen would never admit this to anyone, but he despised the idea of an arranged marriage. Stoic and humorless as people

saw him, he was a romantic—in the privacy of his own heart, of course. He believed in love. He believed in passion and desire, not in a cold transaction. He admired his younger brother for going after his wife, and he even felt a bit jealous that Martin had been brave enough to follow his heart. However, as the firstborn, he had a duty. And his duty certainly did not include feisty redheads. He had to make a proper marriage and have an heir. Oh, how he often wished that Martin had been firstborn. Then, he would be able to enjoy that bloody kiss with Charity—or more.

Goodness, if he did not end his intrusive thoughts about her instantaneously, he would be unable to keep it together the next time he saw her. And he'd definitely see her because they moved in the same circles. If he allowed his thoughts to wander any further, his blush would reveal himself the next time he looked Charity in the eyes.

He glanced at his pocket watch. He had almost forgotten about a dinner invitation his brother had extended to him—he'd have to hurry if he wanted to make it on time.



The flaming red hair was the first thing he saw when he entered his brother's estate, and his heart dropped to his stomach where a thousand butterflies exploded. It was an odd feeling, an annoying one at that—one that he disliked immensely.

All the blood drained from Charity's face when she too saw him, making the butterflies subside and giving him the upper hand. She was shocked.

“Ah, Lady Charity.” Stephen hoped above all hope that the tremor in his voice was not audible. “I had no idea that you’d be here too.”

Charity stood, and Stephen noticed that her hands were shaking. She held one out to him, and he allowed his lips to brush over the silken skin—the strange feeling in the pit of his stomach returning with a fire of a thousand suns.

Charity looked at him with a dainty smile. She knew the touch had affected him, and he had to turn the tables to get the upper hand back.

“I must say, my lady, I believe I have something that belongs to you, something you... misplaced... at our last meeting.”

It worked. She was ghostly pale again.



The list. He had the list; it could not be anything else. Charity stared at him, searching her mind desperately for the right words. “You have my list.”

The words escaped her mouth without permission, and Stephen smirked before standing up and walking away. Charity sat frozen for a minute before following him outside.

He stood on the terrace, proud and proper.

“Do you have it?” Charity would not allow herself to notice how handsome he looked against the green landscape.

“Perhaps.” Stephen seemed quite proud of himself while Charity’s eyes narrowed.

“You must give it back, my lord. It’s terribly improper to keep a lady’s property.”

“Indeed...” Stephen was having far more fun than her, that much was evident. However, it was not much of a surprise. He was not the one whose life could be ruined by the list.

“Give it back... please.” She said the last word through gritted teeth. It pained her to plead, and Stephen could no doubt notice it. He removed the crumpled paper from his pocket and glanced at her.

“‘Try something that feels illegal. Find out what gentlemen really want.’ Is that what you are looking for, my lady?” He gave her a look that set her body on fire.

Charity let out a harsh sigh to cover her reaction. “Yes. And having written the list, I assure you that I am quite familiar with the contents thereof. Would you please, my lord, return it to me? Now?”

Stephen shook his head, and the piece of paper disappeared into his pocket once more.

“I would, had some fiery redhead not dared me to live a little and have more fun.”

Charity glared at him. “I did, yes. I just did not expect you to listen to a woman, of all things.”

“So...” Stephen ignored the snippy comment and looked her up and down slowly, almost leering at her body underneath the voluminous gown. “Where would the fun be in just handing it back? What’s in it for me?”

Thunder rumbled in the distance, but Charity barely heard it. She could only focus on one thing: the challenge that stood in front of her at this moment. She had to get the list back; there was no alternative.

“So, what would you have in turn for the list, my lord?”

Charity’s eyes spoke volumes, and Stephen blinked in surprise, a fact she noticed with a small smirk. She expected that he had never met a lady quite so bold. It had to be equal parts refreshing and terrifying.

“What... what do you mean?”

Charity lifted a brow knowingly and shrugged her shoulders. “Well... I was thinking I’d offer you some help.”

“Help?”

Charity nodded.

“Yes. As I’ve mentioned, you need to let loose a little, have some fun. I could assist you in crafting a list of your own—in return for mine, of course.”

The roaring thunder had rolled closer to them, but neither party noticed. They were too zeroed in on one another to notice anything else. Within seconds, rain started falling.

Stephen acted quickly, scooping Charity into his arms and sprinting to the veranda. He removed his soaked jacket once they were under a roof, making sure she wasn’t too wet either. His shirt was clinging to him. Charity could see the tight muscles on his stomach and had to clutch her dress to keep herself from reaching out to him—he was truly a magnificent being.

She was sure he was asking her something, but she couldn’t bring herself to look away from his strong body. When she returned her gaze to his and asked, “hm?” she could see in his smirk that he knew exactly what she was thinking.

“What are you two doing outside? Trying to catch a cold?”

Martin’s voice broke the spell between them, and Charity finally managed to tear her eyes away from Stephen.

“The horses won’t be able to travel in the downpour, even if it clears up. Charity, Emma should have a nightgown for you. You’re welcome to go and have a look.”

“I…” Charity looked from Martin to Stephen, confused. “I can’t stay the night.”

“Neither can I.” Stephen was quick to voice his objection.

“I’m sure my horses can make the trip.”

Charity glanced at Stephen. She knew, in her case, she didn’t want to stay because she might just lose all her virtue. Could he be thinking the same thing? Could he be worried of what would happen between them if they stayed under the same roof?

Surely the attraction was mutual, wasn’t it?



Martin looked at both of them as though they had lost all their senses.

“Are you both mad? A trip in this downpour would kill either yourselves or the horses. There’s not a chance that I’m allowing it. Charity, please do get a robe from Emma.”

Charity skulked away quietly, and Stephen smirked at this. “You must teach me your ways, brother.”

Martin looked at him, mildly confused. “I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

Stephen gestured to the door through which Charity had disappeared. “To handle women, I guess! That young Charity

is like a wild mare when I speak to her, but she turns into a foal when you do.”

Martin laughed at this and shook his head. “Perhaps, dear brother, the first trick would be to not compare women to livestock. Let’s get you a coat.”

“I never thought you’d turn out to be wiser than me,” Stephen teased his brother, and Martin laughed.

Stephen was quiet on their way to the chamber where he’d spent the night. He could almost swear that he caught a flash of red in the room next to his.

“So, I hear you are to be married.”

Stephen sighed. “Yes, father managed to sell me off to some duke’s daughter. Apparently, I’m meeting her tomorrow. Hopefully she’s somewhat like Emma. I tell you, brother, you were lucky to catch her.”

Martin grinned at this and leaned a little closer to his brother.

“Don’t tell anyone this, but... we believe that Emma is expecting. And I know our story does not have the most conventional start, but whenever I look at her, I am immensely relieved that I am not married to Theodosia but to the love of my life.”

Stephen grimaced at this. “Oh, the advantages of being the second brother.”

“Oh, come on, Stephen!” Martin shook his head quickly. “You know that Father would love to see you marry for love. You are just far too picky. No woman has ever been good enough for Stephen Huntington.”

At this, Stephen’s thoughts immediately drifted to the redhead in the room next door. His mind was obsessed with her, and he hated the feeling of it.

“Come on,” Martin interrupted his thoughts once more. “Emma and I usually have some fortified wine by the fireplace this time of night. Both you and Charity are welcome to join us, of course.”

At this, Stephen’s heart skipped a beat. Seeing her again, sipping at fortified wine when she was within touching distance, would be a reminder that they’d be spending the night under the same roof.

Yet, he followed Martin to the sitting room wordlessly. Charity and Emma were already draped over the lounge chairs as though they were posing for a portrait. Charity’s hair was beginning to dry, and it framed her pale face perfectly.

One thing was sure: this night would be terribly long.



She’d be spending the night within reach of this man who had an unfathomable effect on her. Charity had to force herself to concentrate on the wine in her glass rather than Stephen. Looking at him would only serve as a reminder that they’d be

under the same roof which would inevitably lead to fantasies of spending the night with him... in his arms.

She could not help but look up. Stephen was looking at her with an intense expression, and her heart jumped.

Could it be that the proper lord was sharing her improper thoughts?

Charity wondered what it would be like to be loved by him. She had been drawn to his gentle demeanor since the first time she met him. She enjoyed teasing him. She'd also felt proof of his manhood in the gentleman's club, with his fingers clutching at her hips. She was certain he'd be an incredible kisser... and more.

No. She couldn't think that way. She had a list that she needed to get back and complete. She couldn't keep dreaming about the same man for more than two nights in a row, even one as attractive as Stephen Huntington. Besides, it was pointless. Did she not know that better than anyone?

When she looked up again, Stephen was staring at her intently, and blood rushed to her cheeks.

She had to admonish herself for she was not like other ladies. Dreams of husbands and children, true love, and passion were not meant for her. She knew that.

She turned her attention back to the fortified wine in her glass.

Maybe she just needed to get Stephen Huntington out of her system, but she knew it would be a terrible mistake. A man like that would not leave one's system without a trace.

CHAPTER THREE

Charity found herself unable to sleep for the first time in forever. The reason for this was most likely sound asleep in his own bed in the chamber right next to hers. She could almost feel his hands burning on her hips, where he had touched her only the night before. Was he also thinking of her? It set both her body and mind on fire. She *had* to know.

Charity jumped out of her warm bed and reached for a robe she had carelessly tossed over a chair earlier. She couldn't just let it go; she had to figure out what to make of Stephen Huntington. She wanted nothing other than to understand this effect he had on her. She needed to see him, and she needed to see him this instant.

Charity's courage nearly wavered when she stood in front of Stephen's door. What would he think of her? She paused. The fact she allowed herself to wonder what he would think was alarming, to say the least.

When had she ever cared about that? There was simply not enough time on earth to care about what others thought of you. It was this realization that forced her hand to lightly knock and push open the door.

Charity's heart skipped a beat at the sight of him. He hadn't yet changed into his nightshirt—his dress shirt was unbuttoned from top to bottom and hung loosely around his chiseled frame.

"I..." Charity swallowed dryly. What was it she had planned on saying to him again? For the life of her, she could not remember. Her gaze was stuck on his chiseled chest. Stephen seemed to notice the distracted path of her eyes, and he smirked. *The arrogance!*

"Can I help you, Lady Charity?"

He leaned against the doorframe, grinning at her. His tone was far too nonchalant, nothing like the sweet Stephen she had met a while ago. Who was he, and what was he doing to her? Charity blinked a few times, trying to find the right words. They finally came to her and rushed out to him like a flood.

"I want my list back; that is how you can help me! I will not allow you to steal from me, sir, and—"

"Breathe, my lady," he interrupted her with a wry grin.

How had he turned the tables on her so easily? No one turned tables on Charity Magdale, and here he was, doing exactly that.

"I want my list." Somehow she managed to sound confident, and Charity let out a sigh of relief at this. He could not know the effect he'd had on her.

“I believe you promised me you would assist me in crafting a list of my own, my lady. I’m still waiting for the offered assistance.”

“Oh,” Charity thought for a minute and narrowed her eyes. “Well, as I’ve said, you need to let loose a little. So, that’s how we will start your list. But I really do need mine back.”

Something in Stephen changed at this, and Charity tilted her head. He stood a little straighter and looked around. He seemed almost afraid of letting go.

“What is it? What is wrong? You... you look different all of a sudden.”

She had to ask, and Stephen sighed. “It’s nothing, my lady.” She registered the vague emotion he tried so hard to hide from her. Charity looked at him, her eyes wide with shock.

“You’re afraid.”

Charity could not keep the note of shock out of her voice, and she took a step towards him, close enough to smell the faint scent of his musky sweat wafting towards her. Immediately, she took a step back, too dizzied by his closeness to keep her control of the conversation. Stephen didn’t reply.

“So... letting loose would... look, could you, please, button your shirt up?”

Charity quickly clapped both hands over her mouth after the words left her mouth without her permission. She hadn't intended to let him know his partial nudity elicited any reaction from her, but judging by the look on his face, she'd failed miserably.

This made Stephen laugh. He kept a close eye on her as he slowly began buttoning up his shirt, leaving the top three buttons undone. Charity locked her gaze on the light hairs peeking out through the open panels of his shirt.

“Yes, letting loose.”

Stephen shook his head, his eyes never leaving hers. He was evidently unwilling to allow her to maintain any control over the conversation whatsoever.

“Why don't you tell me why a duke's daughter even has a list like that?”

Charity hesitated. The truth was far too macabre to share, but she was no liar. She settled for a half-truth.

“Perhaps because I am a duke's daughter,” she said and pushed past him, going further into the room. Stephen gestured to the bed, indicating for her to have a seat. Charity moved almost automatically, sitting down exactly where he gestured. To her surprise, Stephen chose a seat at the opposite end of the chamber.

“So...” He did not waste time. “Would you care to elaborate, my lady?”

Charity shrugged. She wasn't used to talking too much about her reasons for being a rebel.

"Well..." She would continue upon her decision to share a partial truth. "Ever since I was a little girl, people had expectations of me. Perhaps I don't like that. You ought to understand what that's like. Being the eldest son of a marquess comes with its own set of expectations."

"That's true..."

Stephen sounded hesitant, and Charity quickly got the distinct idea that he either did not believe her or he was nervous about the direction in which the conversation was heading. She decided to push it and pray for the latter.

"So, being a duke's daughter and all, I decided that I wanted to create my own destiny, my own life. Haven't you ever wondered what that would be like?"

"Not until I met you."

It seemed bluntly honest, and her heart skipped a beat.

"Meeting me... changed you?" She hated the audible vulnerability in her voice. Luckily, Stephen decided not to push it for whatever reason. He only tried to hide a smile and changed the subject.

"So, the list... only two items were checked off, am I right?"

This was oddly a safer turn of conversation, and Charity nodded. “Indeed. I only started about a week ago, so I have not had much time to delve into it yet. Don’t you fret; I will check off every item before I turn twenty-four.”

Stephen frowned at this, seemingly perplexed. “Why twenty-four?”

Charity froze. This was by no means a conversation she was ready to have. Not even Emma could manage to unlock the fear she hid away so aptly.

“Why not twenty-four?” Charity decided to continue her playful pretense. “I don’t know. Twenty-four seemed right. With my birthday getting closer every day, I...”

“Why not twenty-five? It is the rounder number.”

He was like a dog with a bone, and Charity grit her teeth. Why would he not accept her half-thought-out explanation and leave it be? She simply was not ready to share the truth with him.

“Because twenty-four felt right.” Her tone was clipped. Stephen had to get the message now, and by the looks of it, he did. “Rather tell me why you never realized how incredibly boring being proper is.”

Stephen laughed and shrugged. “I guess I didn’t know, if that makes sense.”

“It doesn’t,” Charity deadpanned and leaned back on the bed to adjust her limbs into a more comfortable position. “Even as a child, did you not want to break the rules?”

“I mean...” Stephen was quiet for a minute. He seemed thoughtful, and Charity watched him with interest. “Every child breaks the rules now and then.”

“Tell me about it.” She was curious enough to ask without fear that he might return the question. “Tell me about a time you broke the rules.”

“Well...” Stephen thought for a second. Sorrow flashed across his face, but it quickly disappeared, replaced by a large grin. “When I was seven, my father had a duke and duchess over for supper—the most boring people you could imagine, very proper.”

It had all the potential of a great story, and Charity shifted on the bed again, eager to hear the rest. “Oh, do tell!”

“The maids had been at it all morning, preparing various treats for them. Some of these were so tempting and, naturally, we were forbidden from stepping foot in the kitchen.”

A slow grin spread over Charity’s face. “This is going to be good. I can feel it!”

Stephen laughed and wiped over his face before continuing his tale. “Long story short... Martin and I ate a few too many meringue tartlets and realized we needed to replace them if we

didn't want to get caught. Only, we could not bake for the lives of us."

"What did you do?"

Stephen sighed. "Well, we figured that baking wouldn't be the best idea, so we'd rearrange the tartlets and use some clever decorating to hide the fact that so many had been eaten. Only, we used baking soda instead of the sugar we were meant to."

"Lord, no!" Charity covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "Obviously, they found out!"

"Of course, they did! Father knew it was Martin and I the second he took a bite of the ruined tartlet. We received a proper hiding for it."

Charity giggled with glee but stopped when she noticed the sorrowful look on Stephen's face again. "What is it?"

He shrugged, avoiding her eyes. "What is what?"

"Whenever you talk about letting loose, you get this look on your face... like the worst thing in the world would happen if you dared do it."

"Perhaps it would."

Stephen sounded sullen. He clearly did not want to talk about it, but Charity refused to let go. "How could it?"

Stephen sighed and stood from his chair. He paced the room a few times before coming to a halt with a wildness in his eyes, a wildness she could not place. “People... innocent people... get hurt when I let loose. Horrid things happen when I break the rules, my lady... and I have learned and accepted that it might be better not to try.”

Without even thinking about it, Charity reached out to softly touch his cheek. “Like Martin getting a hiding?”

He smiled, though something about the smile was off. “Like Martin getting a hiding.” He looked her in the eye and covered her hand with his own. “Or worse. Please, Lady Charity, do not ask me to reveal more.” He removed her hand, kissing it softly, and sat on the bed next to her.

“I will not.”

She had no idea why she made the promise. Perhaps it was the desperate look in his eyes.

“Thank you.”

Charity was awfully aware of his closeness. There was something about him, proper as he was, that sent her heart aflutter, and she was sure he could tell for he leaned closer.

“Lady Charity, I am a proper gentleman, but with a beauty such as yourself in my presence... I must admit that there is a part of me that wants to break a few rules.”

Charity turned to face him. His face was so close to hers that she could feel the warmth of his breath on her cheek.

“Are we both not already breaking rules by my mere presence here, sir?”

“Perhaps we are... and perhaps breaking one more rule would not matter.”

Stephen leaned closer and pressed his forehead against hers, his breath racing. Her stomach flooded with butterflies; her own breath wild.

Was he as affected by their close proximity as she was?

“Lady Charity... would you mind terribly if I kissed you?”

Charity lifted a shaking hand to touch his face. It was not as smooth as it looked; stubble had started growing on his cheeks.

“I would mind terribly if you did not.”



It was all the encouragement he needed. Stephen leaned further in and finally allowed his lips to touch hers. Her lips were soft and sweet, and when she opened her mouth under his, he immediately deepened the kiss.

He quickly decided that her slender body was too far away so he pulled her close. Charity did not seem to object for she pressed her soft chest against his and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Before he could stop himself, Stephen turned them over, so Charity's back hit the mattress. He had never gone this far with a lady like her before. He could feel himself growing hard with anticipation of more, not that he would try that. After all, she was a lady, and...

Charity's lips left his to press a soft kiss on his neck, and every sensible thought left his mind. Every inch of her body was pressed against him, and he pushed his hips against hers harder. In response, a stunning moan left her lips, and he allowed his hand the freedom to explore her gentle curves. He wished he could tear away everything she wore under that robe and finally touch her soft skin. Her hands moved from his neck to his back, and he kissed her with more urgency.

He wanted nothing more than to become one with her, but he could not allow himself to take it further.

"Gods... Charity..." It took all of his self-control to tear his face away from her soft skin. "How have you bewitched me, my lady?"

Charity's breath was racing, and Stephen was pleased to see that she was not unaffected by their ministrations.

"You're the one who bewitched me, I believe." Her eyes were glazed over and unfocused, and in that moment, it was the

most beautiful sight he had ever seen. He bent his head down to kiss her again, this time softer and gentler but still with an aching hunger for more.

When they finally managed to end the second kiss, Stephen sat up, filled with regret and lust.

“I fear I must let you go, Lady Charity... lest I forget that I am a gentleman.”

She was quite the sight. Her red hair was unkempt, and her eyes were dark. He wished with all his heart that he didn't have to let her go, but he knew above all that he couldn't take her virtue, especially since he was betrothed to another.

This made Stephen swallow. With Lady Charity in his room, being betrothed to another woman seemed even worse. He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, and she looked up, surprised.

“I cannot let you get hurt on my account, my lady. And I fear that your reputation will be more than hurt if you are caught in my room—it would be destroyed. I will not allow that to happen.”

She took his offered hand and swallowed dryly.

“It was an honor spending time with you,” she said, her dark eyes all but screaming that she wanted to spend even more time with him. And by the gods, he wanted the same thing.

He pressed another kiss against her lips—a chaste, quick one that was meant to be safe but only served to give him visions of a life filled with similar quick kisses and Lady Charity.

“Sleep well, my lady.”

He stood quickly, and Charity made sure to press up against him as she stood to leave.

“Have pleasant dreams, my lord.” She left with a wink, leaving Stephen breathless.

The little minx. All his dreams would most certainly be anything but sweet, and he believed Lady Charity was aware of that fact. She was also, so he believed, aware of the fact that she'd be the sole star of his every dream.

CHAPTER FOUR

Charity awoke with a start. She sat up slowly, trying to recall the visions plaguing her throughout the night.

In her dream, Stephen was kissing her, and from her lips, he trailed a path to her neck, never ceasing searching her body. He touched over her buttocks and breasts with his hands, warm lips following the trail created by his fingers.

She was on fire with desire, and she had never wanted anything in her life quite as much as she wanted him.

The kiss from last night was real—she was certain of that—and her chest grew hot and fiery just thinking about it. Yet, the dream that followed was unfortunately anything but real.

The thought of even his name made Charity cheerful—and a tad hot under the collar, if she was honest. She made a grab for the robe she'd thrown on the chaise the night before and wrapped herself up in it.

She could not get Stephen Huntington out of her mind. In her dreams, he did not give a single fraction of a damn about her

virtue. In her dreams, she belonged to him, and he belonged to her.

What have you done to me?

She caught sight of herself in the mirror. Her hair was a mess, but the smile would not leave her face. Something else caught her eye, drawing her attention away from her reflection. There was a piece of paper by the door. She rushed to pick it up, and each word made her heart knock a little harder at her chest.

“Kissing you was number one on my list.” It was scrawled in messy handwriting that no doubt belonged to Stephen. A satisfying jolt shot through her body at the realization. She wondered if he regretted sending her away the previous night—perhaps he was also plagued by dreams of her throughout the eve.

A knock on the door made her jump. *Could it possibly be?*

Charity yanked the door open eagerly, only to be faced with Emma’s mildly surprised face.

“That was quick.” Emma sounded leery, and Charity quickly hid the note underneath her robe, knowing that Emma’s propriety would never allow her to fathom that Charity could have had the gall to go into Stephen’s room at night.

“Oh, I was on my way out... to you, of course. To see... what... what time breakfast was.”

She made it up as she went, and by the looks of it, Emma suspected something was up. The latter suddenly lifted a paper and started reading out loud.

“Dearest Love Lady, I can hardly believe that I am writing you a letter. I suppose I could have spoken to a trusted friend instead, but friends tend to be awfully biased. Thus, I am writing to you in the hopes that you have some advice for the dilemma I am currently facing.”

Emma glanced up at Charity, who did everything in her power to keep a straight face. Emma shook her head and continued reading.

“I am what you would call a free spirit. I believe that life is meant to be enjoyed and lived, not suffered through in an unimaginative existence. Fortune favors the bold, but I fear that in my case, fortune has played a cruel trick. The gentleman who may have a chance to steal my heart is everything but bold. He is impossibly proper, reserved, and shy...”

Charity could not stand it anymore. Was Emma going to reread her entire letter and its response? Why could her friend not be more direct?

“I must ask, Emma... is there a reason you are reading this? Surely you don't want my advice about a letter I'm sure you've answered.”

“I've answered, indeed.”

Emma's tone was clipped, and Charity looked everywhere but at her friend. "So? What was your answer?"

"That the pair meet each other halfway. Basically, that they could end up together and balance each other out, so to speak."

"Well..." Charity let out a dry laugh. "That's just silly. A bold woman and a shy man? That'd be an odd pairing."

Emma ignored the insult and stared at Charity suspiciously. "Charity, did you write me this letter?"

Charity nearly doubled over at the directness of the question. It was very unlike Emma to be so straightforward. "What? Don't be ridiculous. Why would I write a letter to you? Couldn't I just ask you? It's absurd, as is your advice, if you don't mind me saying."

Charity babbled incessantly, anything to prevent Emma from finding out the truth that it was indeed her who had written the letter and that she was far too close to fall hopelessly in love with Stephen.

Emma's eyes narrowed at the criticism. "Oh? My advice is absurd?"

"Yes. Like I said... it could never work. It would be like fire and water. The shy man would kill the lady's fire. I honestly think a retraction is in order, Emma. You're working with people's lives here."

“So...” Emma seemed to hesitate but quickly stomped ahead.
“So, it’s not about you and Stephen?”

Charity swallowed nervously. How was she going to get Emma off her tracks?

“Of course not! What would make you think something like that?”

“I don’t know.” Emma still seemed suspicious. The note burned in Charity’s hand, and she moved to her bed, sitting down with a great flourish and letting go of the note in the process. It landed safely on the pillow where she could shove it in between the blankets.

Charity looked at Emma defiantly, and the latter stared back with an uncharacteristic purse of her lips. “I picked up on a... vibe or something between the pair of you last night. It was like Stephen came alive around you, and you seemed...”

“I seemed what?”

Charity’s tone was dangerous, and Emma moved to sit on the chaise.

“You seemed vulnerable with him, Charity. You were so unafraid to be your authentic self.”

Charity let out a shrill laugh at this. “I’m always unafraid to be myself, Emma.”

“Don’t lie to me.” It was a simple request but made with such sincere conviction that Charity could only sigh.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I do sometimes struggle to be myself, and I did find myself oddly unafraid to be that way last night.”

Emma seemed to see the admission as a victory, and she smiled. “But the letter... it’s really not you?”

Of course, Charity wanted to tell her the truth. It would be so easy to talk to her, to get her insight and true opinion. There would be no one better to talk to than Emma.

“It’s really not me.”

She couldn’t be honest, at least not quite yet—not until she’d figured out what it was that made her so unbelievably drawn to the man.

“Good.”

Emma’s response was unexpected, and Charity lifted a brow.

“Good? That’s an odd thing to say.”

“I only say it because Stephen left early this morning to meet with his betrothed and their mothers.”

The words shattered Charity's cheerful mood, and she stared at Emma blankly.

“To meet his betrothed and their mothers?”

Emma picked at some invisible piece of fluff on the chaise and nodded without meeting Charity's searching gaze.

“Yes. According to Martin, Stephen is to be married before the next fall.”



“A fall wedding would be beautiful, don't you think?” Catherine, Duchess of Leinster, looked from Stephen to her daughter with a wide grin. “Oh, Elizabeth, you could use the fall colors in your wedding. She looks great in any fall color, you know. It goes with her complexion.”

Stephen glared out in front of him. He knew full well that he was being rather rude, but he could not help himself. He did not want to marry the girl sitting next to him.

“A fall wedding would be lovely, Mother.”

Elizabeth Kensington's voice grated at him, even though he had to admit it had a pleasing sound. He glanced at her. She was rather pretty, with long blonde ringlets and wide blue eyes.

She was seemingly kind as well. She'd taken care to tend the horses before starting any of the pleasantries, and thus far, she

had been nothing short of kind while he'd been exceptionally rude.

It wasn't her fault that he hated her. It was Charity's.

The redhead had plagued his mind all morning. The thought of her overshadowed everything Elizabeth and her mother said.

“What do you think, Stephen?”

His mother's voice sounded irritated, and Stephen forced himself to look up. “Sure. Fall seems fine.”

It was the longest sentence he had spoken all morning, and it seemed to encourage the girl. Elizabeth placed a soft hand atop his.

“Fall is my favorite season, sir. May I ask what yours is?”

Who in the world had a favorite season? It was ridiculous. “I don't know. I don't like the change of season much.”

Elizabeth nodded eagerly. She tried hard to engage him, but he didn't want to engage with her—or be engaged *to* her for that matter. “Oh, I understand what you mean. The change of season seems to cause terrible reactions in some. Is there anything specific that seems to bother you, sir?”

“What an odd question.” The statement left his lips before he could help it, and Elizabeth shrugged. “I merely ask because I

am aware that such cases can cause people to behave in certain ways, sir.”

It was surprisingly spunky, and he looked at her with mild surprise. “You’re right. I do have quite a few things that cause me trouble.” He shot a look at the Duchess of Leinster. A strong floral scent surrounded the heavysset woman. It was too sweet, far from Charity’s light scent. An idea formed in Stephen’s mind at this, and he had to swallow back a smirk.

“I’m especially tormented by some flowers. The scent is often too much to bear.”

The sentence alone prompted the three women to begin planning a wedding without heavily scented flowers. So when they mentioned sunflowers, peonies, and roses, and he was free to recall his late-night tryst with Charity.

Oh, how he wished he could make her his. What a difference it would have made if the entire purpose of this meeting was to arrange his marriage to her.

Not that she’d stand for a meeting like this. They could elope, flee together, and return married.

Their sons would have their mother’s wild temperament, and their daughters would be a tad more like him. All the children would have her red locks and his blue eyes.

“Stephen!” His mother’s voice was sharp, making him jump at the sound. All thoughts of Charity, their future children, and

the prospect of creating those children were interrupted by the shrill sound.

“What?”

Lady Elizabeth looked at him with a small smile, and it grated his nerves. What was there to smile about?

“Tea, my lord. Your mother asked if you wanted any tea.”

“No.” Stephen looked Elizabeth in the eyes. He knew full well that he was being downright rude to the poor girl, but he could not help himself. “No, thank you. I want nothing.”

It was the truth. He wanted nothing. Other than Charity, of course.



“So...” Charity stabbed at her plate wildly, missing the piece of bread completely. “I hear Stephen is getting married.”

Martin looked from Emma to Charity a few times before slowly nodding. “Indeed.” He sounded dubious, but Charity could not care less that her jealousy was openly displayed.

“Good for him.” When the fork landed on the bread this time, Charity stabbed it again, imagining it was Stephen’s face. She longed to stab him with something far more lethal than a fork. How could he have led her on in such a way? “Good for Stephen.”

After a vicious utensil assault, the piece of bread finally made its way to her lips, and she chewed quickly. It was rather unladylike, but she couldn't bring herself to care. "What's his betrothed like? She must be quite something to catch his attention."

Her envy was on display for all to see. Martin attempted to hide his grin by raising his mug to his face, but it was too late. She'd seen it, and it grated her nerves almost as much as the thought of Stephen marrying some proper lady.

"As far as I know..." Martin sounded hesitant, perhaps afraid that he'd bear the next assault of her fork. "Lady Elizabeth is quite kind and gentle. I have not met her enough times to form an opinion, and if I'm not mistaken, Stephen is only meeting her today."

The fork clattered onto the plate, and Charity lifted a brow. "Only today?"

"Yes. It's an arranged marriage, obviously. Stephen... let's just say he won't let himself fall hard enough for anyone to want to marry. He doesn't like anyone that much." Martin laughed to himself.

Charity, on the other hand, was far from amused.

"Oh?"

The syllable hung in the air; the question left unspoken but certainly not unasked.

“Stephen is... rather uptight, I’m sure you’ve seen.”

Charity nodded eagerly at this. “Yes. I have noticed that he has a giant stick up his—”

“Charity!” Emma interrupted her quickly. She sounded aghast, and Charity wolfed down another piece of bread, avoiding her friend’s eyes.

“I was going to say throat.”

“You were not.”

Emma didn’t seem amused, and Charity sighed, trying her hardest not to embarrass her friend any further.

“I’m sorry, Emma. I don’t know what’s gotten into me.”

In all honesty, she knew exactly what had gotten into her, or more accurately, what had *not* gotten into her.

Stephen Huntington had managed to get under her skin, and she hated it more than she could explain. No one had ever managed to do that, and it threw her for a loop.

“So, Martin...” Charity smiled and tried to summon every ounce of politeness she possessed. “What is Stephen’s story, if you do not mind me asking? Why is he so... uptight?”

“Well...” Martin seemed to hesitate and, for a minute, Charity feared that he would tell her it was not her business, as would be his right. “He was not always this proper. He used to be a tad more free-spirited, but something happened. I’m not certain what the whole story is, nor is it mine to tell. All I know is that the last time Stephen let loose, it was during a horse race, and...”

Charity leaned forward, eager to understand a bit more about the inner workings of Stephen Huntington. Martin shook his head, his voice suddenly clipped. “Someone got hurt. It was bad, and Stephen blames himself... always has, always will. Please, excuse me.”

With this, Martin stood and fled the dining room, quickly followed by his wife. Charity sighed as she stared at the disappearing figures.

Perhaps she was too curious, too eager to ask questions. She could not, however, help but feel sympathy replacing her earlier anger at Stephen.

Why would he blame himself for an accident that happened years ago? Why would he not allow himself to be free because of something that—if Martin’s conflicted gaze was anything to go by—was not entirely his fault?

She needed to know more so she could understand.

No, that wasn’t quite right.

Charity's realization was swift. It coursed through her, and her heart fluttered when she finally admitted it to herself.

She did not just need to know more. She needed Stephen Huntington.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Stephen...” The Duchess’s voice was ever shrill, and it grated on his nerves. “Won’t you take Elizabeth on a short walk through the estate?”

Stephen shook his head quickly. He had no interest in taking Elizabeth on any walk anywhere.

“It would be improper, my lady.”

“Oh, pish posh!” The Duchess laughed falsely. “The two of you are to be married. Your mother and I will follow, if that would make it less improper.” She grinned at his mother toothily. “Such a proper gentleman you have for a son.”

“Indeed.” His mother did not sound impressed, and Stephen was quick to avert his eyes.

She knew him far too well, perhaps even better than his father, and he could tell by her clipped tone that she did not fall for his excuse about propriety.

“Stephen...” His mother’s tone of voice left no room for argument. She had her mind made up, and she was most certainly not happy with her son. “Take Lady Elizabeth to the stables, don’t you? Her mother and I will join you shortly, but I am certain that neither of you will have your reputation affected by a leisurely stroll around the estate.”

“Yes, Mother.”

He knew that the irritation in his voice was evident, but he did not care. He held a hand out towards his bride-to-be but kept his eyes on his mother.

“Shall we, my lady?”

“Sure.” Elizabeth’s tone was pinched, and Stephen gave her a closer look. He did not understand why she’d have a reluctant attitude. Sure, his father’s ranking was much lower than her own, but she was older than most brides, nearly thirty herself. It was unheard of for a lady her age to be unmarried. She had to be ecstatic about the prospect of marrying.

She was quiet as they walked around the estate, but her pace quickened when they arrived at the stables. She did not compare to Charity, but she had a twinkle in her eyes when she saw the stables. It almost made her pretty.

“Why have you not married?”

The question left his lips without his permission, and Stephen was as surprised as Elizabeth seemed.

“Why have *you* not married, sir?” She threw the question back at him easily, and he hesitated.

Why had he not married? The simple answer was that he was in love with Charity, but why had he not married before?

“I’m not sure, my lady.” He did not expect the blatant honesty to leave his lips, but it did. “Perhaps I disliked the idea of tethering oneself to another person for life, perhaps I was afraid. All I know is that it was never something I considered.”

“I’d considered it, I just...” She shook her head and smiled.

There were only three horses in the stables. The last few years had not been kind to the Marquess of Hertford and his family.

“It’d be easier being a horse, don’t you think?” Lady Elizabeth did not seem to be entirely aware of him at that moment.

“A horse, my lady?”

He could not hide his amusement, but she continued as though he had not spoken at all.

“They’re so free.” She turned suddenly to face him. He noticed that her eyes were a sandy brown color, not the bright blue oceanic orbs of Charity. Her hair was rather dull too—a muddy brown, almost black.

“Do you feel free, good sir?”

Stephen hesitated. He had never thought about freedom until rather recently, when he had met a certain redhead. Now, his apparent betrothed nagged at him about freedom too.

“No, my lady. I certainly do not feel free.”

“The firstborn son of a marquess... If I’m not mistaken, your younger brother made quite an impressive marriage, did he not?”

“Indeed. He did.”

“Do you find it difficult being a disappointment, sir?” She asked the atrocious question in a perfectly polite tone. Stephen grinded down on his teeth hard.

He’d never thought of himself as a disappointment. He’d been the perfect son.

“I’m not a disappointment, my lady.”

The only time he’d ever seen his father disappointed in him was at that cursed horse race almost a decade ago.

“Right. Of course, you’re not. You’re perfect.” The dark eyes searched his face; she was evidently having fun at his expense. “Do you not find perfection unbelievably boring, sir?”

Gods, she was right. Perfection was boring, and as he looked at Elizabeth, the realization struck him. She was perfect—perfectly boring—whereas the mere thought of Charity’s name sent shivers down his spine.

She was everything he’d been taught not to be, and he was mad about it.

For a few painful seconds, he allowed himself to think of a life with Elizabeth. She’d be a pleasant wife and mother, of that he was certain, but the life he pictured with her was unbelievably dull.

He might have been content with that a month or even a few weeks ago, but Charity changed him. He was no longer the man who didn’t care about living an exciting life. He desired a life full of adventure, the kind of adventure that only Charity could provide.

He walked quietly away from the stables, forgetting the pleasant woman who seemed smitten with the horses.

He wanted a life of thrill and adventure.

He wanted Charity.



She wanted him.

Charity was frustrated. Stephen Huntington proved to be a complex man, and one that was far more entertaining than

anything she'd written on that cursed list, not that she would ever let him know that.

"Must you leave already, Charity?" Emma sounded disappointed.

Charity suddenly felt as if something was chasing her away from their cottage. And without even considering it, she knew exactly what the cause of her sudden urge to run away was: Stephen and his unnamed bride. The thought made her antsy and irritable, and she couldn't punish Emma with her cruel mood.

"I know I promised to stay a few days, Emma, but..." Charity hesitated. "You could visit me at the house. I just..."

"If you're afraid of running into Stephen, he won't be back. He's far too busy to visit us over the next few weeks. You could stay," Emma pleaded.

"It's not about Stephen." *It is about Stephen.* "It does not matter that he's getting married." *It matters.* "I just... I want to go home, Emma. I do apologize for the inconvenience."

"Charity, stop!" her friend sounded aghast, and Charity paused to look at her. "You're never this proper; it does not suit you one bit. What is going on?"

Charity sighed. She couldn't admit how forlorn and heartbroken she was about Stephen's impending marriage. Emma had already suspected it, but she believed it was

motivated by jealousy. What would she say about the heartache that truly troubled her?

“You could visit me during the week. I’m just... not feeling well.”

It was sort of true. Her heart was broken, and that left her with a pathetic fluttering in her stomach. Emma, naturally, thought differently.

“The dizziness is back?”

“Yes!” Charity knew that her answer was almost too quick and eager, but she was relieved to have an excuse. “I’ve been feeling quite faint.”

“Oh, Charity...” Emma immediately pressed a hand against her forehead, concern apparent in her wide eyes. “You should have mentioned it.”

“I...” Charity hesitated, searching her mind for an excuse that would not draw Emma’s suspicion or make her feel bad. “I didn’t want to admit it even to myself, but I just need rest.”

Of course, this was a blatant lie. In all honesty, the dizzy spells had not bothered her at all while she was there. She supposed the fresh air allowed her to breathe more freely or that the entire situation with Stephen just kept her mind off her illness.

It didn’t matter. He was about to marry, and she needed to go home, crawl into her bed, and feel sorry for herself.



“Stephen?”

His mother seemed surprised to see him, and he looked at her with a dark frown, waiting for her to continue. “Where is Lady Elizabeth?”

Oh. He had left the woman at the stables.

“I must have... forgotten her at the stables.”

It looked like his mother was about to explode. “You... forgot her? How... how do you forget a whole woman?”

Truth be told, Elizabeth was rather forgettable but Stephen aptly guessed that it would not be a welcome response.

“I’ll go back then.”

The Duchess had not spoken. She simply sat with wide eyes and a gaping mouth. Stephen turned on his heel to head back to the stables.

He had not realized that he had left the stables and made his way back home. He was so consumed by his thoughts that his feet did the walking without his mind being aware of it.

When he reached the stables, he saw a miserable heap against the wall. It irked him.

“My lady...”

The eyes that looked up at him were dark, and Stephen paused, waiting for a verbal bashing. Charity certainly would have let him have it.

Elizabeth only proved again that she was far too proper to bash anyone. She gathered her skirts and stood, her chin lifted.

“My lord.”

There was nothing much to say, though he was certain that his father would receive either a strongly worded letter or a visit from the Duke of Leinster.

“I apologize, my lady. I...” What could he say? *My mind was elsewhere, with a certain redhead that I'd much rather marry than you?*

“I have no excuse.” Not one he was willing to share anyway.

Elizabeth simply pursed her lips. She ignored his outstretched hand and stood, walking past him.

“Apology accepted, my lord.”

She ignored him all the way home. He tried caring about it, tried forcing himself to make conversation, but it was just too hard. It wouldn't have been as hard with Charity. She'd be talking his head off, and he smiled at the thought of this.

Lady Elizabeth strutted away from him angrily as soon as they reached the house, and Stephen sighed deeply. There was no doubt that she and the Duchess would tell the Duke everything.

He was in more trouble than he'd been in ever since boyhood, that much he was sure of.



“Charity?”

Priscilla sounded surprised, and Charity nodded, trying to push away the tears that dared to fall.

“Indeed. I have decided to return earlier. Is... is father here?”

Priscilla hesitated. “He is, indeed. I believe he is in his study.”

“I will speak to him now. We will have some tea. Thank you, Priscilla.”

Charity practically ran to her father's study. The Duke of Devonshire sat behind a desk, quill in hand. A large smile broke out over his face when his only daughter entered the study.

“Charity!” He was a jovial man—a kind, exuberant figure—and he picked his daughter up in a hug when she made her way round the desk. “I barely see you lately.”

It was true. She’d been avoiding him, but she could do so no longer.

“I apologize, Father.”

She chose not to make excuses, though he most certainly expected one. Instead, she sat down on the large chair in his study and looked at her hands intently.

“What is bothering you, my dear?”

He seemed worried, and when Charity looked up, her eyes were filled with tears. “Father... do you perhaps know the Duke of Leinster?”

“Ah.” Her father nodded. “William. We have met, once or twice. Ridiculous little fellow. Why do you ask?”

Charity hesitated. The truth would give away far too much about her interests, but it was also the only thing she could do to get the answers she so craved.

“Do you know his daughter?”

“Elizabeth. A pleasant girl, a bit old to be unmarried, but decent enough.”

Well...” Charity pursed her lips. “She’s marrying now.”

“Really?” His eyes narrowed as he watched her, and Charity knew without doubt that he was close to discovering the truth, that Elizabeth was marrying a man she herself was in love with. “Who is she marrying, my dear?”

“Stephen Huntington, the Marquess of Herford’s eldest son, and...” There was no need to say anything further; she could do nothing but burst out in heartbroken tears.

“Have you taken a liking to him, then?”

What could she do but admit the aching truth? Before the words could fly from her lips, there was a knock at the door. Charity quickly pulled herself together and forced a smile onto her face.

She watched quietly as Priscilla entered with a tray. She made a big show of giving the Duke his tea before handing Charity a little mug as well.

As always, Charity admired the little yellow flowers floating on the liquid. They always made her feel special. She drank her tea quietly while Priscilla and her father shared a whispered conversation.

Priscilla left the study with a sympathetic smile and Charity sniffed. Her father took a sip of his own tea, his eyes trained on his daughter.

“So? Talk to me about this man, my dear. He’s not like those boys that trespass my estate and you think I don’t notice, is he?”

Charity almost blushed. She thought her friends had been discreet enough, but apparently she was wrong. Her father wasn’t, however. She thought of Stephen, all tall and proper, jumping over her fence. No, he wasn’t anything like those boys. The image in her head was rather comical, but she also craved for it immensely. She craved for him to come to her. Her body couldn’t decide if she should laugh or cry, so she did both while her father eyed her, concern in his eyes.

Suddenly, the dizziness returned. It was obvious she couldn’t handle any of these emotions. She took a deep breath.

“I will talk to you later, Father. I... I do love him, but there is no promise of a future with him. Let him marry the Duke of Leinster’s daughter. I will... I will accept it.”

CHAPTER SIX

*H*e would not marry Elizabeth, as perfectly polite and pleasant as she was. He could not. He would not.

Now, there was only one thing to do.

He had to tell his father.

Stephen smiled to himself at the thought of this. It had been years since he'd gone against duty. Apparently, Lady Charity brought out the irresponsible side of him. As loath as he was to go against honor and duty, he knew full well that he could not marry another woman, not when Charity plagued his mind as she had done ever since he caught her stealing silver from her own father.

“Stephen!” The Marquess of Herford was a large man with a thick mustache. He was usually quite jovial, but today, Stephen couldn't help but notice that he seemed older and a bit irritated. “What did you do?”

Stephen froze. He had not heard his father ask that question in that tone in ages—which could only mean one thing; he was furious.

“What do you mean?”

“Well...” The Marquess’s mustache trembled, and Stephen automatically took a step back. “According to the Duke of Leinster, his daughter found you rude and boorish, and he is reconsidering the match!”

“Good.”

The Marquess’ eyes popped out of his head in response.

“Good? Who are you and what have you done to my son?”

It was a tad dramatic, and Stephen lifted his chin. He would not be bullied into marrying the boring woman his father had chosen.

“I do not wish to marry Lady Elizabeth. The marriage is off. You can tell the Duke that.”

“You...” The Marquess laughed hysterically and shook his head. “You do not wish to marry Lady Elizabeth?”

Stephen crossed his arms over his chest.

“No. I do not wish to marry her.”

“Well...” His father gaped, his eyes wide and his mouth plopping open. “Well, why in the world not?”

What could he answer? *I am in love with another woman?* His father would scoff at the notion.

“I am marrying someone else.”

The answer surprised even Stephen himself. He was planning on marrying Charity? Sure, he’d thought about their future, but marrying her and making things official? Did he truly want everything a wedding and marriage meant?

To his surprise, the thought did not scare or repulse him. Instead, darned butterflies started fluttering in his stomach.

“Yes. Another duke’s daughter caught my eye, and I intend to make her my wife.”

The words kept rolling from his lips as though he had willingly given up all control.

Yet, Stephen found himself not minding at all. He liked the idea of being married to Charity.

Yes, indeed. He would wed her, and all would be right.



All in all, Charity soon realized, it did not matter much that the marriage was arranged. What mattered was the fact that Stephen was getting married, and he knew that while kissing her.

“Argh!”

It was a sound of pure frustration that left her lips. And to make matters worse, the memory of their kiss haunted her every waking moment and in her dreams.

She could not rid herself of the thoughts of him.

“Charity?” Priscilla’s voice was as sweet as the tea she so often carried. Charity smiled. It was an act of kindness that she had to pretend to appreciate. Priscilla was trying.

“I made you a cup of tea, dear.”

As always, Charity took a quick sip after admiring the small, yellow flowers floating in the teacup. Priscilla watched her like a hawk as she drank, as was her habit. Charity could only assume that the reason for this was to make sure she did not starve herself.

“What’s wrong, dear?” Priscilla sounded worried, and Charity sighed before taking another sip of tea. Before she could answer, her stepbrother entered casually.

“Oh, tea again.” He reached for the teapot, but Priscilla quickly slapped his hand away. “No!” Her voice was sharp,

and both Charity and Noah looked at her with mild surprise.

“This is cold. I’ll brew you a fresh pot, Noah. Charity, you were saying?”

Charity sighed deeply. “Nothing. It’s just... a man.”

“Oh.” Pricilla rose to her feet, still eyeing Charity and Noah warily. “Let me make some more tea.”

She left quickly, and Noah lifted a brow. “So, a man has gotten under your skin, dear sister?”

Charity smiled. As far as brothers went, she was lucky to have Noah. The pair had grown quite close over the last few years.

“Can you believe it? I have actually caught myself daring to dream of a future, even though we both know it could never be.”

“Don’t say that.” Noah sounded worried, and she shrugged—there was no denying the truth.

“You understand my situation, Noah. I’m-I’m dying. I know far better than to hope for a future and love.”

“You don’t know that.” Noah shook his head quickly. She knew he didn’t like it when she spoke of her future, or rather of the lack thereof. “Don’t talk like this, Charity, I beg of you.”

Charity sighed deeply. “Noah, we both know my reality. My mother passed away aged twenty-four, so did my brother. My twenty-fourth birthday is just around the corner, and I have a list to complete before that day comes, a list that has no room for love and ridiculous dreams.”

“Your dreams are not ridiculous. When it’s love, when that love is real, there’s always hope. Love always finds a way.”

Charity scoffed and tossed a biscuit in her stepbrother’s direction. “Oh, stop. You sound like a woman.”

Noah laughed spontaneously and popped the biscuit into his mouth. “Perhaps I am just a poet at heart.”

“You’d be a proper poet, Noah, always with your head in the clouds and your heart on your sleeve.” If not for the gentle note in her voice, Charity knew that her words could easily be regarded as an insult. Luckily, Noah knew her rather well.

“I *could* be a poet, a great writer indeed. Only, I am not as lucky as you, dear sister. I am yet to find someone who could hold my heart as this man seems to hold yours. Perhaps if I did, my writing would rival that of the great ones like Sir Shakespeare.”

Charity smiled gently at him. Noah had big dreams—dreams that Priscilla, sweet as she was, did not agree with at all.

“Charity, do tell me about him! Everything you have said so far only served to make me curious. He seems like quite the mystery.”

“Oh.” Charity laughed at this and shook her head. “He’s everything but mysterious, dear brother. He is perfectly proper, actually.”

“You are in love with a proper gentleman? Good heavens, poor soul! He’ll be shocked out of his wits by you.”

Charity sighed. “I believe he’s getting married soon, so his wits are safe.”

“Do you believe that he returns your feelings?”

Charity folded her arms. Noah, ever the romantic, would only encourage her if he knew that Stephen had kissed her. Yet, perhaps that was what she needed. She knew full well that it was what she craved in this minute.

“I believe that he might return my feelings, yes. He may have... kissed me.”

Noah practically melted at the declaration. He leaned towards her eagerly, his eyes wide. “Tell me more, sister!”

“Gods, Noah, no!” Charity shook her head vicariously. “I am not telling you one bit more and giving you more food for futile dreams. I will simply have to get Stephen Huntington out of my system. Besides, he is betrothed, and not to me.”

She bit down on her lower lip, trying to force the daring tears back. “Dreaming of him serves no purpose. It would not have

had a purpose even if I did have a future.”

“Oh, Charity...”

Noah looked at her sorrowfully, and she forced herself to smile. “Let’s talk about you instead. What have you been up to, dear brother?”

He shook his head with a small smile, the sorrow still apparent in his eyes. “Nothing important, especially not as important as your list! Did your father ever find out about his silver?”



The list.

Stephen could not get the darned list out of his mind. Was Charity truly planning on completing every activity on this list? Some were quite mild, whilst others bordered on dangerous and wildly mad.

“Number eleven, ride a wild horse.” Was she blatantly mad? Was she trying to die?

All in all, Charity was rather like a wild horse herself—and one he’d love to tame. “Number twelve... receive a midnight visitor in my bedchambers.”

Well, that was certainly an item that held less danger and one he could help with. Stephen grinned madly and neatly folded the list. It made its way to his back pocket, and he checked his pocket watch.

There was still plenty of time left. His father had been furious at first and only settled with the promise of a wedding to come.

“The announcement better be quick, boy.”

The Marquess had left with this warning, rushing off without another word and leaving Stephen to his thoughts. Those thoughts inevitably led to Charity. Gods, the woman had a way of sneaking into his mind and stubbornly refusing to leave. It was not her beauty, per se, that stuck with him. It was her general being. There was simply something about her that made his heart race.

“Receive a midnight visitor in my bedroom.” He reread item number twelve with a grin before crossing it off. Tonight, Lady Charity would receive her midnight visitor... and he could not wait to see her reaction.



An odd *cling* awoke Charity from her slumber. She sat up with a frown. Whatever the sound was, it had awoken her from a rather spectacular dream about Stephen. *Cling*. There it was again, a distinct *cling* from her window.

Charity jumped from her bed, ready to attack. All violent thoughts disappeared when she opened the curtain to see none other than the object of her dreams and desires. He gestured like a naughty schoolboy before climbing up the tree next to her window.

Charity opened the window once he was closer to her, her eyes wide in surprise.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Receiving...” Stephen carefully placed one leg, then another, over the window pane. “Receiving a midnight visitor...” He took a step past Charity and then turned to grin at her. “This was on your list, number twelve if I’m not mistaken, my lady. So here I am.”

He opened his palms in a gesture seemingly meant to garner her good graces. “At your service, my lady.”

Charity glared at him, trying her best to suppress the urge to kiss him until they both forgot that he was betrothed to another.

The thought of his bride-to-be did the trick, and Charity folded her arms over her chest.

“Should you not instead be at the service of your future wife, my lord?”

Stephen’s face fell at this, and he took a step in her direction. Charity stepped back at this, anger coursing through her veins. How dare he visit her in her room when he had a future wife to think of?

“Right... so I take it Martin and Emma told you about the arrangement.”

He sounded far too nonchalant for her tastes, and Charity glared angrily. “Yes, I know about the arrangement. So what are you doing in my room, sir?”

“Well...” Stephen’s voice suddenly sounded clipped. “I guess I wanted to tick off one of the less dangerous items on your list before seeing what else you’d bring in here.”

“What in the seven hells is that supposed to mean?” Redheads were known for their tempers, and Charity was no different. She glared at Stephen furiously. “Do you take me for the type to bring anything into her room, my lord?”

He shrugged his shoulders at this, inflaming her rage even further.

“Well, you *did* attend a gentleman’s club with a reputation, my lady. What ought I to think?”

“You have no right to think about me at all!” Charity had to be careful to keep her voice low, though every cell in her body begged her to scream at him.

“You kissed me!” She hissed the words out slowly, her lip curling. “You kissed me, knowing full well that you were betrothed, that you were to be married. How dare you?”

“You...” Stephen laughed, a shocked sound. He sat down on the chaise without an invitation and pursed his lips, looking at her through narrowed eyes. “You came into my room, my lady.

And if I remember correctly, there were no complaints about the kissing then.”

“That’s because I had no idea that you were to be married! Had I known, I never would have...” Charity shook her head, angry at the sudden tears forming in her eyes. “I never would have made myself... I did not know that you were getting married!”



Stephen suddenly smiled. There was only one reason why she could possibly be angry at his impending nuptials: she felt the spark between them too.

“You like me.”

His voice was light, as was his heart. She felt the same; she had to. Charity did not seem impressed by his sudden giddiness. She still glared at him.

“It does not matter whether I like you or not, my lord. The fact is that you are getting married to another woman. I have accepted it, and now, I am afraid I must ask you to leave at once.”

“Charity...” He had to straighten out the misunderstanding at once. “I am not getting married.”

She paused at this and looked at him curiously. “What do you mean you are not getting married? According to Martin you had a meeting with your betrothed and your mothers only this morning.”

“Yes...” Stephen reached out, grabbing at her hand and pulling her into his arms. “I told my father that I’m not marrying Lady Elizabeth. There is only one woman I intend to marry... and that woman is standing in front of me right now.”

He looked down at her with a soft smile, waiting to see her melt at the words.

She did not.

“Oh, Stephen...”

Her voice sounded sad, and Stephen looked at her, suddenly worried about her odd demeanor.

“You should tell your father that you are indeed marrying Lady Elizabeth. You see... I cannot ever marry.”

It sounded absurd. He wanted to laugh, but something about the sadness in her voice made him hesitate.

“Why can you not marry, my lady?”

“Because...” Charity sighed and blinked a few times. She squeezed his hand, and when she looked up at him, her eyes were filled with tears.

“I cannot ever marry... because I’m dying.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The words buzzed in his ears senselessly. She was dying? He refused to accept the atrocious truth. Charity was far too vibrant, too vivacious, too lively to be connected to death in any manner.

She could not be.

“No, you’re not. You cannot be. Charity, I...” He what?

What exactly did one say in response to the person you’re in love with announcing their imminent death? There were no appropriate words; there was no quick fix.

Were it true, there would be no fix at all.

“Please, tell me that you have an incredibly twisted sense of humor or that you use the term dying in an inexplicably figurative manner.”

She smiled sadly before lightly shaking her head.

“No. I mean that I am sick, Stephen, and that I will not live beyond twenty-four.”



Charity was dizzy. Perhaps it was the surprise of seeing Stephen in her room, perhaps the shock of admitting the truth to him, or perhaps it was a symptom of her mysterious disease.

“I need to sit down.”

She sunk onto the chaise opposite of him slowly, the world becoming blurry before fading to black. Her lids fluttered, and she was vaguely aware of Stephen’s face above her.

“You’re so handsome.”

She wasn’t able to make sense of things anymore. She only knew that she was feeling incredibly lightheaded and that Stephen’s face close to hers was doing nothing to curb the uncomfortable symptoms she faced.

All she knew was that she felt safer in his arms than ever before, and he was here.

“Charity?”

Stephen sounded quite concerned, and she sighed. “I am quite all right, my lord. Just a dizzy spell. They tend to happen more frequently nowadays.”

The concern did not fade from Stephen's face, and Charity reached out lazily to cup his cheek.

He was handsome and caring and the type of man she could see herself falling for had it not been futile.

"No need to fret, my lord. It will fade shortly."

Before she knew what was going on, she was easily lifted from the chaise. Her face pressed against a chiseled chest, and she inhaled deeply.

Stephen Huntington was most certainly thrown into her world to completely destroy the orbit thereof.

"You're ruining... everything."

The dizziness was overwhelming, and Stephen looked offended at her slurred words.

"My lady! What on earth am I ruining?"

He sounded offended too, and Charity sighed deeply. "I was fine... without a future... before you."

His chest smelled incredible, and she rested her head against him with a deep inhale.

“And now?” There was a gentle note in his voice, and Charity pressed her face against his chest a little harder. Was her bed always so far from the chaise? She hoped it was even further away now.

“Now, I just...” She yawned, suddenly incredibly tired. Yet, it did not concern her that she’d grown so weary without warning. She felt safe in his arms. “Now, I just want you.”

“My lady...” Stephen’s voice cracked with an emotion Charity could not for the life of her decipher. “Would you mind terribly if I stayed the night?”

Charity smiled sleepily.

“Stay forever.”

She was vaguely aware of gently being put in the bed and Stephen slipping in next to her. It was inappropriate and wrong on every level, and yet, she would not have it any other way.



When Stephen awoke, Charity was gone. The bed still smelled like her, and he inhaled deeply, drawing in her scent.

She was gravely ill.

His smile disappeared immediately at the thought. He would contact every physician within reach to find a solution, find a cure for whatever ailed her.

He had no idea why her father had not done so yet. It made no sense, but he would do whatever it took. He would leave no stone unturned until he found a cure.

Stephen quickly redressed. He had spent the night in only his underwear, and apparently, Charity had found the time to fold his clothing and put it on the chaise.

Where was she? There was nothing to do but leave in the same way he had entered, through a window and tree. He couldn't be wandering the house now, could he. Yet, it felt incredibly impersonal to leave without a trace.

He would leave a note, and as terrifying as it was, he would leave it all up to her.

“My dear lady, I have to leave, but...” What would he say? *I look forward to hearing from you?* “But I leave with the hope that I will see you again soon. Yours, S.”

That was enough. Stephen hesitated when he noticed the locket on her bookcase. Without thinking twice, he shoved it into his pocket and grabbed his note again.

P.S. Your locket is with me, my lady. I will return it if I see you again.

Stephen swung his body back through the window and climbed down the tree slowly.

He had a physician to find. But before doing so, perhaps he should take a quick detour to his estate—creased clothing was not very proper.

The change of season suddenly bothered him less. He quite enjoyed the wind against his face—the faint smell of flowers reminding him of her.

She was pure perfection. She had fallen asleep in his arms, and he was not ashamed to admit that he had spent quite a few minutes just staring at her.

Her dark lashes formed a stark contrast to her fair skin. Her curls were less vibrant in the dimmed light of her bedchambers, and yet, she still seemed far too vivacious to be dying.

Stephen spent his walk so consumed with thoughts of her that he was woefully unprepared for his estate to suddenly rise up ahead of him. He had walked faster than he had anticipated, and hoped above all else that he would not run into a servant—or worse, his father. He did not want to see anyone who could attempt to dissuade him from his plans.

Luckily for Stephen, the house was quiet. He made his way to his bedchambers quickly, undressing without much thought. His mother had told him about a physician she had seen a while ago. Perhaps he could help with whatever Charity's ailment was.

A note dropped to the floor as he folded his pants, and he looked at it, dumbfounded. Where on earth did it come from?

Excitement stirred within him. He figured it had to be from Charity, but his hopes were dashed when he took a closer look at it.

The neat handwriting mocked him, jeered at him silently from the paper.

Stay away from Lady Charity, else I will be forced to tell her the truth. If you care about her wellbeing, you would not want her to know what you did to her brother. Do not force me to tell her.

He crumpled the piece of paper with pursed lips. It didn't make sense in the least. Did it fall from his pants or was it in his room? If it came from his clothing, it must have been from someone in Charity's household. He didn't think any of her family members would have known about his late-night visit. Perhaps it was one of the servants?

This raised a whole new question. Who in this household knew the truth about what had happened to William? And why did they keep it from Charity to begin with?

He would not be threatened or blackmailed into giving up on the woman he had fallen for. Nothing in the world would keep her from him, even if he had to face the mistake he'd made so many years ago.

Stephen sat down slowly, suddenly worried. Within minutes he was back there... at the tracks.

"Come on, Will!"

Stephen had been jovial, and after a few mugs of ale, he had become even more excited. "I bet you will not do it."

"Oh?" William had raised his head at the dare. There was a twinkle in his eyes. "You underestimate me, my friend."

"Of course... The son of a duke would never compete with peasants."

"I will not only compete..." The mention of peasants made William rise to his full height—his friend had been eager to prove him wrong. "I will win."

"And if you do..." By this time, the ale had been speaking far louder than logic or reason. "You will have one of my estates for yourself, my friend."

Gods, if he had not extended that ridiculous dare... William would not have died.

Stephen shook his head. He had to let bygones be bygones, but it was far from easy. He had not yet mastered the art of forgiveness even as it pertained to others. How would he then manage to forgive his own worst enemy: himself?

As it was, it was not only his own forgiveness he had to be concerned about but also that of Charity. The note threatened to expose his secret, and if she found out, he knew without doubt that she'd blame him. She'd never forgive him, and just the thought of hatred and anger in those lovely green eyes tore through him.

She could not find out, especially not from someone else, but there was no right time to tell her.

Stephen swallowed the panic down. He would not let anything get between them, no matter what.



Charity could not focus. She kept stirring and stirring the cup of tea pointlessly. Emma was on her way by this time, and Stephen was quite possibly still asleep in her bed.

She wanted nothing more than to be with him, but...

She took a small sip of the tea and pulled a face at once. There was an odd taste to it today, as though it needed sugar.

“You’re up early. I wanted to bring your tea in bed.”

Priscilla’s voice shook Charity from her reverie, and she smiled at her stepmother. “I was just thinking that my tea needs something. It must be your special touch.”

Priscilla smiled sweetly. “That’s kind of you to say, dear. I’ll be sure to bring you some in the morning, but... pray tell, why are you up so early?”

Charity smiled at her stepmother’s inquisitive nature. Priscilla was not always this chatty. “Emma is coming to visit, so I wanted to get ready.”

Priscilla was spared a response by a loud yawn, and Noah's lean figure entering the kitchen.

"Morning everyone!" He stifled another yawn before falling down on a chair next to Charity. "I'm not fond of mornings. Give me the sweet starry skies at night, give me sunsets and not sunrises..."

"You're being poetic again." Charity could not keep the amusement out of her voice, and Noah laughed.

"Allow me the freedom to be poetic, dear sister. I could compose sonnets of sunsets... sunrises, on the other hand, not so much."

Priscilla shook her head at this, and for a second, Charity thought that she looked upset. A smile appeared on her face quickly, however, and she pressed her hands on the table.

"I'll leave the two of you to your poetry."

She disappeared from the kitchen quickly, and Noah sighed. Charity glanced at him worriedly.

"Noah, are you and your mother upset with one another?" She didn't know why she asked, only that she had to. Noah's jovial smile had disappeared, and he stared out in front of him with pursed lips.

"Let's just say that we have different visions for my future."

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Noah shook his head quickly, evidently unwilling to discuss it more.

“Why don’t you tell me about your mysterious midnight visitor instead?”

A blush crept to Charity’s cheeks, and she covered her face with her hands, aghast. “You know?”

Noah grinned brightly. “Indeed, I know. Surely you have realized by now that I know everything that happens in this house. So, tell me... were you scandalous?”

“Noah!” Charity could not contain her laughter, but she shook her head quickly. “No, we were not scandalous. We talked mostly.”

“About your future? Did you make plans?” His eyes were wide and excited, and Charity sighed. “Honestly? We talked about a lot of things, including my lack of a future, and today, I just feel oddly vulnerable.”

Noah lifted a single brow. “Is it not a good thing to be vulnerable with the ones we love?”

Charity scoffed at the notion. “I do not know if it’s good or not. What I do know is that I completely despise it. I don’t want to be vulnerable. I’ve never...” She sighed and looked at

Noah openly. “I’ve never had to worry about being vulnerable. I’ve always done my own thing, and... I do not know. Stephen risks that.”

“What do you mean? He threatens your independence?”

“Something like that, indeed, yes. I feel... bound to him in a certain way, and I... I don’t like that.”

“Except that you do indeed like it?”

Charity sighed deeply and nodded. “Something like that. What do I do, Noah?”

“Well...” Noah hesitated, then smiled gently. “Charity, have you ever considered happiness over independence?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous!” It was an absurd notion for a dying woman, and Noah should have known better. She scowled at him, and he sighed.

“Just... allow yourself to consider it. I would see it as a personal favor, and who knows? I might even craft a play or a poem about it!”

Charity sighed. She could not entertain the thought of happiness, no matter how tempting it was.

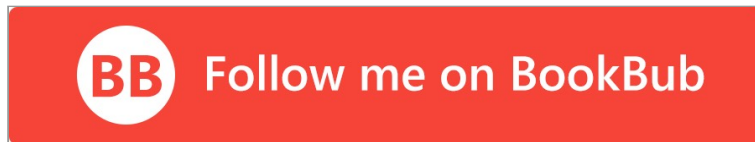
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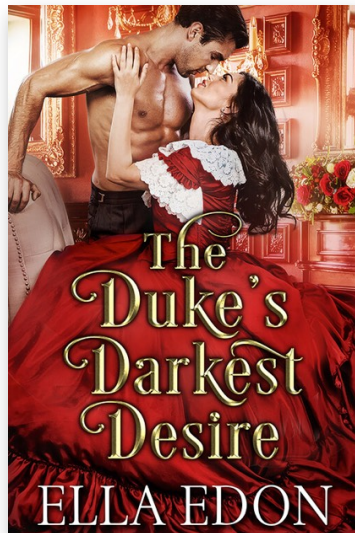
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ella Edon is an American author of steamy historical Regency romance books. She started pursuing her childhood passion of putting stories to paper after experiencing two of the most life-changing experiences of her life.

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She lives in New Orleans, Louisiana with her loving husband and candy-sweet daughter. Before she started writing Regency romance, Ella was working in a phone center, despite the fact that she majored in English Literature. However, her restless spirit leads her to chase her dream and now she is devoted to sharing her stories with the world.



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